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NIHIL NISI IESUM

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL:



Exonerating God

“Videbam Satanam sicut fulgor de caelo cadentem.”¹

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No single factor is invoked more often in people turning away from God, or in their failing to believe in Him, than the occurrence — note that I do not say the “existence” of evil, especially as it manifests itself in suffering.

The occurrence — not the existence — of evil appears incompatible with God, or at least a coherent conception of God as both — and simultaneously — absolutely good and absolutely powerful. That God and the occurrence of evil should coexist appears logically contradictory and ontologically incompatible. The one is effectively the abrogation of the other. The existence of God, it is argued, precludes (or ought to preclude) the occurrence of evil, and the occurrence of evil precludes (or ought to preclude) the existence of God.

While we can readily adduce empirical evidence, that is to say, tangible instances, of evil to discredit the existence of God, the availability of evidence to corroborate the existence of God, on the other hand, is so exiguous that even when such instances are invoked, they are deemed extraordinary events in the affairs of men; indeed, events so far from commonplace that we call them miraculous — that is to say, inexplicable interventions conditionally attributed to God in the absence of alternate explanations that may yet be forthcoming. Whether or not this is a sufficient, if concise, summary, the general implication is clear: evidence of evil overwhelmingly exceeds evidence of God. If sheer preponderance is the criterion to which we appeal, God loses.

Evil comes as a scandal to the believer who asks, “How can this be, given the existence of God?”

To the *disbeliever* no such scandal arises — only scorn for the believer who is left in perplexity, unable to deny the existence of God on the one hand ... while equally unable to deny the occurrence of evil on the other.

We appear to be consigned to either nihilistic resignation in the one camp (understanding evil as somehow ontologically *inherent* and rampant in the universe although we cannot explain why), or an unreasoned and therefore *untenable* affirmation of the existence of God — *despite* the *contradictory* concurrence of evil — in the other. Both appear to be damned to perplexity.

Neither has satisfactorily answered the question implicit within every occurrence of evil: “Why?”

The Problem ... and why we must respond to it

Before we begin our attempt to arrive at an answer to the problem of evil, we must first clearly summarize and completely understand the nature of the problem itself.

While this may appear obvious, all too often our efforts to make sense of the experience of evil in our lives and in the world fail to adequately address implicit or unstated premises apart from which no answer is either forthcoming or possible.

Failing to follow the premises, we fail to reach a conclusion. Instead, we reflexively seize what is incontrovertible (the occurrences of evil) and ... understanding nothing of its antecedents, satisfy ourselves that it is entirely a mystery — in other words, utterly incomprehensible to us — in fact, so *opaque* to our ability to reason it through (which we do not) that we throw up our hands in either frustration or despair ... declaring that either it is the will of God in a way that we do not understand, or that there can be no God in light of the enormities that we experience.

In either case — whether we affirm that God exists *despite* them, or deny that He exists *because* of them — we confront the experience of evil as an impenetrable mystery. Such a facile answer, I suggest, is not a satisfactory state of affairs at all.

Antecedents

We can only speculate upon the pre-Adamic origin of evil.

That evil preceded the creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Paradise is clear.

We are given no explanation of the genesis of evil as it predated the creation of man. We only know that it had already manifested itself in the Garden — as something already *extrinsic* to it and *antagonistic* toward it. That is to say, in the Creation Narrative, we encounter from the outset the *parallel existence* of the serpent (a personification of evil) with man prior to the Fall.

I say *parallel* because the serpent possesses a *supernatural* existence parallel to and contemporaneous with, the created nature of man, much in the way that the supernatural being of Angels coexists with the natural being of men.

While we are unable to explain evil *prior* to the creation of man (simply because no narrative exists to which we can appeal apart from one utterance of Christ in Saint Luke 10.18: “*I saw Satan like lightning falling from heaven.*”), we are not, however, for this reason absolved from explaining not only how evil came to obtrude upon the affairs of men, but why it is not incompatible with our conception of God as all-good and all-powerful.

Philosophy calls this endeavor a theodicy. We needn’t be intimidated by this, nor think ourselves unequal to it, as we shall see.

To further compound the issue, the problem is no mere academic matter from which we can stand aloof as so many theorists to hypothetical abstractions. It is a problem that vexes us, and lacerates us at every turn, believer, and unbeliever alike. It has a direct and painful bearing upon us; it affects us, afflicts us, and, yes, sometimes crushes us.

Despite the refuge that the believer has taken in the notion of mystery, or the cynicism to which the unbeliever consigns himself in hopeless resignation, each cry out, equally, “Why?” — especially when the evil experienced or perpetrated is an effrontery to justice or a violation of innocence.

The skeptic ... most often a casualty of evil ... cannot reconcile the occurrence of evil with the existence of God. The two appear to be ... not just rationally incompatible ... but mutually exclusive. What is more, the empirical evidence of evil is far more preponderant and far more compelling than any evidence that can be readily adduced to the existence of God.

The believer, on the other hand, is painfully perplexed, and sometimes deeply scandalized, by this seeming incompatibility which often buffets the faith which alone sustains his belief — the faith that, somehow, the occurrence of evil and the existence of God are not, in the end, irreconcilable.

First and foremost, then, it is critical to be clear about the context in which the problem first occurred, and from which all subsequent instances follow.

Even before this, however, and as we have said, we must be absolutely clear about the problem itself which, in summary, follows:

The Problem Summarized:

- We understand by God an absolutely omniscient Being Who is absolutely good and absolutely powerful.
- A being deficient in any of these respects — that is to say, wanting in knowledge, goodness, or power — we do not understand as God, but as less than God.
- An absolutely good, absolutely powerful, and absolutely omniscient Being would know every instance of evil and would neither permit it because He is absolutely good, or, because He is absolutely powerful, would eradicate it.
- Suffering and evil, in fact, occur.
- Therefore, God, from Whom evil cannot be concealed, cannot be absolutely good and absolutely powerful.
 - If absolutely good, God would eradicate all evil and suffering — but does not, and therefore, while all-good, He cannot be all-powerful.
 - Conversely, if absolutely powerful, then God could abolish evil and suffering but does not, and therefore, while all-powerful, He cannot be all good.
- Hence, there is no God, for by God we understand a Being perfect in goodness and power.

Until we are perfectly clear about this, we can go no further. Unless we fully grasp the magnitude of this problem, we cannot hope to understand the reasons why men either fail to believe in God or having once believed, no longer do so. The occurrence, the experience, of evil, as we had said in our opening, appears as nothing less than a scandal to believers, and the cause of disbelief in unbelievers.

It need not be so.

For our part, we must be prepared to follow St. Peter's exhortation, "being ready always to satisfy everyone that asks you a reason of that hope which is in you." ²

Hence, we begin.

The Solution to the Problem of Evil

As mentioned earlier, any attempt to come to terms with the problem of evil vis-à-vis the existence of God inevitably entails linguistic and conceptual complexities, especially in the way of suppressed premises, or unstated assumptions. It is absolutely essential that these latent features, these uncritically assumed concepts long-dormant in language, be made manifest.

What really is the problem of evil, and what really is the nature of God in its simplest formulation? Can God really be exculpated? Can He be exonerated of this ontological cancer that we call evil?And what is the real nature of evil itself?

All too often we are too facile with our answers through some articulation of faith that we are not adequately prepared to defend.

Our confrontation with the problem of evil is the greatest confrontation of all — for it is, in the end, not only the genesis of all that we suffer but remains the apocalyptic culmination of all that has been and ever will be.

The Solution Summarized

- The problem of evil and suffering is a *moral problem* with *existential* consequences that extend to, and are manifested within, the *universe of experience*.
- The universe of *moral discourse* within the context of which alone a discussion of the notion of evil is possible is not coherent apart from the notion of volition (the will; specifically, the free will).
- Evil, therefore, cannot be understood apart from moral agency, especially as it pertains to man of whom it is predicated as either *an agent* or *a casualty*. That is to say, man either causes evil, is a casualty of evil, or both.
- An all-good and all-powerful God would not create man imperfectly. If He *chose* to create an imperfect man, He would not be all-good; if He was *unable* to do otherwise, He would not be all-powerful.
- **Free will is a perfection in man.** If we do not concede that free will is a perfection, then we cannot not concede ... to this concession ... which is to say we cannot hold

ourselves free to disagree with it, and deem *this* better than to be free to *disagree* with it, which is logically untenable.

In a word, if free will is *not* a perfection, then it pertains more to the notion of perfection that the will not be free. However, apart from free will, there is no universe of moral discourse; nothing meritorious and nothing blameworthy, no intention, action, or event in the affairs of men that is susceptible of being construed as either good or evil — and no action is good, and conversely, none is evil — for there is no evil and no good pertaining to the actions of men.

- But there is evil.
- And there is good.
- What is more, if I am not free not to love God, then my loving God — or anyone or anything else, for that matter — is without value, for we do not ascribe the notion of valuation to that which proceeds of *necessity*.

That the sum of the interior angles in any triangle is 180 degrees possesses nothing in the way of valuation. We do not say that it is good or evil. It is geometrically necessary. If we agree that free will is a perfection (that it is better to possess free will than not to possess it), then in creating man, God would have *deprived man of a perfection* in his created nature, had He not endowed man with free will — a notion that would be inconsistent with either the goodness or the power of God, or both.

- Eve already knew ... was acquainted with ... good ... for the Garden of Paradise was replete with everything good, and devoid of anything evil. Eve experienced no want, no *privation*. We must keep this in mind, given our classical understanding of evil as “a privation of good.”
- Eve chose to *know* good and evil.

- Eve, by nature created good, therefore chose ... *not to know good*, the first term, with which she was already naturally acquainted ... but she *chose to know* the second term *as well: evil*. Eve already knew good, but *she knew nothing of evil*, for only good existed in the Garden of Paradise, and she herself was created good.
- Now, it is not possible to *know* evil without (apart from) *experiencing* evil, any more than it is to know good without experiencing good. We cannot *know*, understand, or comprehend, pain and suffering without — *apart from* — *experiencing* pain and suffering — any more than we can know, understand, and comprehend the color blue without apart from *experiencing* the color blue.
- In *choosing to know evil*, therefore, Eve *inadvertently*, but nevertheless *necessarily* and concomitantly, *chose to experience the evil* of which she erstwhile knew nothing. It was not the case that Eve was conscious or cognitive of the deleterious nature of evil (for prior to Original Sin, as we have said, Eve had only known, experienced, good).
- What is more, no one chooses what is evil except that they misapprehend it as a good, for every choice is ineluctably a choosing of a *perceived* good, even if the good perceived is intrinsically evil.
- The most evil act is latently a choice of a good extrinsic to the evil act. Man, only acts for, and is motivated toward, a perceived good, however spurious the perception or the perceived good. It is impossible to choose an intrinsically evil act apart from a perceived extrinsic good motivating the intrinsically evil act.

Eve's choice, while free, was nevertheless instigated through the malice and lie of the Evil One who deceived Eve that an intrinsic evil — explicitly prohibited by God — was, in fact, an intrinsic good, which it was not. I wish to add that the susceptibility to being deceived does not derogate from the perfection of man, for the notion of deception is bound up with the notion of trust, which is an indefeasible good. The opposite of trust is suspicion which already, and hence anachronistically, presumes an acquaintance with evil.

- In choosing to know evil, Eve’s choice necessitated, precipitated, those conditions alone through which evil can be experienced, e.g., death, suffering, illness, pain, etc.

Her choosing to know evil bi-conditionally entailed the privation of the good, the first term, through which alone we understand evil, the second term. Evil instantiates no *esse*, no *actus essendi*, for evil has no substance: which is to say, evil possesses no being of its own apart from the good of which it is only privative, a negation in part or whole. For this reason, we see the two terms conjoined in Holy Scripture in, “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The existence of the good, does not, as some suggest, still less necessarily entail, the experience of evil. Adam and Eve in the state of natural felicity in the Garden of Paradise knew good apart from any acquaintance with, or any conception of, evil.

- Evil necessarily implicates good, but good in no way necessarily implicates evil. The notion of knowledge by way of contrast and opposition is confined to relatively few empirical instances and always yields nothing of what a thing is, only that in contradistinction to what it is not.

To know what a thing is not tells us nothing of what it is. We do not know the color blue by its opposition to, its contrast with, or in contradistinction to, a not-blue, for there is no existent “not-blue.” There are only other colors we distinguish from blue — but we do so without invoking the notion of contrast or opposition. I do not know blue as “not-red” (or, for that matter, through invoking any or all the other colors). I know blue in the experience of blue only. If there is an “opposite” of blue, or a corresponding negative to blue, it can only be the absence of color — not simply another color that is “not-blue,” for in that case every other color would be the opposite of blue — and the opposite of every other color as well.

- Once again, in Eve’s choosing to know evil, she consequently and concomitantly chose the conditions under which alone such knowledge was possible. Among the conditions informing such knowledge were death, suffering, pain — and all that we associate with evil and understand by evil.
- Far from being culpable, God warned Adam and Eve to avoid, “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”
- To argue that the goodness of God is compromised by His injunction against the plenitude of knowledge through His forbidding them to eat of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” is spurious inasmuch as it holds *knowledge*, and not *felicity*, to be the greatest good possible to man. In withholding complete knowledge, it is mistakenly argued, God deprived man of an intrinsic good.
- Felicity, or complete happiness, not omniscience, or complete knowledge, is man’s greatest good, and only that which redounds to happiness is good for man, not that which redounds to knowledge, and the two do not completely coincide.
- To maintain that to know evil, suffering, illness, death — and unhappiness — redounds to man’s happiness is an irreconcilable contradiction. Evil is a privation of the good; consequently, to choose evil is to choose a privation of the good, specifically that which vitiates or diminishes the good.
- To maintain, furthermore, that man can know evil, suffering, illness, and death without experiencing evil, suffering, illness and death is equally unacceptable. By this line of reasoning, one whose vision is color-deficient can know the color purple without ever experiencing the color purple know what is bitter without experiencing bitterness know “hot” without experiencing hotness. Purple, bitterness, hot — evil, suffering, illness, death (all that we understand by “evil” are not concepts (in the way, for example, that a simple binomial equation $(1+1=2)$ is a concept independent of anything existentially enumerable) but experiences, the knowledge of which demands the experience and cannot be acquired apart from it any more than pain can be known apart the experience of pain. Pain, illness, suffering, death, etc. are in no way inherently, intrinsically good. No one who has experienced the death of a loved one, the pain of an injury, or illness of any sort will maintain that such knowledge acquired through these experiences redounds to their

felicity; that their “knowledge” of any of these evils either promotes or contributes to their happiness.

- God, then, is in no way culpable of, nor responsible for, the existence of evil. The occurrence or experience of evil derogates neither from His goodness, nor detracts from His power.
- If God is all good, He would confer the perfection of freedom upon man in Adam and Eve. If He is all-powerful, He would permit the exercise of this freedom.
- To confer the perfection of freedom of will upon man does not *eo ipso* imply that the exercise of the will necessarily involves a choosing between the good and the not-good or the less-good, still less a choice between good and evil. Presumably the exercise of this freedom prior to the Fall was exercised in choices between things of themselves inherently good, albeit distinguishable in attributes. The fig and the pear are equally good in nature, but differing in attributes, and to choose the one over the other is not to imply that the one is good and the other not-good or even less-good. The choosing to eat the one and not the other is a choice among alternative goods.
- Nor is the thing not chosen “less good” in itself than that which is chosen. It is good proper to its nature. The pear and the fig are distinctly equally nutritious.
- The notion of choice is only coherent in the context of right reason. Choice (the exercise of free will), is never gratuitous but is always in accordance with reason which alone mediates the choice to a coherent end. What we choose, we choose to coherent ends. In other words, we choose for a reason — and not spontaneously or gratuitously. Choices are always ordered to ends, however disordered the choices themselves may be.
- One does not, for example, choose as the means to nutrition, a stone rather than a fig. The choosing of the fig does not imply that the stone is not good. On the other hand, one does not choose figs to build a house, rather than stones. This does not imply that the fig is not good. The nature of the fig redounds to nutrition, while the nature of the stone does not, and the nature of the stone redounds to building while the nature of the fig does not. One can still choose to eat stones or to build with figs, but such choices do not accord with ordered reason, which of itself is also an intrinsic good.

- Only God can bring good out of evil *He does not will*, but *nevertheless permits* through having conferred the perfection of freedom upon man. While God could not have endowed man with this perfection without simultaneously permitting the consequences necessary and intrinsic to it, He is not Himself the Author of the evil but of that perfection in man through which — not of necessity (for man is never compelled to *choose* — inasmuch as compulsion by definition abrogates choice) — man chooses evil and subsequently becomes the agent of it.
- The occurrence of evil, consequently, is neither inconsistent with nor contrary to the notion of God as absolutely good and absolutely powerful.

The Scriptural Narrative as the Logical Antecedent:

1. “And He commanded him, saying: Of every tree of Paradise thou shalt eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death.”³

2. “Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman: Why hath God commanded you, that you should not eat of every tree of paradise? And the woman answered him, saying: Of the fruit of the trees that are in paradise we do eat: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise, God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die. And the serpent said to the woman: No, you shall not die the death. For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil.”⁴

Concerning the Genesis of Evil

The argument thus far articulated is clearly framed within the Biblical context in which it first presents itself to us, and as such may be understood as a type of *epoche*, or bracketed narrative, the authenticity of which we assume as Catholics — not

necessarily apart from discursive reasoning, but not articulated exclusively or even largely in terms of it, either. Whatever we can speculate upon regarding the origin of evil, *of one thing only can we be certain: that the origin of evil is radicated in the will.*

If we seek an ontological genesis of evil, we shall not find one ... simply because what we understand as evil is a privation of being and not constituting, let alone instantiating, a *being* itself whose ontology is tautologically reciprocal with evil.

In the strictest sense, there is no purely evil being. This is tantamount to saying there is a being nothing, or, alternately, a nothing being. In a word, it is an oxymoron.

This is also not to say that there is no single being, or categories of beings, from which the good has been exhaustively, but not totally, deprived, and we understand such beings as evil not in the sense of what they *possess* in their being but in the sense of what is *deficient* in their being: specifically, the *good* in whatever measure — and *precisely by that measure* — of the absence of good in their being, are they construed as evil.

In that inverted and simulative realm of evil, just as there are differing magnitudes of goodness in the holy, there are differing magnitudes of *the absence of goodness* in the evil. As some are to greater or lesser degrees holy ... so, to greater or lesser degrees, are the evil.

The ultimate expression of this near total privation of the good is personal because it pertains to *a will*, and the person in whose will we find this nearly total extinction of the good we understand as Satan, or the devil.

Apart from a coherent notion of *the will* we find *nothing* to which we can assign moral predicates, nothing inculpatory or exculpatory, praiseworthy or blameworthy, no sanctity and no sin; we find no world of moral discourse.

To speculate upon the root of all evil *from the beginning* is to speculate upon the first instance of *the corruption of the will*. We have no Scriptural narrative to which we can appeal in answering this and thus no phenomenological bracket (or *epoche*) in which to address it as Catholics. Consequently, every effort will be, at best, conjectural.

We at least know that it pertained to freedom ... specifically freedom of the will ... apart from which there is no moral discussion. We have no narrative through which we can answer the question of *why*, in the first instance, Satan sinned through a willful refusal to cooperate with God.

This has been speculated upon by theologians throughout history as attributable to pride, specifically concerning the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Immaculate womb of Mary which instigated the sin of angelic pride: specifically, in Satan's refusal to worship God Who *became man* — in the Person of Jesus Christ — for we must remember that, in the hierarchy of being, “man ... was created *less than the angels*”⁵. The refusal to worship the True God Who became True Man — the first corrupt act of free will in the created world, was arguably the primal evil act, the very first instance of evil in the chronology of creation.

The earliest allusion to this occurs in the Book of Wisdom: “For God created man incorruptible, and to the image of His own likeness he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death came into the world.”⁷

Thus, while the circumstances surrounding the first defection of the free will from the supremely good will of God can only be speculated upon, the free will of Satan nevertheless is resolved into a *causa sui*, a cause in and of itself, originating from no prior cause that could be held to subvert or attenuate the autonomy of the free will of Satan.

That this primeval malice obtruded upon the natural world through the equally free agency of the will of Eve and Adam is, unquestionably, the greatest tragedy in human history. This, however, is not to indict God for endowing man with free will, as I have argued. Indeed, understood in the context of the *Felix Culpa*, the remedy that we find in salvific history in the Person of Christ Jesus has immeasurably exceeded in *supernatural* felicity what had erstwhile only been endowed with natural felicity and was subsequently lost through sin.

Note: The provenance of this primeval malice which antecedes the creation of man is the topic of another subject. Evil was in no way intrinsic to the Garden of Paradise. Happiness was. The intrusion of evil upon nature through supernatural artifice only

indicates the pre-existence of supernatural evil apart from nature which was created good. While chronologically antecedent to nature it was not manifest within it, even while concurrent with it, for the two — the natural and the supernatural — are ontologically distinct. The present argument purposes to explain the origin of evil as it touches upon human existence in nature, not the provenance of evil as it pertains to diabolical being in the supernatural. Apart from the diabolical, by whose instigation Eve was deceived. The provenance of this primeval malice which antecedes the creation of man is the topic of another subject. Evil was in no way intrinsic to the Garden of Paradise. Happiness was. The intrusion of evil upon nature through supernatural artifice only indicates the pre-existence of supernatural evil apart from nature which was created good. While chronologically antecedent to nature it was not manifest within it, even while concurrent with it, for the two — the natural and the supernatural — are ontologically distinct. The present argument purposes to explain the origin of evil as it touches upon human existence in nature, not the provenance of evil as it pertains to diabolical being in the supernatural.

¹ “I saw Satan like lightning falling from heaven.” (Saint Luke 10.18)

² 1 St. Peter 3.15

³ Genesis 2.16-17

⁴ Genesis 3.1-5

⁵ Hebrews 2.7

⁶ Wisdom 2.23-24

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Feast of St. Agapitus, Martyr

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