WHAT IS EVIL?

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Nothing is Evil because it is all Good

Long before the words Christian or Trinity or even Yahweh were spoken, humans carried an ache in the deepest recesses of their being, some version of the question, "If the gods and the material world are good, why does it hurt so bad to live in it?" This ache lies at the center of what some Christians call "the problem of evil." Suffering, violence, and death, apart from their pain and terror cause trouble for a Christian tradition that makes the following three claims: God is good. God is all powerful. God is the one who creates and sustains. How can all three be true when creation includes corona viruses, climate change, mass shootings of children in Connecticut, of Asian women in Atlanta, of queer people in Florida, and a knee on George Floyd's neck in Minneapolis? Evil threatens bedrock Christian claims. If an all-powerful God makes suffering and death happen—or even just lets them happen—then how is this the God who Christians claim? How can we hold on to the goodness of God's world when the lived reality begs otherwise?

These modern yet ancient questions cannot be answered in the span of an essay. In fact, Christianity sometimes adds insult to injury in its attempts to explain what for ages could not be explained. As a chaplain I rarely found that intellectual answers did much good in the moments of deepest sorrow and suffering. In the face of violence and loss, most often the best I could offer was my presence, a hand on the back, a willingness to stay, a silent harbor. Theology, at least for me, is most hospitable and helpful not because it has all the answers, although it has some. Instead, with uncertainties like "evil," Christian teaching can show how to ask questions and live in an age of unknowing.

Nevertheless, at the right time, there is deep good that can come from reflecting on what Christians believe about evil. I find companionship and comfort in joining up with a long tradition that affirms the significance, complexities, importance, and mystery of questions that, despite our sweeping, never stay under the rug for long.

Grammar and Guardrails

Christian thought on evil offers less of a solution to what cannot actually be explained and something more like a grammar as we beg the question, why? (By grammar I don't mean grade school rules about where nouns and adverbs etc. belong in a sentence. A Christian grammar for evil means the way Christians think and speak about evil, the ways Christians organize their thoughts. A Christian grammar is like rules of thumb, like handholds to grab onto as you fumble in the dark, and like guardrails to make sure you don't get too far off track.) Christian inquiry into evil's significance is hedged by three truths. God is good. Creation is good. God is omnipotent (all-powerful). These are the guardrails. Christian theologians don't budge on the goodness or omnipotence of the Creator God. Sometimes Christian sects have moved beyond these guardrails, concluding God must not be so good or in control, and in the end they found themselves outside of what we know today as Christian tradition.

But what exactly do Christians mean when they speak about "evil" and how do they acknowledge it without stepping beyond those three basic claims? What words or grammar do Christians employ when they think about evil? From John 1:3 we learn that "All things came into being through God, and without God not one thing came into being." If all that exists has been made by a God who is good, then there simply can be nothing that is bad, that is evil in itself. No creature is inherently evil. This is a way that Christians speak about evil.

In the 300s, North African Bishop Augustine likewise insisted that "nothing evil exists in itself."[1] Christian theologians across time more or less agree with him. Evil does not exist on its own. Rather, evil is privative. Privative is a key word. Coming from the Latin privatio (pree-VAHT-see-oh) privative indicates a taking a way or a deprivation, a stripping down. To say that evil is privative does not mean that Christians don't think evil is real. All we have to do is look at the stripping down of ecological systems, or at the scars peoples bear and inflict on each other to know that something is not the way it is supposed to be. Evil is real. Evil is not, however, something that exists in and of itself, either as an agent (doer) or as an object. Rather evil is more like an event, an occurrence or a process of undoing that

[1] St. Augustine, *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Albert C. Outler, ch IV.

depends first on the presence of something good to undo. More like a verb than a noun, evil describes the reality that the goodness of the created order sometimes deteriorates or disintegrates. You might say, everything is good and no thing is evil. That's the grammar of good and evil.

What exists is made by God and so no thing is evil. In fact many early theologians spoke of evil as exactly this, as nothing or no-thing. After all, if God brought all creation out of nothing, then to undo, strip or deteriorate this creation is to move it back towards nothingness. The state or experience of such undoing can be described as an experience of evil. Evil isn't a real thing. Real evil is the experience of the undoing of things. Evil then is the deranging or erasure of God's good creation.

Between the guardrails, learning about what Christianity means by "evil" is to discover its fierce commitment to the goodness of the created, material world. This is good news because all too often bodies, sometimes but not always human, are described as "evil" and are made to take the blame for suffering and pain. It's an old habit, blaming evil on bodies, on the material (meaning the physical world). Some early Christians thought the only solution to the quandary of evil was to interpret material creation as tragic—the soul is good, the body is bad. Theologians fought back. In the 600s, a byzantine theologian, Maximus the Confessor, insisted that because nothing existed before creation, nothing could force God to create the world God did. In other words, every creature, every body, all flesh, including rocks, whales, dung beetles and you and I, are the will of God materialized. To look at mycorrhizal networks (symbiotic relationships between fungi and plants) through a magnifying glass, at buzzard flocks, at yourself, but also your enemy is to look at the will of God made flesh, made fungal, made aviary, made human. To eye a lady bug or a plantain is to see divine intention—actualized, bodied. Knowing the awesome reality of creation as the fruit of God's will makes even greater sense of why the destruction—or privation—of God's creation is what Christians call evil. Evil is the seeming opposition of or the undoing of the will, desire and activity of God.

To be clear, to pit evil against God is not to put them on an equal playing field, as if two forces used our planet for a cosmic standoff. There is only one God. That's why the language of privation is key.

Metaphors for Privation

Most theologians reading this might be scratching their heads. That's because most theologians would have used metaphors by now or examples of evil as privation. Evil having no being of its own is pretty abstract. "Use the plantain!" they would say. Eventually it rots. Evil is like rot. It's not really there. It just slowly decomposes or disappears the fruit. Evil breaks down the good. Or take a plate of fresh humus or a mere slice of bread. Evil is like the mold that decays the bread until there's nothing. Evil as nothing. Evil as parasitic on the good. The metaphors seem to help.

When Christians say evil is like rot or mold, or a parasite, they aren't being particularly inventive. They take their que from centuries of theologians and from Scripture. Scripture often talks about death as the privation of life. Death opposes, undoes. If death is the enemy of life, decay is like the final nail in the coffin. The body dies and then is subject to decay, no trace of God's creation to be found. Death and decay are like a package deal in Scripture. They still are. Together, death and decay corrupt or undo God's creation to nothing.

From Whence Evil?

Evil, as no thing but the corruption of things gets us part of the way to understanding how Christians think about evil. Evil is not an agent, not a creature, not the human or the deer tick or the red-tailed hawks that prey on my hens. If God made it, it is good. However, even if evil doesn't exist by itself, it is still very real. No one would say that death or decay are pretend. Deer ticks and rot aren't exactly easy to live with. If God didn't make evil, how do we explain evil's reality?

For 2000 years, Christians have turned to the Garden of Eden to explain the presence of death, decay, and evil. The story might be familiar. Adam and Eve, as a primal mortal human couple living in intimate relationship with God, are set up to live indefinitely even though they are creatures and not the Creator. They come from nothing and therefore exist only by the will of God. They are dependent. To be a creature is to be dependent. In the garden, God gives Adam and Eve resources to live forever, even though they are material creatures who eat and grow and change. How do mortals evade death? God offers God's self and God offers the Tree of Life. Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas talks about this tree as a creature that God

uses to deliver grace, the grace of living into perpetuity despite the couple's mortality. Thomas talks about the Tree of Life as a drug that staves of death.[2] We might also think about the tree like we think about the manna that God offered the Israelites in the Egyptian desert or like the bread and wine Christians receive in the liturgy. These all teach Adam, Eve, the Israelites, you and me that we are mortal, dependent, that we live by God's grace, by God's hand and even by material graces like bread and trees. Each time Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Life, they learned about their dependence.

The lesson gets interrupted. A snake tells Eve that she can eat from another tree that will make her independent and thus like God. It is the one tree that God forbids. Eve tells the snake that she will die. This is Eve's best move. She knows she is mortal and depends on the Tree of Life and relationship with God. But the snake tells her she will not die. Adam and Eve succumb. They feast on the lie and are expelled from the garden, losing access to its gifts. No longer able to partake of these, Adam and Eve, as mortals, face the reality of being creatures who come from nothing—without God's graces, they will now eventually return to nothing. It is their undoing. It is evil. Not a creature, but all too real.

Christians point to this event as the entry point for corruption, deterioration, and death in God's world, for humans and everything else. Romans 8 describes creation groaning the way a woman groans during her labor. Creation cries out as it waits for liberation from "its bondage to decay."

If this story creates more questions than answers, you are not alone. For example, what does it mean that predation and death, "nature red in tooth and claw" exist in natural history before the first hominids do?[3] How does one couple's failure change the state of the cosmos? How do the effects of Adam's choices connect to my own? These are exactly the sorts of questions Christian theologians spend their lives investigating, but at the base of these is the idea that the story of Adam and Eve's Fall is God's truth to us about the state of human existence amidst a creation thrown out of joint by human action.

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[2] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.97.4.

[3] Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," Poets.org, accessed April 16, 2021, https://poets.org/poem/memoriam-h-h.

Perhaps this might have been harder to imagine even 200 years ago, but in a time when human activity has now changed the geological and atmospheric history of the planet, it might be easier to see that our lives are entwined with the rest. The events leading to present day extinctions, to the disappearances of entire ecological systems are privations worthy of the title "evil," even if humans themselves are, as God declared in the garden, very good.

Things Are Not Evil ... and Privation Is Not Rot.

Faced with this ecological degradation, I resist the language of decay, rot, mold and even disease as metaphors for evil's privative nature. Prior to Anthony van Leeuwenhoek's discovery of microbes and Louis Pasteur's connection of those "wee beasts" to mold, rot, decomposition, and disease, all of these were mysteries. Pre-modern (the time before the late 1800s) disease was not a germ isolated in a petri dish. There was no creature associated with disease at all. Disease was not an object or agent. Disease was more of a state of feeling unwell or of dying. In other words, disease was a privation of health. Disease was real, but it did not exist as a thing. Neither were decay, rot or mold things in themselves. They were not tiny agents. They were the phenomenon of God's creation spoiling, of beers and dairy and dinner spontaneously going bad. Decay and disease and rot were not things, not creatures, not nouns. They did not exist, but they were real and were at the time apt illustrations of evil, of the reality of God's creation gone awry and fading into nothing.

Contrarily, moderns are taught to think of disease as a germ such as the microscopic corona virus or Staphylococcus aureus. When we think of rot and decay and mold, we think of these as the activities of bacteria that decompose. Theologians and the writers of sacred scripture had no sense when they linked evil to decay, rot, and disease that they were naming things that moderns could look at through a microscope. The whole point was to say that evil was not a thing at all. But when disease, rot, and decay become a material creatures it no longer works to think of disease and decay as evil. The metaphors have gone bad.

All Things Are Good

Evil is not a thing and evil must never be pinned on just one set of creatures. Creation is good. Matter is good. Evil is the events, the lies, the rebellions that usher in destruction of the grace of creation. It helps to remember Adam and Eve who turned to the wrong tree. What brought on evil was a turning away from the tree God intended for our aid and a turning towards the lie that humans don't need God or other creatures to live. This primeval failure was an ecological one now amplified in the present destruction of the world God made so all might live. Perhaps, if you take the bread and the wine, like manna, like the Tree of Life, you might receive these sacraments not only as invisible graces but also as material, bodied ones, as holy goods, signals of our dependence on a creation we are all too prone to undo.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author describes classical Christian accounts of evil as a "no-thing," an event of stripping down or degradation rather than an agent or object in its own right. How does this view align with the way you usually think about evil?
2. If all of nature is good in itself, then how do we express the evil inherent in major catastrophes like pandemics and the climate crisis.
3. If everything in the material world is good, what does this say about the popular conception of salvation as dying, being freed from your material body, and going to heaven?
4. The author says that Christian claims do not so much answer the problem of evil as provide a grammar for speaking about evil in a Christian way. How does this change your thinking about evil, if at all? Did you find any of her observations particularly compelling?