

## 9 : Evil from human nature

TO TRADITIONAL believers we have said: the problem of evil cannot be solved by applying ever stronger, ever blinder faith.<sup>48</sup> To atheists we have said: explain the “problem of good” if you can, not in remote and naturalistic terms only, like “kin selection” or “inclusive fitness,” but in experiential and existential terms.

The theology of theopraxy, we have also said, does not need to solve the problem of evil because it does not believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator-God in the first place, and it goes on to throw some light on the atheists’ “problem of good.” Nonetheless, can our theology offer something useful about the *practical* problem of evil, that is, about the presence of evil in everyday life?

ON THE definition of good offered in EXPLANATIONS 6, the theology of theopraxy sees evil—good’s opposite—as the free and conscious doing of harm, where “harm(ful)” is what we call whatever action destroys, dishonors, or diminishes any form or instance of life whose thriving does not depend on harming equal or higher forms or instances of life.<sup>49</sup>

Extending this we can say: particular forms and instances of life that want *more* life for all forms and instances of life (with the proviso above) are apt to do right and good, while particular forms and instances of life that want *less* life for all forms and instances of life, or more life only for themselves or *their* form of life, are apt to do wrong or evil. What is *not* alive, however, or does not want (desire) anything, might be good or bad for life—we can decide which—but it cannot do (or be) evil.<sup>50</sup> The nearby supernova that someday will scatter our solar system through

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**48** *This is not to dismiss the extremely sophisticated efforts of theologians like Alvin Plantinga to rescue faith from skepticism by positing religious faith as not in need of defense on the grounds that it is no worse than, and probably better than, several other foundational, axiomatic beliefs—like the belief in reality, logic, or our own existence.*

**49** Cf. EXPLANATIONS 6, and Footnote 26 there.

**50** Not wanting *anything*—expunging desire—is the larger part of the Buddhist solution to morality with the understanding, rarely stated, that the cessation of wanting is not to be caused by the surfeit of having. (Plato cut off this possibility by claiming that the desire for material goods and for power are intrinsically limitless, and ultimately destructive.) Like the older Hindu principle of ahimsa, the idea is this: that not-desiring leads us away from taking anything from anyone else using force. Acceptable, only, is receiving what others freely offer.

infinite space like so much dust, will be bad—very bad—for life on earth. But it will not be evil.<sup>51</sup>

Is evil an entity or force? St. Augustine, Maimonides, Aquinas, and most liberal theologians since have disavowed the idea that evil is a “positive” force or entity usefully personified as Satan or the Prince of Darkness. Rather, evil is a privation, an absence, a lack, of goodness. They reject the Gnostic notion that Yahweh is a lesser god, as well as the Manichaean notion that agents of good and evil, cosmic in scale and equal in power, are locked in eternal battle with each other. Why? Probably *because it does no good* to believe it—less good, anyway, than believing in the far greater power and ultimate triumph of a God who is wholly good. But if we agree that “evil” means something more than the failure to do good (when it would be possible to do good) or prevent harm (when it would be possible to prevent harm), if it means “positively” visiting pain and anguish and death upon others, then we must admit to some slippage, some contamination by older notions of evil as a “positive” force. For it implies that evil is more than just nature’s entropy at work in the form of error, randomness, breakage, aging, or natural death, and more than just a thwarting of good intentions by complications. Evil that deserves the name is wrong-doing intended, done, and condoned. It is someone’s wishing harm upon another and then acting in ways that bring it about—ways that might include neglect or carelessness (i.e., forms of *not-doing*). It also speaks of evil’s attractiveness—of the way that evil-doing can call to us in the name of justice, a little fun, or short-term gain in an uncertain world.

DEFINITIONS CAN get us only so far. What can be said about the practical problem of evil from the point of view of theopraxy? In the most preliminary of analyses, this: that evil occurs chiefly as the result of four features of human nature:

- The first is that people can be driven by the conditions of war, famine, addiction, sickness, poverty, imprisonment, or natural disaster to regress to a less-than-human state. Starved, threatened, or cornered, people will kill to save their own lives or the lives of their clan; humiliated, they will strike out to restore their dignity. They will steal, deceive, and destroy, or,

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**51** *It is the hallmark of modern philosophy, and commonplace today, to make the distinction between natural “evil” (like volcanoes, tsunamis, and other “acts of God”) and moral evil, which is what we and perhaps a handful of other animals can do, and call only the latter evil.*

in despair, do away with themselves, which is hardly a better outcome.

It is obvious how to prevent evil in these cases, at least in theory: it is to do everything possible to prevent humanity-degrading conditions from developing in the first place, and, if the situation is already far gone, to do everything possible to reverse them.

Now, some might say: “Not *everyone* turns to evil under duress. *Good* people don’t. People of strong faith don’t. Only the morally weak blame their ‘situations.’” True? Well, we can certainly find instances that illustrate the case. But, setting aside the evidence that tells us that chance and genetic factors make a significant contribution as to who will break and who will not, let us remember to check the intentions of those who push this only-the-weak-fail argument to the fore, because, aside from being logically circular, it can be used to persuade others to allow themselves to be tested to failure and then to blame themselves for having characterological flaws (weakness of faith, evolutionary unfitness), all to the persuader’s advantage.

Even on the best of motivations, relying on extraordinary conscience, courage, or faith in God is not a good idea. Human beings are social animals, flexible and ambitious. This is why, in the act of writing laws or configuring institutions whose overall missions might unquestionably be good, it is still essential to avoid devising jobs, positions, titles, roles, or patterns of authority that by their very nature will put people in situations of despair or, more insidiously, that will put people in situations where *being good at their job* is at odds with, or even disconnected from, *doing good*.<sup>52</sup> The desire to be competent and be recognized as such, the desire to excel and to deserve praise, runs strong in human nature. Regardless of the activity at hand, there are few stronger threats to our personhood—from ourselves if not others—than feeling incompetent, ineffective, unable to attract attention or “hold up our end.”<sup>53</sup> And this makes it easy, even natural, for us to put being *good at* something ahead of whether that something is *a good thing to do*. Indeed, many people would rather be good at doing bad than be bad at doing good. All the more is this true when our competence at doing X, rather than the goodness *of* X, has been so configured, institutionally, as to be source of our legitimacy or livelihood.

Lest you feel immune from this weakness, know that the nicest of us are capable of doing evil on this basis. The experiments of Stanley Milgram in

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. *EXPLANATIONS* 5, 6, and especially 10.

<sup>53</sup> Let’s be honest: this is the downside of preaching that we should live to serve others. For if we’re bad at it, why live?

the 1960s and Philip Zimbardo in the 1970s have made that abundantly clear, not to mention the Nuremberg trials of the late 1940s or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s.<sup>54</sup>

God is the good we do. God is therefore interested—metaphorically, *selfishly* interested—in how good we are at doing good. Other religious philosophies are able to make this clear too, of course. But none place the distinction at the heart of a theology.

- The second feature of human nature that keeps us prone to evil is this: that only witnessing suffering firsthand evokes in us the undismissable, visceral responses of pity, empathy, or fear. Use remote means of warfare and the enemy becomes unreal. Hide abattoirs and we can all eat meat. Remove people of type C from our neighborhoods and their fate becomes academic. One of the drawbacks of continuing suburbanization, globalization, and technological advance has been the heightened production of just this sort of *social distance*: whole new classes of people whose lives do not intersect with ours in any direct way, whose faces, if they appear at all, appear on TV. Then too, the consequences of our actions—mediated as they are by scores of people, machines, market transactions, and bureaucratic protocols—fan away in all directions, becoming ever harder to discern, harder to assign. Under these conditions, moral accountability is diffuse. When everyone is rationally doing their part in some great System, no one person is responsible for the harm done...or the good done, for that matter.

It is ever to the credit of conventional theistic preaching, therefore, that it emphasizes our personal visibility and accountability to God. We are *each* to follow God's commandments, *each* to treat others as we would like to be treated, *each* to resist attempts to make others alien either by social definition or forced relocation.<sup>55</sup> The theology of theopraxy goes one step further. It holds that God is the good we do, not collectively as such (as in democratically making good law), but individually as we each *contribute* to that process. Whenever and wherever good is being done, solo *or* in contribution to a collective effort, then and there is God summoned up, "whole in every part." Every single encounter with others creates the potential for bringing God into being (or, if you prefer, for bringing God's goodness to life).

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<sup>54</sup> See Stanley Milgram (1974), Philip Zimbardo, (2004, pp. 21–50), [www.prisonexp.org/slide-1.htm](http://www.prisonexp.org/slide-1.htm), and [www.doj.gov.za/trc](http://www.doj.gov.za/trc). *These people were just doing their jobs*.

<sup>55</sup> To my knowledge, no one has developed this theme better than Zygmunt Bauman (2000 [1989]).

This view of God, I suggest, undoes tendencies to sacralize community *per se*, which many religions do, completely convinced, in the case of *their* communities, of its inherent morality. But in fact, taken too far, elevating “community” to religious status cultivates social distance from other groups, which sooner or later breeds enmity as well as bends individual conscience to community norms.

- A third fact about human nature, seldom remarked upon as a source of evil, is that people are prone to overcommitting to the ideal of *justice*. Consider: those who lie, steal, murder, or wreck others’ lives in large and small ways invariably have a story to tell. And invariably it is a story of injustice, redress, and/or higher justice: They did it because their victim killed their brother; they did it because they were unfairly fired; they did it because they needed the money more than the insurance company did; they did it because their family was stolen from; they did it because their rights were ignored, because they didn’t get what others got and didn’t deserve (either). And so forth. The list is long because, in fact, *unfairness and injustice are endemic to life on earth*. Life’s complexity is such that it cannot be lived with precise and inflexible rules of fairness-accounting. Without forgiveness or patience or hope, without doubt about the accuracy of hearsay, and without the capacity to absorb a modicum of unfair punishment and bad luck uncomplainingly, the grounds for evil-doing are laid again and again. Is nine-tenths of love not relaxed accountancy?

Far from ignoring justice, repeated wrongdoers—“bad people”—are often *perfectionists of justice*, untutored that *goodness* is the higher ideal by far.<sup>56</sup> What greater priority can be given good-doing than identifying it with God “himself”?

- Finally, a fourth fact about human nature: We are only recently out of the tribal phase of human existence where (among other things) we imagine members of other religions or nations (i.e., “tribes”) to be blood-

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<sup>56</sup> By referring ultimate justice to God and final reward or punishment to the afterlife, Western religion aims at reducing the urge to level the scales of justice impulsively, or in ways that contravene goodness. This is a good thing. Or can be. Why, then, is the tendency to give justice priority over goodness so prevalent? Perhaps because measuring and administering justice is easier than measuring and “administering” goodness. Asymmetries of pain and benefit are plainer to see and simpler to correct than absolute volumes of love. The scales of justice measure comparative not absolute mass, after all. Moreover, justice more often than not is simply power authorized or revenge legitimized, and both power and revenge-seeking are older instincts by far than offering generalized love or practicing goodness for life’s sake.

related to each other and therefore intimately knowledgeable of each other's doings. Deeper than that, we imagine them united under the skin, each individual being simply a mirror, a manifestation, of the archetypal Person-of-That-Tribe: an Arab, a Jew, a Pole, a Catholic, an American. It follows that to encounter *one* actual person of that descent or origin is to encounter *all* people of that descent or origin collectively, archetypally. It is upon this atavistic logic that the guilt of one Greek, say, becomes the guilt of all Greeks, and punishing *any* Greek becomes only marginally second-best to punishing the actual Greek that committed the offense. One might cite the shadow that fell upon all American Muslims after September 11, 2001. But history is replete with internments, discriminations, and pains inflicted upon the innocent through the ideas of national character and collective guilt. (And let us be wary, too, of the latter's seductive twin: collective merit.)

Now, to deny that there is any such thing as national character seems foolhardy. It would be to deny the role of culture, language, local history, and family ties in making the people of a given time and region similar to each other (for better *and* for worse) as well as more likely, however slightly, to know each other. Nor can one deny that a first meeting between strangers compellingly involves each party making suppositions about the other's character based on their apparent nationality (or social class). The sin—the crime—begins when matters stop there and no greater depth is sought or admitted to exist. When the daily encounter between flesh-and-blood people devolves to—or rises no higher than—a game-like encounter between two stereotyped national characters, the potential for evil is hugely multiplied. An attitude barely appropriate to soldiers-at-war is being allowed to invade daily discourse. This is how brutality comes to lurk just below the surface of smiles.

All this is well understood, and I shall not elaborate further. The question is: does the theology of theopraxy help us commit to seeing beyond national and cultural stereotypes to the more complex truth of the individual? I suggest that it does, by locating God in acts by individuals, acts in behalf of all life. God can be on no *nation's* side ever, by definition: nations don't act; people do. It is you and I who can choose to be "on God's side" or not, moment by moment. It is you and I who, to the best of our abilities, can help draft laws and construct situations wherein the good is both rewarded and easier to do than the bad—or if not easier, still well short of requiring heroism. Learning to treat no person as a national (or ethnic or cultural or racial) *type* for longer than one second—which is about as much time as human nature can be granted in this case—is a small but important step.

In summary, these four features of human nature have to be faced by all concerned with decreasing the evil in this world:

- our tendency to regress in maturity and morality when under physiological duress or when attempting to satisfy inherently conflicted situational requirements,
- our insensitivity to remote suffering,
- our tendency to prioritize justice over goodness, and
- our tendency to relate to people as types.

OTHERS HAVE written more eloquently about these things. But I know of no place where these four features of human nature are collected for inspection, nor, of course, a place where a response is offered from the point of view of a theology like ours. Secular humanists, certainly, would agree that although all four might be a part of human *nature*—and indeed might once have served a life-preserving purpose—each, then as now, is brought forth and then exacerbated or moderated by human *culture*. And this means that each can be addressed by institutional design and by education: education not only about the facts of history and nature, but about the varieties and consequences of our beliefs.

One important set of beliefs has to do with the nature of God. Attempts such as ours to reconceive what “God” means are attempts precisely, on the one hand, to undo the logical flaws and unethical outcomes of too enthusiastic a belief in a supernatural, justice-dealing, side-choosing Creator-God, and, on the other, to weaken the demoralizing effects of denying that holiness can be produced, and not just deludedly felt, by human beings in contact with God by (almost) any definition. Atheistic humanism, I submit, is handicapped by its disregard of *sensus divinitatis*—our sense of the divine. This is as much a feature of human nature as any I have listed, with the difference that it is entrainable to producing and sustaining goodness in copious amounts.

For subscribers to the theology of theopraxy, you know what *that* means: it means producing and sustaining God.