

Evil, God, and the “Ethics of Belief”

The birth of modern science in the seventeenth century sparked a debate between science and religion that rages with a steady ferocity. While a key question in this debate hinges on whether or not there is a God, and if so what the nature of this Supreme Being is, the related problem of evil looms large over the landscape. This problem seems particularly salient now as the West finds itself embroiled in yet another war, indeed as it finds itself a player in a global “clash of civilizations” as Samuel Huntington states it in a book by the same name. With the usual vilification that accompanies such a conflict, with the customary branding of the other as evil, the waning years of the first decade of the new millennium is perhaps a good time to ask ourselves whether or not it is ethically permissible to believe in what Yale professor emeritus and noted futurist, Wendell Bell, in his essay, *All about Evil*, calls the “myth of pure evil.” If, as W. K. Clifford suggests in “The Ethics of Belief,” it is wrong, always and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,” we must ask ourselves if a belief that allows us to “demonize entire groups, nations, or religions” has any value at all in a world continuously rent by murderous and escalating violence.

This is not to say that monstrously cruel and barbarous things don’t happen. A quick survey of the last century alone gives us more than enough examples of unimaginable pain and suffering inflicted on millions of people, many of them innocents. And these acts can rightly be called evil. But what is evil? Is it a supernatural force, an absence of good, or simply flawed human behavior? Does the existence of evil in the world imply a dark force and thus a corresponding belief in a higher benevolent power, that is, a belief in God? Or can one approach it from a purely empirical perspective?

People today hold various concepts of evil inherited from ancient tradition: From Zoroastrianism we get the idea of evil as a dark force in a cosmic struggle with good, an idea that would evolve into the classic Christian eschatological framework culminating in a final apocalyptic showdown between good and evil and the eternal victory of light over darkness. For Augustine in the early medieval period we see evil as the absence of good, vices in the soul simply privations of the natural good; evil is not something fully real but something dependent or parasitic upon something real or good (Brians). From Zoroaster on, evil has become personified in the devil, Satan, witches and demons. Whatever the traditional conception of evil, its pervasiveness and ubiquity have made it a challenge to a belief in God and, as Richard Dawkins puts it in his notorious *The God Delusion*, “is seen as the strongest argument against the existence of a good God” (108).

“Good” is the operative word here. John Hick encapsulates the dilemma facing believers in his essay “The Problem of Evil.” “If God is perfectly loving, he must wish to abolish evil and if he is all-powerful, he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists; therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly loving” (143). Barbour underscores the challenge of this classical question and says that the extermination of six million Jews in German concentration camps “presents the starkest example of unmitigated evil and suffering and it challenges the ideas of God’s justice and providential care” (301). The impeccable logic of these observations, however, has been met with a plethora of labyrinthine arguments collectively known as theodicy to justify, or at the very least remove barriers from, a rational belief in God. A sampling of these

arguments illustrates how inadequately they address the problem of evil, at least in a prescriptive sense.

1. Evil, in the sense of human suffering, is the proper punishment for Adam's fall from grace, for his "original sin," which Ian Barbour in *Religion and Science* defines as egocentricity and disobedience to God (133). As Barbour points out, neither the primeval state of perfection nor a historical fall is very credible today" (301).
2. Evil is part of God's divine but mysterious purpose. God has a higher morality by which his actions might be judged. B. C. Johnson in his essay "God and the Problem of Evil" dismisses this as a very strange higher morality that claims what we call bad is good and good bad (140). And, again, Barbour points to the impossibility of reconciling such atrocities as the Holocaust, or even the suffering of children, with a providential God.
3. Evil is tied in with free will. Virtues come into being only in the moral struggle of real decisions and real consequences. (Barbour 301). The divine purpose could not be realized in a world designed as a hedonistic paradise; the world is a place of "soul-making" (Hick 146). Johnson lambastes this argument because it seems to place humans in a sort of sinister catch twenty-two; as Johnson puts it, "God allows free will so that we can freely do evil things so as to make us more evil than we would be if forced to do evil acts" (140). A God that would construct such a reality seems, in Dawkins's words, "a capriciously malevolent bully" (31).
4. Evil is a necessary consequence of the laws of nature. As Barbour puts it, "There must be dependable regularities in the world if we are to make responsible decisions ...the growth of human knowledge would be impossible without the existence of such regularities. Neither moral character nor scientific knowledge would be possible if God intervened frequently to save us from suffering" (302). But evil as a necessary by-product of the laws of nature makes little sense according to Johnson. He argues that in cases of really horrible disasters God could and should intervene (139).
5. Evil is a necessary contrast to good. The problem with this argument is two-fold. Barbour suggests that "the existence of a cosmic principle of evil" would be an "extreme limitation of God's power" (301) and Johnson argues, not entirely convincingly, that a very small amount of evil, say a toothache, would serve this purpose. We would be better off embracing Taoism with its cosmic balance of good and evil if we go with this argument. At least it does not baffle us with an irreconcilable juxtaposition of benevolent creator and unspeakable, seemingly preventable, suffering.

Faced with such unsatisfactory justifications for evil within the framework of Christian teaching, we must return to the ethics of a belief in evil as it is conceptualized by theologians. In embracing one or all of these arguments from theodicy, are we, in the words of W. K. Clifford, "suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation" into the real and perhaps very basic nature of evil? If so, are we being unethical? Do we have a right to fall back on these "artifacts," as Bell refers to traditional beliefs about evil?

There are those thinkers that have posited interpretations of evil that depart from the traditional theistic arguments. The great seventeenth-century philosopher and apostate Jew, Benedictus Spinoza, attached a certain relativity to evil as he did to good. As Matthew Stewart explains in *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, in Spinoza's framework, everything follows from necessity from God's eternal essence; thus, all those things that we call evil are in God as much as that which we call good. For Spinoza, for whom God was as rational as a mathematical equation, there is no good or evil in any absolute sense. They are relative to us and our particular interests. As Stewart concludes, "Spinoza's God – or Nature or Substance – may be perfect, but it isn't good" (162). A logical extrapolation from this perspective then must be that evil, too, must always be placed in a context, however repugnant that may be in a given situation.

While the brilliant Spinoza was a leading thinker on the philosophical, mathematical, and theological questions of his day, like Augustine, who was ignorant of the idea of germs and their relation to disease, he was not exposed to the idea of evolution. Spinoza's concept of good and evil operated in a rational but fixed universe. Three hundred years into the future, a French Jesuit priest cum trained paleontologist and philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin, would attempt to incorporate contemporary knowledge from science into Christian teleological views in his theory of the Omega Point. Chardin was a proponent of orthogenesis, the idea that evolution occurs in a directional, goal-driven way. In this framework, evil exists but humankind might perfect itself by degrees and over a long period of time at the end of which history will experience its culmination in the Omega Point.

Taking the ideas of Chardin, and armed with an understanding of current advances in physics, Frank Tipler goes even further in his book, *The Physics of Immortality*. In this conception God is the Omega Point and Tipler uses game theory to show how, in the culminating and eternal instant of the universe, all individuals will have the choice to be "uploaded" to immortality. In this schema, one that reconciles perhaps better than ever before science and Christian metaphysics, evil is seen as the product of a flawed individual. While it might be that the flawed individual resists the guidance of the Omega Point for infinite subjective time, i.e. forever, (here Purgatory becomes Hell), the Omega Point will refuse to abandon a human no matter how evil and ultimately all will enjoy salvation (Tipler 253-254).

Tipler's ideas are bold, even audacious, but they still sound like theism. Like so many who write of evil, Tipler acknowledges it but fails to define it in practical terms or prescribe a remedy for it in this life. Here, Wendell Bell is refreshing. For Bell, it is very basic indeed; evil consists of "human actions that harm other people" (8). Bell describes a "continuum of evil that ranges from the "horribly grotesque and monstrous" acts to those that are relatively minor. For Bell, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" rings true and he asserts that far from being "some eternal other seeking to throw the world into chaos" ... the production of evil is for the most part the result of the behavior of ordinary people" (9).

This is of course out of sync with the "myth of pure evil" the "cluster of millennial beliefs about the existence of a supernatural world, an eternal struggle of good and evil, the threat of ... a coming apocalyptic upheaval in which good will triumph over evil" that, though millennia old, continue to exist in sacred and secular form, around the world (19).

Just what objection does Bell have to these beliefs? For Bell, they are not benign. Millennial beliefs blind people to the fact that it is ordinary people, including themselves, who commit most of the evil acts of the world (16). They perpetuate an “us versus them” world of “true believers whose absolutism in the rightness of their beliefs leads them to clash with people who have different views” (19). And ultimately, they cut off any hope of humanity’s transcending differences and meeting the real causes of evil in the world with a morality grounded in reason; they are a “victory of the present over the future” (12).

Here we return to Clifford’s point about the ethics of belief then. Clifford asserts that “the question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of ...belief, not the matter of it; but whether {one has} a right to believe on such evidence as {is} before him” (149). With evidence sorely lacking to justify beliefs in evil as conceptualized in a religious framework, and with a pressing need to attend to the real manifestations and causes of evil in the world, it is time for people to turn elsewhere to break the malevolent cycle that threatens to destroy us. It is time to adopt a policy of rational action based on what we now know about the physical and social sciences, about the biological and psychological nature of human beings. It is time, as Bell suggests, for people to be skeptical about their own beliefs and to question their own convictions” (16). And it is time to remove evil from the metaphysical realm and place it squarely in the world we live in. Only then can we stop the futile exercise of demonizing fellow humans and work towards evolving our species together.

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