

## Deliver us from evil

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I would like to start with a distinction which I hope is obvious, and that is the distinction between *theodicy* and *theology*. The former is the philosophical discussion concerning the possibility, or otherwise, of justifying the ways of God to men; the latter is a discipline whose ground of possibility is God speaking, and which is therefore at least supposed to partake of the dynamic of the One speaking. With the former discussion, human discourse, and its logical possibilities, is not only the place of the discussion but also its ultimate arbiter. In the latter discussion human discourse and its logical possibilities are always tentative since even as they take place they are being undone from within and recreated by something outside their frame of reference. Whether these two discussions, at least in their modern forms, are compatible, I'm not sure. What I am sure of is that I am trying to be a Catholic theologian, and therefore come to this discussion from within a specific tradition of discourse which takes as its starting point, both logical and experiential, the form of undergoing at the hands of God which we call "Creation".

I would like to offer as a resource for our discussion here what I hope will turn out to be a straightforward presentation of what one might call the old-fashioned or traditional view typical of Christian theology. Namely that what we call evil is a non-thing, something which is properly speaking uncaused and inexplicable, incomprehensibly parasitic on reality. I am not only going to attempt to present this, but will also try and defend it, since it is the theological approach to this matter which I believe to be true, and I think that the psychological consequences flowing from it, and the psychological consequences of ignoring it are very weighty indeed.

What has traditionally been called the "privation of being" approach to evil nowadays sounds such a weird position that I would like to take some time to try and set forth for you something of the bigger picture within which such a way of looking at things has its sense.

This means attempting to explain the understanding of God and of Creation which underlie the whole sense of the discussion. In the first place, about whom or what are we talking when we talk about God and creation? I am talking within the tradition of discourse which goes back to the Hebrew prophets of several hundred years before Christ, and some of whose monuments we see in the texts referred to as the Hebrew Scriptures.

Briefly, for this tradition, a hugely decisive rupture was made at some stage between the seventh and the fifth century B.C. between the notion of God who was one of the gods, just a bigger and more powerful one, and the notion of God who is much more like nothing at all than like one of the gods. The rupture with normal forms of thinking which is implied in this is far greater than I can suggest here, since with it there comes the realisation that God is not a large creature within the universe, but the universe is something which is at all thanks to God. To put it crudely: God is not something that "is" in any normal sense, God is the living "oomph" behind the "isness" of everything that is, including us, for whom God is not an object of our consciousness, nor could be an object of which we could be conscious, but is the condition of possibility of our being, and being conscious at all.

Along with this rupture there developed the extraordinary notion that God is good, faithful, trustworthy, that there are no gods. So everything which seems mysterious and conspiratorial and dangerous about the lives in which we find ourselves is not to be attributed to strange wheeler-dealings among divinities, or to malignant fates and curses. Instead we can rely on the goodness, the regularity and the order of which we are part as signs helping us towards flourishing and growth. In other words, where the “gods” dwell, there is a tendency to keep alive a seriously “religious” universe; where God emerges, so the tendency towards what we would call secularism, emerges. After all, the notion of the Creator and the goodness of all that is tends to limpidity, regularity and visibility of cause, and tends away from purely arbitrary, capricious and conspiratorial views of reality.

And along with this there developed a tendency constantly to move in the direction of ever less ambiguity and ambivalence in the divinity, such that other gods became: first a council of lesser gods, then angelic hosts until finally you get our now traditional picture of the devil as a fallen angel – in other words, something good in itself which turned bad for reasons which are completely incomprehensible since coming from nothing at all and leading to nothing at all, creative of nothing at all, and purely parasitic on reality. But in no way a rival divinity or a source of alternative creative power.

Another feature of this movement, the discovery of the one God who is not one of the gods at all, is that this Creator is actually attempting to involve us on the inside of God’s creative project so that we are not merely passive recipients of something, but are undergoing being made active participants in something whose final form is not yet determined. Not only, if you like, do we find ourselves the clay which the potter is working, but mysteriously we find that we are becoming cells of the skin of the potter’s thumbs. And with this goes the awareness that we are often enough involved in the project in such a way as to tend to snarl it up rather than contributing to it. So every year, on the day of Atonement, the Creator’s emanation, the High Priest, would come out of the Holy Place, the place where the Creator dwelt outside creation, and come through the Temple Veil into creation bringing the Lord’s purifying blood to unsnarl, disentangle, our ensnarlment of the project. In other words, creation is not something which happened in the past, it is an ongoing project in which God is involving us now by loosing our ensnarlements.

Now please notice what this means: it means that there was already, in the period of the First Temple something of a need to begin to work out what it is in humans which is inclined to snarl up creation. The lists of sins have varied from generation to generation, but over those same generations there was a gradual anthropologizing tendency to understand that the real issue was one of desire. So even in the ten commandments, the real issue is seen as being one of desire, with the dynamic of the previous nine commandments being wrapped up in the final précis:

“Thou shalt not desire the house of thy neighbour; thou shalt not desire the wife of thy neighbour, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything that belongs to him”<sup>1</sup>

By the time of the rabbis, the distinction was regularly made between two sorts of desire – the good impulse and the bad impulse<sup>2</sup>, with the one being recommended and the other treated against, especially by reading, studying and observing Torah. Even if this was still seen as something “within the ego” rather than received and essentially other-related, the possibility was certainly present in Torah of an understanding of desire as binding us in

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:17.

<sup>2</sup> yetzer ha-tov and yetzer ha-ra.

rivalry, thus pitting us against our fellow humans in more or less lethal ways. It is fratricide, not parricide which causes most grief to the authors of the sacred texts.

As I understand it, it is within this frame of reference that a new understanding emerged through a significant group of heirs of the fairly heterogeneous Hebrew tradition from before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. This understanding was, and is, that God, in fulfilment of widespread prophecies, has become his own High Priest, has come into the world, has accomplished the definitive sacrifice, in which he was also the victim, putting to an end the world of sacrifice, because finally allowing creation to flow free, unensnaring us for ever from our involvement in futility. This futility was seen to be linked to the human tendency to create “good” and “order” mendaciously by allowing what we would now call “scapegoating” to turn into murders, and then calling these murders “sacrifices”. Our growing inability to hide from ourselves for long what it is that we are doing when we scapegoat, is the space from within which our whole pattern of desire can be made new and transformed. This perspective on what is, is what we call Christianity.

Christianity introduces a slight, but important, modification in the understanding of desire which had been available before. This slight, but important, modification in the understanding of desire has, since the time of St Augustine, gone by the name of “the doctrine of original sin”. Very briefly put, this doctrine posits that in the light of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, it became possible to look back and see that all humans, ever since there has been a humanity (and the codeword for this was “since Adam”) have been involved, by the mere fact of being born and socialized into human culture, in a culture run by death, vengefulness and its scapegoating and sacrificial outcomes. We are thus all born into a culture in which desire is distorted against itself and frustrated. This culture seemed to all of us simply to be what is normal. But in fact it is not. In fact we are brought into being so as to share, by means of human desire, in the life of God, which is so far removed from death that for God human death is not the opposite of life, nor its enemy. Rather it is the form of biological finitude proper to the gift of being the sort of creature which we are, one of the contours of creatureliness, which is the condition of possibility of our coming to enjoy God.

Thus the doctrine of original sin is a highly sophisticated qualification of human desire. Far from being an abstract denigration of what it is that humans are, it is the claim that we are all created good, and that there is no such thing as an intrinsically evil desire. All desire is severely distorted, and yet all is capable of being undistorted over time, of being brought to share, starting from where it is, in the life of God. Furthermore, it is also the case that none of us can be the judges in any definitive sense of anyone else, since none of us, not even the holiest of saints, is outside the social construction of meaning produced by distorted desire, and so none of us is able to look at anyone else in a way that does not partake of the imagination which dominates us, an imagination run by rivalry, resistance to change, the longing for security, and by the need to protect ourselves against death by seeking our survival at the expense of others.

The doctrine has its sense because with the foundation of the Church, an amplification of the people of Israel, God is bringing into being a visible sign of a completely different imagination, one which is not based on death and its fear, or the distortion of desire into various forms of conflict, and which enables all humans to dwell together with each other as enriching each other and enabling each other to share God’s life and God’s goodness, starting now.

So we might talk about two sorts of imagination alive in humanity, one, the apparently normal one, in which we are run by death and given meaning starting from death, in which the search for meaning is always over against some other, and in which we lure each other on, and which is inevitably futile – haunted by vanity; then the other sort of imagination which has been made available by the installing in our midst of the first fruits of a counter-

lure: the possibility that our imaginations and our desire can be made alive to meaning and goodness in a way which does not lead us into conflict and rivalry.

The doctrine of original sin merely makes the obvious point: it is what seems to us to be a counter lure, the lure made available by God, that is the real and original lure, the lure of the Creator which calls into being what is and what cannot be frustrated; what seems to us to be the “normal” lure is in fact the counter-lure, leading to futility. Furthermore the depth of our involvement in the culture of original sin is shown by the degree to which we are ignorant that it is not really “normal” at all, but a pale and misleading simulacrum of what is.

I offer you a silly image. Imagine that you are a wallflower, only you don’t know that. As far as you are concerned you are just a flower facing south looking for the sun, and so are unaware that there is a wall behind you. With all the wonderful energy and capability of growth which is part of what you are, you rapidly head off across the ground, spreading further and further, and thinking you are getting closer to the sun – you aren’t of course, but you don’t know that. Everything about your growth is good, but you are in fact getting the wrong sort of nutrients from the ground, digging little shoots into it, and feeding yourself in a way which is less than optimal, and sometimes severely unhelpful. Now imagine that from behind you, and thus invisibly to you, there appear a pair of gloved hands which gently start to pull you up, detaching your little shoots somewhat painfully from the earth, and reattaching them to a wall which was behind you and you either didn’t know about, or vaguely did, but thought that growing upwards was both hard work, and not so obviously in the direction of the sun, which seemed to come from the south.

At first the shift is painful, but after a bit you begin to get the idea: what you are in fact is a wallflower, not a ground-spreader as you had thought, and furthermore, as you become adjusted to the idea, you find that the nutrients in the wall are just the right sort for you, and that the wall holds you in just the right sort of way, and not only that, but you realise that actually your very clinging onto and integration into the wall is making the wall a different and a better wall. The glance down from your new becoming at what you had thought was normal, and now realise is not, that glance is the doctrine of original sin.

Well, if you will allow me to carry on in this vein, I would like to draw some inferences from this picture. It all sounds very complicated, but I suggest that rather than the doctrine of original sin being a complicated series of ideas, it is something much more like part of the necessary fine-tuning to our perception of what undergoing creation looks like. That is to say, it is an attempt to indicate what sort of thing, both immensely strong and immensely fragile, the adventure which we are involved in, and which we call creation, is.

We find ourselves being taken out of the realm of one lure, a lure which is not even a real lure, but a concatenation of relatively superficial fake lures, into the realm of the true lure which is bringing us into being. Which means to say, we are not discussing anything from a position of neutral objectivity standing outside anything with an overall view of it. We are in the middle of a dynamism which is heading somewhere much bigger than we, and we discover to our amazement that we have been short-changing ourselves and each other about what it is that we thought we were, and where we are heading. This means that we also begin to be aware *as part of this dynamic* that there is risk, adventure, and also the possibility of, as it were, falling off the wild ride.

We also learn that one of the ways of falling off the ride is precisely to identify too exactly what it is that we are leaving behind, and therefore what we can call evil. We are tremendously susceptible to returning to our former lure, and becoming fixated on tendentious and symptomatic signs of “something going wrong” as things which really are in themselves, are significant, give us meaning, make us good *by contrast, over against them*. To do this is to refuse to undergo being given meaning, significance, life, at the hands of the

only lure which really can do so, and to grasp at ersatz meaning instead. To settle for instant but fake meaning instead of deferred meaning, and being over time<sup>3</sup>.

It is for this reason that the Christian tradition recommends such parsimony of language and indeed of *interest* in the question of evil. Our own use of words like “evil” represent a real temptation to an entirely fake sort of fascination which is capable of taking over us and turning us into something much less than we are. For us the really creative challenge is the discovery of, and the becoming fascinated by and entranced with, the *good*. And what the fascination and entrancement with the good will always look like will be a shift in our pattern of desire and imagination. It is a decisive shift such that we are able to perceive our own likeness in what seems “evil” around about us, not fear it, nor fear being lured by it, but become able to be merciful and gentle with it as part of helping it and ourselves to un-attach and be re-attached. In short, behind what appears to some to be the indifference to evil of the one who is being reformed by and towards the interesting good, there begins to emerge the only quality and perspective which is strong enough to be immune to fascination by evil, which is that pity which comes from a stretched equality of heart.

It is because of this that Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil rests so easily within the traditional Augustinian framework<sup>4</sup>. Her conception de-demonizes evil, thus making us more aware of the lessons we can learn from our likeness. It is also because of this that the imagination of the good is very often the refusal to name, the refusal to label, to categorise, and instead patiently to study, to relativise, to see what might work. This is the way in which, like Cinderella in Ann Ulanov’s marvellous reading<sup>5</sup>, we can become capable of sorting through things and thus find ourselves discovering what really is. What is the real sign of belief in the Creator? Taking a paedophile and pronouncing him a monster, run by incomprehensible and evil desires? Or insisting, against all the evidence, that we have here someone who in principle is one of us, who is like us, and whose very distortions of desire will eventually yield to understanding and some form of therapy of benefit to us all as humans?

It also means that the real challenge for us is alertness and vigilance lest we be overcome by the inertia and easiness of things going on as they seem to go. Which is why the recognition of evil is always in our case a self-critical process of learning, lest we be ensnared by something too small. A recognition of a certain sort of awakening, and a certain sort of breaking of heart as I become aware of what I had allowed myself to become, and what I find that I am being hauled painfully into being bigger than. This is why, in the scheme of things which I am attempting to rehearse for you, repentance is so important.

Repentance is not the need to bow the will before some authority, much less a religious authority. Rather it is the gift of the ordinary access to being created which is proper to us good creatures whose goodness has inexplicably got involved in being something less than we are, a gift whose shape is a certain breaking of heart.

I would like to end with a very brief allusion to something which I think may be helpful here, since the purpose of the conference is to bring psychoanalysts into dialogue with a series of different disciplines and their approaches to the question of evil. This is the work of French Psychiatrist and Professor of Psychopathology at the Sorbonne, Jean-Michel Oughourlian. In particular I would like to highlight some key observations concerning psychological time in

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<sup>3</sup> For a good example of someone who understands the dangers in the addiction to junk meaning, see Chris Hedges’ book *War is a force that gives us meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Milbank’s magnificent treatment of this theme in *Being Reconciled* (London: Routledge, 2003), chapters 1&2.

<sup>5</sup> Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Cinderella and her sisters: the envied and the envying* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

his work *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession and Hypnosis*<sup>6</sup>. Oughourlian compares and contrasts the movement of desire in physical time and the movement of desire in psychological time and shows how they are related.

In physical time, a desire or set of desires in a social other, a model either individual or social, inspires and creates a desire in the fledgling human, and this desire in turn produces the very malleable construct known as the self. In other words, in physical time, the “self” is the symptom of desire which is itself received according to, by imitation of, the desire of another. This objective flow of physical time however has, from the point of view of the “self”, no psychological significance.

For all of us, the movement of time which has psychological significance is that by which the self, the symptom of the whole process, develops as a result of memory and forgetfulness of what brought it into being, which includes all the forms of reaction and separation and individuation by which we claim to be original and unique. In other words there is what seems to be a necessary form of “non-recognition” of what really happened, which can be exacerbated into a serious form of self-deception, within the way in which the self is brought into being.

I bring this to your attention, because it seems to me that here we have something very close indeed to what has traditionally always been meant by the distinction between “Creation” and “Original Sin” in the theological tradition from which I am speaking. I recognise a great affinity with Oughourlian’s recommendation of understanding better the way the memory attempts to appropriate as its own what can only be its own as received and I suspect that there may here be a genuinely therapeutic way of both caring for, and sitting loose to, such ensnarlements as tempt us to reify those moved by them as “evil”.

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<sup>6</sup> University of Stanford Press, 1991, pp. 237-9.