Filologické vědy

SEMANTIC HISTORY OF THE TERM «EVIL» IN ANCIENT GREEK AND EARLY CHRISTIAN LEXICON

S. V. Garin, candidate of philosophical sciences, assistant professor
Kuban State University, Krasnodar, Russia

Summary. Lexical, semantic and axiological aspects of the term «evil» (πονηρία, το κακὸν) are analyzed in this paper in terms of Ancient Greek and early Christian thought. The work revolves around texts by Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Euripides, Origen, Plotinus, and the New Testament. Pragmatic components of ancient ethical lexicon come to light. Semantic difficulties in translation of Greek ethical lexicon into English will be described.

Keywords: ancient Greek; semantics; evil; defect; weakness; slang; pragmatics; axiology; morals; ethics.

The major lexical component reflecting semantics of the term «evil» in Ancient Greek is πονηρία. This term concentrates on negative semantics (states, conditions, values) rooted in the Bible. The concept appears in the Gospels (Mark 7:22, Matthew 22:18, Luke 11:39) and in the epistles of Saint Paul (to Romans 1:29, Corinthians 5:8, Ephesians 6:12). This particular noun also defines the most important forms of an adjective πονηρός («crafty»), appearing in prayers essential for Christianity (Πάτερ ἡμῶν, «Our Father»). However, this concept was involved widely in the Septuagint's books before appearing in the text of Καινὴ Διαθήκη (the New Testament), for example in the books of Esdras II 11:23, 12:2, 23:7, Isaiah 1:16, 47:10, Jeremiah 4:4, Psalms 27:4, 54:16, parts of Solomon's books (Ecclesiastes 10:5, The Book of Wisdom of Solomon 4:14), etc.

European image of «evil», its semantic architecture and normative axiology are children born in a spindle of Ancient Greek lexicon. European ethics were developed with regard to the NT's axiology, which has mainly Greek origin. However, the concept of «evil» had long pre-Christian history. That had received a number of major projections in the array of early Christian thought. A few elements of this history will be considered in this work.

Some authors point out that Ancient Greek lexicon of «evil» is truly complicated to translate: It is only Latin that conveys ambiguous meaning of the word πονηρία adequately. This Greek word is translated as «evil» into English and majority of modern European languages. As a result, we often imagine something opposite when an Evangelist speaks of «weakness», «perversity» or «lameness». What we actually see is «force» ...the word πονηρία plays a key role in poetics of the gospel and especially in the Sermon on the Mount (semantic game with this word is a counterpoint of the main subject of the sermon, namely perfection). Thus, only several modalities entered into the NT's canon from all variety of πονηρία's semantics in Ancient Greek. They formed the semantic architecture of subsequent Western European ethics of good and evil.

Let us take a look at this term and its forms in Ancient Greek thought. We meet πονηρία's traditional quality as perversity applied to psychological objects in Plato's «Gorgias»: Τίς οὖν τούτων τῶν πονηριῶν αἰσχίστη; οὐχ ἡ ἀδικία καὶ συλλήβδην ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς πονηρία; [*Pl. Grg.* 479c], i. e.

«what defect is the worst? Is it injustice and perversity of the soul in general?» This point of view becomes crucial in the succeeding early Christian lexicon.

We see a certain substantialization of this perspective In Plato's «Philebus». πονηρία has a special quality of a supplement to something that makes it vicious. Socrates asks Protarchus: Ἂν δέ γε πονηρία τούτων, ὦ Πρώταρχε, προσγίγνηταί τινι, πονηρὰν μὲν φήσομεν οὕτω γίγνεσθαι δόξαν, πονηρὰν δὲ καὶ ἡδονήν; [*Pl. Phileb*. 37d]. «But, Protarchus, if perversity is added to any of these qualities, should we not say, that opinion and belief also become vicious?» Thus, perversity of cognitive acts (opinion or belief) does not occur because of its own internal qualities, but comes from the outside due to a specially acquired feature. Socrates' remark is yet another relevant fragment in the same dialogue: Ἔστιν δὴ πονηρία μέν τις τὸ κεφάλαιον, ἕξεώς τινος ἐπίκλην λεγομένη· τῆς δ' αὖ πάσης πονηρίας ἐστὶ τοὐναντίον πάθος ἔχον ἢ τὸ λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Δελφοῖς γραμμάτων, [Pl. Phileb. 37 c]. «This is a kind of vice, which receives its name from a condition; a vice in general usually involves a characteristic which is the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi».

It is known that Socrates was a rationalist and somewhat an educator in ethics. The term «evil» is also regarded from gnoseological and educational points of view in «Philebus». It is typical of Socrates to concentrate «evil negativity» and «defect» on the topic of ignorance, i. e. the absence of knowledge. So, Socrates says: κακὸν μὴν ἄγνοια καὶ ἣν δὴ λέγομεν ἀβελτέραν ἕξιν. [*Plat. Phileb*. 48c]. «Ignorance is evil and we call it a condition of nonsense». The term ἄγνοια is interfaced inevitably with the nature of evil in its semantics. It is an unconditional axiom of Socratic ethics. However, our concern is not the gnoseological and intellectual background of the Athenian philosopher but his semantic structure in the broad sense. «Evil» is not

represented with traditional πονηρία in this particular fragment but with the word «κακὸν». That is also quite common for both Ancient and Modern Greek lexicon. Socrates' principle concerning the nature of ignorance (ἄγνοια) is lexically defined through «κακὸν» and «πονηρία».

Plato developed a special, destructively pragmatic aspect of evil's harmfulness in his mature years. If we look at the text of «The Republic», this aspect is included into the wide system of corresponding defects, diseases and deviations. «Pernicious» nature of evil is analyzed by Plato not only in common terms of ethics and moral reflection but also in the domains of metallurgy, medicine, carpentry and agriculture: Τί δέ; κακὸν ἑκάστῳ τι καὶ ἀγαθὸν λέγεις; οἷον ὀφθαλμοῖς ὀφθαλμίαν καὶ σύμπαντι τῷ σώματι νόσον, σίτῳ τε ἐρυσίβην, σηπεδόνα τε ξύλοις, χαλκῷ δὲ καὶ σιδήρῳ ἰόν, καί, ὅπερ λέγω, σχεδὸν πᾶσι σύμφυτον ἑκάστῳ κακόν τε καὶ νόσημα; [*Pl. Resp*. 609a] «How about this: Do you say that there is a special good and evil for everything, as for example ophthalmia for the eyes, disease for entire body, mildew for grain, rotting for wood, rust for bronze and iron, and as I say, there is a congenital evil and disease for practically everything». It is worth to mention another vector of Plato's ethics, which has not been studied so well yet. It comes in the form of defectology that is a special universal science. «Evil» possessed extremely wide pragmatics during the archaic era. It was stretching out far beyond modern ethical premises.

And further on: Τὸ σύμφυτον ἄρα κακὸν ἑκάστου καὶ ἡ πονηρία ἕκαστον ἀπόλλυσιν, ἢ εἰ μὴ τοῦτο ἀπολεῖ, οὐκ ἂν ἄλλο γε αὐτὸ ἔτι διαφθείρειεν. Οὐ γὰρ τό γε ἀγαθὸν μή ποτέ τι ἀπολέσῃ, οὐδὲ αὖ τὸ μήτε κακὸν μήτε ἀγαθόν. [*Pl. Resp*. 609b] «It means that each thing is ruined by evil peculiar to it but if evil is unable to ruin the thing, nothing else will destroy it. The good will ruin nothing, of course. Something cannot be pernicious if it is neither good nor evil».

Semantics of πονηρία transform completely from typical psychological and spiritual to corporal and material defects as well as pathology in «Hippias Minor»: «Χωλεία δὲ ποδῶν οὐχὶ πονηρία καὶ ἀσχημοσύνη ἐστίν;» [*Pl. Hp. Mi.* 376 d], where Socrates asks: «Isn't lameness an ugly defect»? In this case evil acts as a physical deformation of the impellent system. This image of πονηρία is very characteristic for the Greek thought. It is reproduced repeatedly in various texts.

Πονηρία is applied as deficiency, perversity and «evil» in terms of an eye decease in «Hippias Minor»: οὐ πονηρία ὀφθαλμῶν; [*Pl. Hp. Mi.* 379d]. Evil is not presented as a defect of the soul only. It also refers to physical phenomena and subjects. As we find it in Plato's passage from «The Republic», evil-πονηρία is responsible for «perversity», «staleness» and literally «rotten» food: Ἐννόει γάρ, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ὦ Γλαύκων, ὅτι οὐδ' ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν σιτίων πονηρίας, ἣ ἂν ᾖ αὐτῶν ἐκείνων, εἴτε παλαιότης εἴτε σαπρότης εἴτε ἡτισοῦν οὖσα, οὐκ οἰόμεθα δεῖν σῶμα ἀπόλλυσθαι·ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὲν ἐμποιῇ ἡ αὐτῶν πονηρία τῶν σιτίων τῷ σώματι σώματος μοχθηρίαν, φήσομεν αὐτὸ δι' ἐκεῖνα ὑπὸ τῆς αὐτοῦ κακίας νόσου οὔσης ἀπολωλέναι· ὑπὸ δὲ σιτίων πονηρίας ἄλλων ὄντων ἄλλο ὂν τὸ σῶμα, ὑπ 'ἀλλοτρίου κακοῦ μὴ ἐμποιήσαντος τὸ ἔμφυτον κακόν, οὐδέποτε ἀξιώσομεν διαφθείρεσθαι [*Pl. Resp.* 609e]. «Think, Glaucon that we don't consider the body has to perish directly from the spoiled food, it doesn't matter if this food is stale, rotten and so on. And when spoiled food causes a corporal illness, then we say that the body perishes from the food but at the same time from its own defect, in other words from an illness. And as the food and body are different things, we consider that the body can't be lost because of stale food as long as this evil is foreign to the body and won't cause evil peculiar to it». We see here that πονηρία stands for certain functional and subject-related unfitness of a thing in terms of its main purpose. There-fore evil is concentrated as an *obstacle* in teleological vector. And the nature of that thing does not make any difference, whether it is the soul, pieces of wool and bread or a soldier. If there is a reason for unfitness (an illness, a coloring defect, callousness, cowardice, absence of bravery, etc.) then the whole functional set of defects becomes evil leading the thing astray. *Transitive* nature of evil is also interesting in this remark. Namely, supernatural, external evil can resign to internal and become immanent.

The subject of evil as a perversity varies from its physical and material perspective back to psychological in the 10th book of «The Republic». It should be noted that πονηρία is evil itself or defectiveness leading to evil in this context: κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τοίνυν λόγον, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἐὰν μὴ σώματος πονηρία ψυχῇ ψυχῆς πονηρίαν ἐμποιῇ, μή ποτε ἀξιῶμεν ὑπὸ ἀλλοτρίου κακοῦ ἄνευ τῆς ἰδίας πονηρίας ψυχὴν ἀπόλλυσθαι, τῷ ἑτέρου κακῷ ἕτερον [*Pl. Resp.* 616a]. «On the same basis if a body damage doesn't cause perversity of the soul inherent in it, we are never able to recognize that the soul perishes from external evil, except for its own perversity: this kind of evil and evil peculiar to the soul are different things».

Another important word form designating phenomena related to evil in Ancient Greek is τὸ κᾰκόν and its lexical derivatives. If πονηρία is related to κᾰκόν, then πονηρία is more likely to denote perversity from the semantic perspective, while κᾰκόν stands for evil. However, πονηρία also expresses evil without κᾰκόν. For example, Plato uses both κᾰκόν and πονηρία in «The Republic» combining them or taking them separately at times. So, considering preconditions of immortality in evil context, the Athenian author writes the following: οὐκοῦν ὁπότε μηδ 'ὑφ' ἑνὸς ἀπόλλυται κακοῦ, μήτε οἰκείου μήτε ἀλλοτρίου, δῆλον ὅτι ἀνάγκη αὐτὸ ἀεὶ ὂν εἶναι εἰ δ' ἀεὶ ὄν, ἀθάνατον [*Pl. Resp* 611a]. «But if something doesn't perish from any of these evils, neither from

its own nor from external then it is obvious that it has to be something eternal. And if it exists eternally then it is immortal».

It is remarkable that the category of «defect» is lexically formed with both πονηρία and κἄκόν in the Ancient Greek language. For example, in Plato's «Laws» the Athenian answers Clinius' question: Ἆρ' οἰόμεθα, ὦ θαυμάσιε, τοὺς τότε, ἀπείρους ὄντας πολλῶν μὲν καλῶν τῶν κατὰ τὰ ἄστη, πολλῶν δὲ καὶ τῶν ἐναντίων, τελέους πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἢ πρὸς κακίαν γεγονέναι; [*Pl. Leg.* 679 b]. «But then, my friend, the men of that time were unfamiliar with many benefits that cities provided as well as with many things that opposed those benefits. Can we consider those people perfect either in virtue or in vice?» In this case κακίαν acts as an antonym of ἀρετὴν.

It should be noted that semantics of τὸ κἄκόν could partly be adjoined with paradoxical lexicon of Heraclitus, whose vocabulary has frightened translators throughout centuries. Let us take well-known Diels's fragment 126b containing Heraclitean criticism of Pythagoras as an example: «Πυθαγόρης Μνησάρχου ἱστορίην ἤσκησεν ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πάντων καὶ ἐκλεξάμενος ταύτας τὰς συγγραφὰς ἐποιήσατο ἑαυτοῦ σοφίην, πολυμαθείην, κακοτεχνίην». [*Diog. Laert.* 8.1] «Pythagoras, the son of Mnesarchus practiced questioning people more than anybody else. And he created his own wisdom by gathering various scriptures, became extensively educated and maliciously contrivable». The term κακοτεχνίην can be translated as «mischievous art» or maybe as «contrivance». The property of «bad» or «evil» (κακὸ...) lexically accompanies «τέχνη» which is the principle of skill and ability in this text. Αγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν ταὐτὸν, Heraclitus' maxim about the identity of good and evil contains κακὸν for expressing whatever is «bad». κακὸν is an adjective here. It turns into a noun τὸ κακὸν when it is exposed to substantiation and receives an article of the neutral gender, singular (το).

Antique usage of πονηρία is remarkable in application to the phenomena connected with estimation of human character and personal qualities in terms of *adynamism*. Πονηρία is characterized with lack of character or cowardice in Ancient Greek tragedy. Odyssey makes a remark in Euripides's «Cyclops»: ἄνδρες πονηροὶ κοὐδὲν οἵδε σύμμαχοι [*Eur. Cycl.* 642]. «These allies are unusable (cowards)». And further on as Coryphaeus answers: ὁτιὴ τὸ νῶτον τὴν ῥάχιν τ' οἰκτίρομεν καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας ἐκβαλεῖν οὐ βούλομαι τυπτόμενος, αὕτη γίγνεται πονηρία; [*Eur. Cycl.* 643] «...and so, am I a coward?»» However, it should be noted that lack of character is not evil in its Christian sense known from the Gospel and the New Testament's epistles. Individual sluggishness in various vital aspects cannot lead to evil as an *active position*. This transition is not so obvious. That means Greek πονηρία had a number of semantic gradations including aspects unrelated to evil directly (for example, certain features of character, functional properties of objects neutral from the ethical point of view.). These gradations were reduced in NT's lexicon. Πονηρία receives a strictly defined semantic vector there.

We come across the same non-dynamic perspective on πονηρία in Aristophanes' «Thesmophoriazusae». «Why is she still alive even despite the dreary course of events?» wonders Mnesilochus imitating Elena's role. An old woman uses πονηρία together with the noun «crow» in her answer: «Τῶν κοράκων πονηρίᾳ» [*Aristoph. Thes.* 868]. That literally stands for «crows hesitate» (the crows are slow, lazy). Thus, we see πονηρία as a form of dynamic lameness, laziness and low mobility here. This semantic aspect of evil projects it to the sphere of platonic lexicon. It can also be considered as a certain defect in teleological order. Lameness, «evil» expressed with weakness, lack of joviality or active tone make the subject dysfunctional. This sort of dysfunctionality may be ethically neutral. Nevertheless, we encounter the same

lexical and semantic version of πονηρία, the one that disappeared from the Greek lexicon in the New Testament.

However, πονηρία does not necessarily stand for passivity, weakness and lameness in Greek lexicon. Sometimes it gives way to poneria that is an active intention or an inclination. A particular criminal activity such as plundering is shaped semantically on the lexical premises of πονηρία. For example, we meet this term in plural with a vocative article (ὦ πόνηροι (thieves)) in Aristophanes' plays: ὦ πόνηροι, ταυτηὶ τῇ δαδὶ φρυκτοὺς σκευάσω [*Hom. Il.* 1331], «Thieves! This torch will fry you!» It is interesting to mention the fact that Slavic «pronira» (sneaky person) ascends to πονηρός, i. e. villain, thief, swindler. It is definitely not a coincidence that the New Testament's lexicon refers to πονηρός when it comes to «devil» or «the wicked one», as it was noticed above.

The antique semantic vector of πονηρία is also remarkable in the context of gigantization and macro scales. For example, we meet «great perversity» that may be «great evil» adjoining to «great virtue» in Plato's «Laws». The Athenian answers to Clinius: Οὐκοῦν ἐξ ἐκείνων τῶν διακειμένων οὕτω τὰ νῦν γέγονεν ἡμῖν σύμπαντα, πόλεις τε καὶ πολιτεῖαι καὶ τέχναι καὶ νόμοι, καὶ πολλὴ μὲν πονηρία, πολλὴ δὲ καὶ ἀρετή; [*Pl. Leg.* 677a]. «However such conditions led to emergence of all present: states, state systems, arts, laws; there was a great perversity, but also a great virtue». The similar aspect of evil's increasing exponential dynamics is found in Aristotelian «Politics». Πονηρία is mentioned there in relation to an impetuously increasing defect: «ἔτι δ' ἡ πονηρία τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἄπληστον, καὶ τὸ πρῶτον μὲν ἱκανὸν διωβελία μόνον, ὅταν δ' ἤδη τοῦτ' ᾖ πάτριον, ἀεὶ δέονται τοῦ πλείονος, ἕως εἰς ἄπειρον ἔλθωσιν» [*Arist. Pol.* 1267b.1]. «Depravity of human beings is so insatiable that only a couple of obols is enough at first. And they always want more as soon as this becomes an established custom. And so it goes for all eterni-ty». It is interesting to notice the fact that Aristotle uses «ἄπειρον» in this phrase. It is a classical term introduced by Anaximander. It emphasizes that the defect is increasing boundlessly. It is remarkable that ἡ πονηρία τῶν ἀνθρώπων stands for «human perversity» in Aristotle's sentence. At the same time, «ἡ πονηρία» means simply «rage» or «evil». So, Aristotle comes up with somewhat a proverb in «Rhetoric»: ὥσπερ γὰρ ἡ παροιμία, προφάσεως δεῖται μόνον ἡ πονηρία [*Aristot. Rh.* 1373a] «Evil-doing needs only an excuse».

Plotinus adds a new semantic vector to the case. He differentiates πονηρία from lexical derivatives of κᾰκόν. We meet perversity of the character (πονηρία δὲ ἤθους) separately from the special lexical construct denoting evil in the «Third Ennead»: πονηρία δὲ ἤθους παρὰ θεῶν ὄντων πῶς ἂν δοθείη; καὶ ὅλως ὅσα λέγονται διδόναι κακὰ κακούμενοι, ὅτι δύνουσι καὶ ὅτι ὑπὸ γῆν φέρονται, ὥσπερ διάφορόν τι πασχόντων, εἰ πρὸς ἡμᾶς δύνοιεν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀεὶ ἐπὶ σφαίρας οὐρανίας φερομένων καὶ πρὸς τὴν γῆν τὴν αὐτὴν ἐχόντων σχέσιν; [*Plot. En.* III 3 p1]. «How to explain perversity of the character caused by the stars, in case they are gods? How come people are able to assume that evil comes from the stars... and they still say it is so. Stars are evil due to their recess and when they stay underground as though something outstanding happens to them when they set, as we see it that from our point of view».

We come across such fundamental ethical concepts as perversity, injustice and sin as they show up together in a rather small fragment by Plotinus: Ἀλλ' εἰ καλῶς ταῦτα λέγεται, πῶς ἂν ἔτι πονηρία; Ποῦ δ' ἀδικία; Ἁμαρτία δὲ ποῦ; [*Plot. En.* III 3h 2]. «But if it is said so perfectly why does perversity exist after all? How about injustice and sin» And further on «why are those beautiful individuals capable of injustice and sin? Πῶς γὰρ ἔστι καλῶς γινομένων ἁπάντων ἀδικεῖν ἢ ἁμαρτάνειν τοὺς ποιοῦντας; ἁμαρτάνω means literally «to do something wrong», «not

to correspond with the purpose» here. Whereas ἀδικεῖν from ἀδικέω has a similar sense, namely «to do something wrong or be wrong, unfair».

It is also interesting to mention overlapping of evil and blindness in Origen's works. We find semantics of evil and the idea of arrogance similar to the NT's ethical invectives in his book «Against Celsius»: Τυφλὸν γάρ τι ἐστὶν ἡ πονηρία καὶ βουλομένη ὡς ἰσχυροτέρα τοῦ χρεὼν νικᾶν αὐτό. [*Orig. Con Cel.* Lib. I, 61,3] «...Evil is connected with blindness; it feels even stronger than destiny». There is no doubt that blindness (τυφλὸν) has mental rather than physical sense here. We face a *spiritual disorientation* in this case. It is the one that refers to values and composes an essential property of «evil», according to Origen.

Origen uses the term πονηρία in connection with questions of ethnic history. It is more likely that «evil» or πονηρία stands for cunningness and slyness in this particular context: Οὐκ ἂν γὰρ πονηρία καὶ μαγγανεία ὅλον ἔθνος συνέστησαν, ὑπερβὰν μὲν οὐ μόνον ἀγάλματα καὶ τὰ ὑπ᾽ ἀνθρώπων ἱδρυμένα ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσαν γενητὴν φύσιν, ἀναβαῖνον δὲ πρὸς τὴν ἀγένητον τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν ὅλων ἀρχήν. [Orig. Con Cel. Lib. II, 6,51] «Slyness and sorcery could not actually shape the whole nation that gave up worshipping not only statues and human handwork, but also any living being ever created and turned to God which is the eternal origin of all things» (ἀγένητον). This semantic layer is certainly the major one in the NT's terminological tradition of evil.

Bibliography

1. Aristophanes, vol. 4, Ed. Coulon V., van Daele M. – Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967.
2. Aristophanes. Wasps, Ed. MacDowell D. M. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
3. Corpus Aristotelicum Ed. Ross W. D. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
4. Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, vol. 1, Ed. Diels H., Kranz W. – Berlin: Weidmann, 1966.
5. Euripidis fabulae, vol. 1, Ed. Diggle J. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
6. Origène. Contre Celse. Ed. Borret. – M.: Paris, 1967.
7. Platonis opera, vol. 2, Ed. Burnet J. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
8. Platonis opera, vol. 3, Ed. Burnet J. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
9. Plotinus. Enneads. Cambridge, 1980.