

Evil as a Subject of Sociological Cognition: Methodological Reflections¹

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In this article, the question of opportunities and boundaries of scientific research of the evil is considered. It is emphasized that the notion “evil” is widely used in politics and journalism for the description of the most vital issues of the present, for instance, international terrorism. It induces social scientists to the methodological reflection of scientific and philosophical attempts of conceptualization, description and analysis of a complex of the phenomena and processes determined by the term “evil.” A brief review of such attempts in science and philosophy of the 20th century is carried out.

Despite the marginal status of the notions of Good and Evil in modern scientific discourse, the main scientific and philosophical concepts of human and society recognized in the 20th century admit the possibility of using these notions. Despite the fact that the idea of Evil is difficult to interpret as a concept term, which is the major obstacle to a scientific application of this, it is inappropriate to name it as unidentified. Such interpretation seems relevant to both social phenomena and anthropological ones.

It is noted that the essential postulates of the modern scientific perception of “The Evil” analysis in sociology have been obtained in the writings of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Karl Popper, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. Those were Marx and Nietzsche who stated the polar vision of the phenomenology of Evil on the socio-philosophical level. Herewith, the survey of the conceptualizations and approaches to this problem is not limited with the abovementioned scientists, but involves the ideas and researches of a quite wide range of sociologists, philosophers and psychologists of the 20th century.

Thus, the contents of the article, i.e. the overview of concepts and ideas, cannot be considered as the extensive one as the theme and the reference sources analyzed are boundless. This issue is to be regarded just as an introductory attempt to give an insight into the matter and get involved into the interaction on the subject.

Key Words: Evil, deviantology, positivism, postmodernism, objectivity, sociology and psychology of Evil.

*In spite of the fact that the concept “evil” seems outdated,
A remnant of the past, far from the present <...>,
Nevertheless, the evil is for us a reality.
We see the evil, we create the evil and we are exposed to the evil.
Lars Svendsen “A Philosophy of Evil”*

Today, international terrorism is considered to be the world’s main evil. This is what the President of Russia said in his annual address, drawing parallels between the fight against terrorism and the one against Nazism — the main scourge of the twentieth century [Epistle,

¹ Article is prepared with financial support of the Russian scientific fund, the project No. 15-18-00038 “Extremism and the ethnosocial conflicts among young people of the politnichny region: forecasting and prevention.”

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2015]. In fact, the term “evil” quite frequently sounds in the speeches of politicians and journalists: let us recall the notorious phrase “evil empire”, which is so relished by American presidents. Hence, a vital methodological question occurs: whether what is defined as “evil” can be the subject of a scientific rather than philosophical and journalistic analysis.

“Good” and “Evil” from the viewpoint of the 19th century positivists are considered in the social sciences and humanities to be incorrect notions. Undoubtedly, such direct assessment and value judgments should be excluded from the “truly scientific” text. Following Max Weber’s advice, they need to be replaced with reference to value: in a certain society, at a particular time people supposed that “X” stands for Good, while “Y” — for Evil [Weber, 1990]. These impersonal formulas, concealing the subjective position of a scientist, entirely permeated the minds of the modern humanities. The scientist must be objective, and thus, not putting forward a personal attitude to the subject, follow the facts. This sounds positive in theory, but an extremely difficult and controversial in practice — the principle borrowed from the experiential scientists (perhaps there have been some reasons at first, but then they were obviously lost) which was finally brought to an end by postmodernism. After all, it was vital to abandon the “subjective” attributing the phenomenon to the category of Good or Evil for the sake of objectivity. It was postmodernism which destroyed objectivity. There is simply none — penetrate into the works of Jean-François Lyotard or Jacques Derrida (as well as Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre-Félix Guattari or Paul-Michel Foucault) that contain no objectivity, no notions of Good or Evil. There is only the infinite variety of phenomena (even not phenomena), and an infinite number of interpretations, which is called “the death of meta-narrative” [Lyotard, 1998]. Any objectivity observed here?

However, our goal is not to clarify the dispute between positivism and postmodernism. The main thesis of this article is equal to the opposite of both of them and implies the approval of the real (and quite objectively comprehensible) existence of Good and Evil. Let remember that these categories are very important for the spirit level of human reality [Ostapenko, 2014]. We strongly believe that these notions are not just real (i.e. having an objective, “material” and the absolute nature), but the fundamental parameters of social and personal being, which requires the introduction of these categories in the space of social and humanitarian knowledge not only philosophically, but also on the conceptual and scientific level. This undoubtedly controversial statement is required to deploy the argument.

Let us begin with the assumption that Evil (as well as Good) is extremely difficult to define on the terminological level. However, this does not imply that we cannot conceptualize it by all means. The science, of course, tends to adhere to obvious definitions, which in terms of logic have the “A is B and C” form. However, a great amount of things, to a huge regret of intellectuals of all types, does not reflect such definitions, being at the same time crucial for us. They are as follows: “Love”, “Justice”, “Happiness” or “Seeking Life Fullness” as well as “Person”, “Man”. “Good” and “Evil” are likewise. However, for such difficult realities we can exploit ostensive (to show) or contextual (to discuss) definitions. At the same time, some advocates of strict science will argue that the things defined in this way are inevitably subjective and cannot be used as facts. However, anyone who has suffered from “subjective” love or “subjective” consciousness of their own sin (fault) is perfectly aware of the fact that this suffering was of quite an objective, real nature. It has been caused by Love or Sin, but not “subjective experience of sentiments.” Here we deal with the empirical law, well known not only to writers and playwrights, but also to all of us through life experience: the human soul suffers from unfortunate love and from a committed sin. In addition, this phenomenon, in our

opinion, is quite objective. On the contrary, the illusion of subjectivity is created by the fact that different types of mental organization, depending on upbringing, experience, hereditary constitution and other conditions, can endure and reveal this suffering in a different way. To put it briefly, the Evil can be conceptualized, or it is possible to show some of its forms and to argue about its nature.

Any research starts with an attempt to review the reference sources. In our case, the similar step will turn out to be inevitably fragmentary for several reasons. Firstly, we do not claim for an extensive research of such a difficult subject in any way. This article is rather an attempt of a dialogue, sometimes an attempt to discuss the most widespread approaches in modern sociology and psychology of deviant behavior. Therefore, our purpose consists in the statement of a problem rather than in its thorough analysis. Secondly, we can come across the main and the deepest attempts of understanding and the analysis of phenomena of Good and Evil in religious and philosophical texts as well as in the works of art. The review of at least of the most part of the above-mentioned texts could demand the independent scholarly monograph. Hence, some of them will be mentioned below. Anyway, the fragmentary nature of bibliography and reference foundation of our introduction to a problem is obvious, and can be justified only by the fact that we present no more than the first step in the designated direction to a reader.

In our viewpoint, the fundamental coordinates of modern scientific approach to the understanding of a perspective of the Evil issue have been laid in the works of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Karl Popper, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche. Herewith, Marx and Nietzsche in their treaties have set the polar ideas of Evil phenomenology on the social and philosophical level.

Marx has formulated the idea of the class nature of moral discourse. Durkheim has contributed to it with the idea of collective consciousness as the carrier of the moral authority, emphasizing that collective consciousness never covers all the community members, but only the majority. Respectively, the understanding of norm in sociology was approved as a statistical phenomenon — what the majority in this social community at present do (sometimes — with the reservation of adaptability of such behavior) is considered normal. These ideas, which are often rather freely interpreted, have given way to constructivism — the theory according to which the concepts of “good” and “evil”, “norm” and “deviation” are a product of social constructing and accord. This, though making a start from objective reality of primary individual and social needs, has a huge historical and cultural variability. The treatise of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann “The Social Construction of Reality” [Berger & Luckmann, 1995] became the most famous and deep sociological achievement of this idea. Amongst modern works of Russian scientists on the subject of deviantology “The Construction of Deviance” under Yakov I. Gilinsky’s edition [Designing, 2011] stands out. In terms of classical constructivism, the main form of Evil is an anomy — the so-called state of abnormality — being in fact the interpretation by Durkheim of Hobbes’ “wars of all against all.” “The law is changeable, but it is the Law and without it life turns into chaos” — that is the credo of classical constructivism.

Postmodern interpretations of the idea of constructivism (mainly by Michel Foucault [Foucault, 2010] and Jacques Derrida [Derrida, 1997]) have brought it, in our opinion, to the point of absurdity. We will refer to this subject again later on. For the time being we will only make a notice that even “moderate” constructivism is in difficult correlation with social reality, constantly solving a dilemma what elements of this reality are ontologically caused and a little

changeable, even in different forms, and which of them are purely an essence of any and easily changing social scenery.

In psychology the understanding of evil (deviation) has been substantially reduced to a problem of unadaptation, in many respects due to psychoanalysis and behaviorism, i.e. Sigmund Freud and John Watson's ideas which are quite different at first sight, yet, deeply similar when it comes to profound understanding of a person and motives of his or her behavior.

John Broadus Watson followed by Burrhus Frederic Skinner have actually proved and spread a view of morals (as well as on other mental structures) as the conditioned-reflex formation gained within the course of adaptation of the individual to environmental conditions under the influence of positive and negative incentives. What we call "evil" is only the destructive forms of adaptation to the environment. This thought has formed the basis of numerous strategies of "a training of the adaptive forms of behavior" which have become the main direction of psychocorrective work in a behaviorism scenery.

Sigmund Freud's ideas (one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century) about the origin and essence of Super Ego — a moral component of personality, which is in charge of "knowledge of good and evil" — represents the psychological version of evolutionary constructivism. The moral, according to this point of view, is like a new type of mentality, which has succeeded instincts and is designed to secure human herd against the most destructive manifestations of individual aggression and sexuality.

Freud actually declared that there is no "evil" per se — there are unadaptive forms of receiving pleasure, the process of relieving tension, which in itself is normal and natural to all animals, including the human. This idea of "the naturalness of Desire" has exerted a very deep impact on all European and world culture of the 20th century. The "natural" human strives for pleasure, the main forms of which are connected with sexuality, while "artificial and repressive" morals prevent him "to find oneself." This collision has caused a huge number of works of modern art in the 20th century and was pondered about by their creators in terms of Evil dually. The first interpretation came down to denying evil, denouncing it as a "sanctimonious" invention and glorifying unlimited sexuality. The only form of something similar to an "absolute" Evil is deformed sexuality (sadism, first of all). This "enlightened hedonism" inspired the European cultural drive of "the roaring 20s" and found its reflection in fashion and the general atmosphere of emancipation of that time. It is worth mentioning in a few words that de Sade considered those forms of receiving pleasure, which have since been called by his name, as a natural consequence of the emancipated Desire, which is running away from Boredom — the eternal persecutor of pleasure.

Another interpretation is more "pessimistic" and at the same time more "human"; it is based on the recognition of an idea that evil cannot be eliminated, provoked by the animalistic, wild and deep-rooted human nature lying behind a thin cover of rationality and morals. It is regrettable, but the person remains an aggressive and perverted animal even if one tries to overcome this wildness in cultural space. This interpretation has in turn generated two branches. First, the European existentialism with its stoical focus on hopeless, but necessary fight against the evil, and hope to find sense in the senseless, presented in literature by Erich Maria Remarque, Jean-Paul Sartre and Ernest Hemingway. Second, pessimistic nihilism, which is represented most vividly, for instance, by Louis-Ferdinand Celine ("Voyage au bout de la nuit") with his hopeless capitulation of Good to Evil.

Anyway, both branches of this literary and philosophical discourse proposed no convincing approaches to the solution of the problem of Evil.

Friedrich Nietzsche made the idea of relativity and artificiality of the evil absolute. His criticism of the “morality of the weak”, which leads to “the other side of Good and Evil”, proclaims a traditional moral discourse even more radically artificial. The Good is the realized aspiration to power, to free self-establishment of a personality struggling against the world and others, while the Evil is the constraint to this will. Nietzsche’s huge influence on postmodernism was revealed in the works of its most prominent representatives, including Foucault with his analysis of the interconnection between power and sexuality as well as Derrida with his idea of “eternal return” to the Babel towers.

Nietzsche’s ideas set one — nihilistic — aspect of the understanding of Good and Evil in the intellectual area of the present times. What we usually call “evil” is only the repression of “willingness to power” (which in essence is the will to live) carried out by the weak in relation to the strong. However, the genuine reality of life lies “on the other side of Good and Evil”.

Another aspect, the soteriological one, is set by Marx’s ideas. In all his criticism of social forms and their peculiar types of morals Marx does not actually get down to denying moral as it is, but only shows its partial conditioning by a social class. The law, formally equal for all, allows some humans to luxuriate with a feeling of moral righteousness, whilst condemning the others to hopeless wretched existence. These forms of the evil have been very brightly and thoroughly described, practically on the borderline of sociology and literature, by Jack London (“The People of the Abyss”), Maxim Gorky (“At the bottom”, “Mother”) and other realists at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries.

The main forms of Evil (quite real and tangible in terms of traditional moral), according to Marx, are alienation and exploitation. Besides, he as a more dangerous, “evil” and metaphysical phenomenon considers alienation. Exploitation is an obvious evil and therefore is easier to cope with. Additionally, alienation can also take latent forms. Alienation of goods from their cost, of a person from work, eventually there are singular forms of more general alienation — a form from its contents, existence from its embodiment, phenomenon from essence. This interpretation of Marx has been subsequently deeply developed by the theorists of Frankfurt school, primarily Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, whose works we will refer to again later on.

While Nietzsche actually encourages to take Evil for Good and to accept “morals of the strong” (i.e. actually immoralism) instead of “morals of the weak”, Marx calls for a fight against the evil. Actually the whole history of the conflict theory development, including its latest versions (e.g. Paul J. Taylor, Paul Walton, Juliette Young) [Gilinsky, 2013: 116-120], was inspired by the idea of overcoming Evil whose roots can be found in the wrong social structure that makes exploitation and alienation possible, which in turn are the reasons for the individual evil. However, the field of scientific and philosophical discourse on the evil topic is not yet complete with the opposition of Marxism and postmodernism (or better to say, of soteriology and nihilism).

Another direction of theorizing on the subject of Evil is set by critical rationalism and, first of all, by its most famous representative — Karl Raimund Popper. In “The Open Society and Its Enemies” Popper, likewise Marx, argues about the need to overcome Evil [Popper, 1992]. Similarly to Marx, he finds the reasons for it in the wrong social structure together with the “wrong” thinking (but if, following Marx, this is incorrect class-consciousness, according to Popper — it’s the lack of critical rationality). Yet, the main form of the social Evil for Popper is “totalitarianism” (which is inevitably connected with violence to an individual) and he apparently compared collectivism to it in all manifestations. This is the first fundamental contradiction between Popper and Marx: for the latter collectivism acts as one of the conditions

of eradicating Evil (social exclusion); the former, Popper, considered individualism to be the absolute social benefit (though its grounds are not quite logical and explanatory) associated with mercy and rationality. At the same time, Popper's instruction for overcoming Evil is directly opposite to Marx's guideline: one must not fight Evil taking "big steps" — it inevitably generates the bigger Evil. It is necessary to improve rational and technological devices so as to "eradicate Evil in small portions", gradually changing the separate aspects of social reality. The conflict of the ideas "Marx vs. Popper" caused the main political opposition of the 20th century between liberalism and communism, which demonized each other, announced each other "the empires of Evil" and managed it from the related methodological positions of Enlightenment and belief in Mind.

However, even if we neglect the political aspects, the Popper-Marx argument (also with Plato) is an acute modern debate about the values of science. Should science take up the "world-saving" mission, as if inheriting that from its foundation ancestor — theology? On the other hand, is its major mission — the impersonal and pure world discovery? Is there any place for values within the boundaries of science? If there is, then which way of manifestation does it take? Moreover, is that true to life that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, or can this road possibly lead to some other place? Was Popper right when he said: "Nowadays I see more clearly than any time before that even the greatest of our mischiefs come from something equally inspiring and dangerous, namely — from our burning desire to make the life of our fellow men better" [Popper, 1992]. These implied, though obvious in the first place, questions need a careful and steady approach, as well as a process of separate consideration, which cannot fit in the space of this article.

Further, in the primary case study, we will try to describe the most successful experiences of scientific reflection of the evil at the first approximation.

One of the main directions of the scientific and philosophical studies of the problem of Evil is linked to existential psychoanalysis of Viktor Frankl. In fact, secular existentialism with its stoical pathos overall gave in to the Absurdity of the 20th century and did not succeed, in our opinion, in understanding and overcoming the Evil matter. However, Frankl's logotherapy is quite different — it comes from the determination of the scientist to survive in the Evil laboratory (a concentration camp) and has probably become the most thorough and productive of all the attempts to tackle intellectually "the defiance of Auschwitz."

Speaking about purely scientific approaches to the consideration of Evil in the 20th century, first it is necessary to note some kind of "stiffness" of the very formulation. As it is considered to be, science is not engaged in studying Evil: that is the destiny of theology, art, and philosophy as a last resort. Science investigates problems. A similar approach at once splits up a colossus of Evil into a set of such problems — the objects of study are as follows: "inequality problem", "crime problem", "xenophobia problem", "unadaptation problem", etc. There are certain advantages connected with transition from the general reasoning to knowledge and technologies, but disadvantages do also exist. The main one is connected with the risk of losing a valuable position of a scientist when the ruthless attempts of decision-making are allowed due to the impersonal analytics of problems, such as abortions, promotion of debauchery (for example, in the form of support of LGBT communities) or euthanasia. Another drawback is the "erosion of Evil" which conceals itself behind particular problems that seem much less acute than "Evil" in all severity of their perception.

Meantime, some scientists have come rather close to what could be called the scientific research of Evil. These include first and foremost the works of social psychologists Stanley

Milgram and Philip Zimbardo — the creators of perhaps the most famous and controversial psychological experiments of the 20th century. Zimbardo's experiment to simulate a prison sentence at Stanford University [Zimbardo, 2000; Zimbardo, 2013] as well as destructive subordination research at Yale University conducted by Milgram [Milgram, 2000] in a quite scientific way allowed to reveal the “ordinariness of Evil.” Its carriers can easily become “ordinary people” — the participants in their experiments. Despite the abundance of the results interpretations of their experiments, the main outcome is apparently the results themselves, which are the following: Evil is present in every one of us and easily manifests itself in appropriate conditions, exposing the fragility of our morals that seem untouched in everyday life. This should not deprive us of courage and hope in the fight against Evil, but, of course, should be a reminder of the fact that Evil must be taken seriously.

In sociology, the most profound examples of research that we used to name “Evil” in daily life refer, in the first place, to the name of Pitirim A. Sorokin (his analytics of “sensual culture” is a perfect example of “sociological theory of Evil”) [Sorokin, 1992]. Then the works of Robert King Merton [Merton, 1992], Charles Wright Mills [Mills, 1959] and Edwin M. Shur [Shur, 1977] are to be mentioned, which are dedicated to the study of war, crime and inequality — the most obvious forms of social Evil in postwar America: *“The problem of war and the problem of crime show a striking similarity. The society has always had quite a strong desire to differentiate all people into those who bring evil and those who cause it. <...> This approach well corresponds to a common American approach to divide everyone into “good guys” and “bad guys.” <...> Wars and crimes have always existed. However, unlike in the past, in both cases the behavior deviating from the accepted standard now seems uncontrollable”* [Shur, 1977:13-14].

Speaking about the immanence of evil, its rootedness in everyday life of a market society, he is echoed by one of the most impressive modern representatives of critical sociology — Michael Hoffman, “The ideals of the 60s — high morality, social responsibility, the right to personal freedom — lost their appeal, lost their social and moral pathos. <...> The scope of criminal offences is just the top of the iceberg — they are the index of the desire to find the shortest path to success which is widely accepted in the society. <...> All segments of the population are involved in the business game, everyone exploits everyone. In the dynamics of the transition of banknotes from one hand to the other, they find themselves in the most vigorous, the most shameless, the most flexible people in achieving personal success. They advance the economy, increasing its efficiency in general, throughout the country” [Hoffman, 2015].

Finally, it is worth mentioning the widely known scientific papers, which are directly aimed at the subject considered. In the first place, these are the works by Jean Baudrillard, who identifies Evil with the repressive artificiality of consumer society that is inhumane and destroys the reality of genuine existence: “Thus, all our categories have entered the era of unnatural where the matter does not concern desire, but forcing to desire, it does not concern action, but forcing to do it, it does not concern cost, but forcing to cost (this can be exemplified by any advertisement), it does not concern cognition, but forcing to know, and, at last, the last but not the least — it does not concern pleasure but forcing to enjoy. <...> Strong motives or, in other words, positive, selective, appealing impulses have disappeared. <...> And the complex of Evil will, rejection and disgust, on the contrary, have become brighter. <...> Perhaps, it is some new form of the Evil principle. <...>?” [Baudrillard, 2000].

This is quite an acute description of manifestations of Evil in consumer society, but unfortunately, it does not correspond to a somehow distinct strategy of its overcoming. On the

contrary, the logic of Jean Baudrillard about “metaphysical inseparability of Good and Evil” [Baudrillard, 2000: 156] leads eventually to the acceptance of “normality” of the evil: “An illusion that makes us think that it is possible to separate Good from Evil so as to develop one thing or another is just absurd (it dooms those, whose objective is to retaliate evil with evil, to weakness because eventually they do good)” [Baudrillard, 2000: 163].

Moreover, there is a profound and thorough research of an issue of Evil that was undertaken by Lars Svendsen in terms of critical rationalism [Svendsen, 2008]. Svendsen, along with all liberal individualists, obviously accepts a prejudiced approach to the facts of the Soviet-Russian history — for example, when talking about “the most serious war crimes committed by Russians in Chechnya since World War II” [Svendsen, 2008: 297]. However, he is much deeper and more “humanitarian” than his scientific colleagues Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek. Consistently studying the problems of theology and anthropology of Evil, observing violence and cruelty as its main forms, Svendsen defends the praxeological aspect of his approach in researches of the evil: “It is also clear that, basically, none of us is insured against a nuisance of committing evil by oneself. <...> Evil is not “others”, but also “we” are ourselves. <...> Evil, first of all, is a practical problem, but not theoretical. . <...> First of all evil should be referred to spheres of personal morality and politics. <...> The necessity of fighting Evil is an axiom of any moral, it also has to be the same for politics” [Svendsen, 2008: 247, 292].

In conclusion to this fragmentary and inevitably superficial review of literature on the subject of the research (or rather the most noticeable tendencies of its development in the 20th century) some Russian scientists should also be mentioned.

First of all, the works of Yury Davydov — perhaps, the most prominent of the domestic social scientists, who touches upon the issues of Evil [Davydov, 1975; Davydov, 1989; History of Theoretical, 2002].

Interesting ideas about human Spirit and conflict Good and Evil in it we found in works of Andrey A. Ostapenko [Ostapenko & Shuvalov, 2012; Ostapenko, 2014].

The works of Alexander Panarin written with a profoundly Orthodox approach are qualitative theoretical papers and they are considered as a very serious research in the field of “political nature of the Evil” [Panarin, 2002].

Undoubtedly, the major theoretical and methodological achievement of the last several years are the scholarly writings of Sergey E. Kurginyan that correspond a profound analysis of forms and roots of Evil with praxeology and politics [Kurginyan, 2009].

The works of Sergey V. Gerasimov [Gerasimov, 1999] and Valeriy G. Gitin [Gitin, 2006] with their catchy titles and an obvious “marketing” way to present the information are also vividly interesting (but rather in the sense of a factual account than conceptualization).

To sum up such an extended introduction to the problem, it should be pointed out that the subject under speculation is immense, as well as the number of scientific reference sources on this topic. In our opinion, the original issue of Evil in deviantology lies in the pure ignoring of this subject, in its transformation into a marginal one. Meanwhile, without studying the Evil, it is impossible to fight against it. As the theologians of Modern age said: “The major victory of the devil is that everybody believes that it doesn’t exist”. The “pure” science, which disregards an issue of Good and Evil and is looking only for the dispassionate Verity, became problematic in the world shaken with passions already at the level of physics: let us remember Oppenheimer’s tragedy. Even more, it is problematic at the level of sciences about society and a person. A person is a being that is not able to remain a person beyond the values, so can the science, which studies the one, remain beyond them? However, we

realize that the issue of introducing an evaluative discourse to science is by no means easy and it requires a careful and diplomatic dialogue. Thus, this article is an attempt to start this dialogue.



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