The Nature of Evil [1]

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On one particular day during my time in primary school, I was in art class1. This alien environment was in a basement, bathed in the strange smells of pastel chalks and powdered paint. But on this day we were not drawing: the teacher had asked us the very inane question of what are colours. "Red", said one, "blue", another, "green", "yellow", "white", "purple", "pink", "black", "turquoise" (ooh!), "brown"... The kid in class who was known for his excellent drawing skills was quiet, until we became quiet. "I think that they are all colours, except for white and black." "What rubbish," thought I. Then he explained that white is the composite of all primary colours (so a kind of super-colour), and black the absence of any colour. The teacher was pleased with this answer, and the discussion continued around primary and secondary colours2.

Introduction

Good and evil; Jedi and Sith; elves and Orcs; ying and yang. Jesus and Satan. In our culture and day-to-day lives, we think of these two, opposing forces ebbing and flowing: always in a struggle. This is perhaps not surprising, because just as we can feel emboldened by acts of virtue and goodness, we can feel helpless because of the welling up of temptation and tug of depravity.

In this article we are going to look at another view of evil: one which more naturally aligns with an all-good, all-powerful God.

Divine Attributes

In the traditional understanding of the God of Christianity, God has four "omni" attributes: "omnipotence" (all-powerful), "omniscience" (all-knowing), "omnipresence" (all-present) and "omnibenevolence" (all-loving). This fits in with the definition of God being the greatest of all possible beings [2]. For the current discussion, we are interested in the last attribute in this list: God's omnibenevolence.

For many people, looking at so much pain and suffering in the world, it is inconceivable that God can be both all-loving (permitting evil) and all-powerful (not stopping such evil). This is the essence of the "Epicurean paradox":

> Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil[3,4]?

This quote poses a *false dichotomy* that God either must prevent all evil, or be unable to do so. No other alternatives are given, as if there are none. It does not provide for the possibility that God is willing and able, but restrains Himself from intervening for some other, higher ideal. This ideal is typically taken as man's free will: if God values autonomous creatures created in His image, they should be allowed to cause suffering and pain by their own volition. If God intervenes to prevent this, He is impairing mankind's free will.

But what is the nature of this motivation to cause pain and suffering? We call it evil, but from where does it come? Where does mankind find it, and how do they draw upon it?

Evil Not a "Thing"

Instead of being thought of as a "force" which exists as some *thing*, evil can be thought of as the *absence of good*. This makes it more like blackness, which is the absence of any light. If we say that God is all-loving—that is, all-good—then we are not simply saying that His whole Being is comprised of goodness, but that all goodness is contained in, or proceeds from, Him. Apart from God, there is no good.

This view of evil (that it is the "privation" of good) was put forward by Augustine of Hippo, and can be found in several of his writings, such as his *Confessions*[5]*, Enchiridion*[6] *and The City of God.*

Evil comes from taking an attribute or quality of God, and then moving in the opposite direction. This is similar to how it would get darker and darker as a person moves away from the only light source. So if we take, for example, truth as a quality of God, then falsehood and lies are the opposite, and therefore evil. If God intends for humanity to exhibit humility (a quality exemplified by Jesus), then pride is sinful (that is, opposing God [3]; evil). Seen another way, if God is love (1 John 4:8), then where God is not, or what does not flow from God, is the opposite of love: malignant hate (or apathy).

This move in an "opposite direction" to the qualities of God can be thought of as shutting out light from a room by boarding up a window. Light still creeps in through the crevices between the board and the wall (more on this below), but this darkening is ultimately a wilful and deliberate action against what is natural and proper.

Concerns

This immediately raises two concerns: if God is omnipresent, He is everywhere, so why is there evil anywhere; and what about good atheists? Both of these concerns could be addressed in an article by themselves. I only offer a brief response to each.

What About God's Omnipresence?

When God created the world, it was good and He dwelt with mankind (Genesis 1:26–31). After the Fall—which was an act of free will and of rebellion—God withdrew His presence from mankind. He no longer dwelt with people, but still governed the world from heaven (Matthew 5:45). God is still "present", in a sense (Hebrews 4:13; hence His omniscience), but it is not a direct presence. Indeed, it can be argued that God's "withdrawal" is necessary in a sense, because the "ground" becomes cursed, which essentially infuses the world with natural evil (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.). This in turn then also highlights the grievousness of our sin, that it stands in opposition to God so that the goodness with which He created the world is twisted and marred in such a dramatic way that we now have so much evil in the world (Isaiah 59:2, Habakkuk 1:13).

What we see on Mount Sinai, and the Holiest of Holies of the Tabernacle and the Temple, is that God's direct presence ("Shekhinah") returns to the world. Ordinary people could not enter into the presence of this manifestation, because their sin would cause them to die (Leviticus 16). We could think of this as each person's sinfulness causing them to be fundamentally "dark", and the "light" of God's holiness would extinguish this darkness—and by implication, the person tied to it. Only certain people, such as Moses and the High Priests, could enter into God's presence under specific circumstances; usually for the purpose of making atonement for the sins of the people[7].

Of course, God's presence is accessible to us through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus: He is now the mediator which allows access to God the Father! (This is largely the thrust of the book of Hebrews.)

How the "variability" of God's presence works is not something which I can definitely explain. My best guess is that God varies the "concentration" of His presence. Or, it can be that His latent presence is like ambient light (which is, for example, how a room can light up when the sun rises, even if no direct sunlight shines into that room; it bounces off of walls, the ground, water, etc. into the room), while His direct presence is like directional or point lighting (where the light source shines directly into a room). But this is pure conjecture on my part.

What About Good Atheists?

The last concern which I shall be addressing here is the question of "good" atheists. Setting aside the fact that no-one, whether atheist or Christian, is essentially good (Psalm 14:2–3, Mark 10:18, Isaiah 64:6), there is a difference between knowing how to act with goodness, and knowing from where goodness comes. Christians happily concede that atheists can do good: for their own sake and the sake of those around them, God reveals and grants goodness (Matthew 5:45). Atheists, as much as Christians or anyone else, are beneficiaries of the fact that God has not completely withdrawn from the world. We emulate this revealed goodness and enjoy the blessings which God provides as He continues to sustain the world. This can all be done without knowing or acknowledging the source of the goodness.

Conclusion

Thinking of evil as the absence of good gives glory to God by acknowledging Him as the true and complete goodness. It also places into context the grievousness of our sin: that it separates us from God. But this separation is breached by Jesus, who came into the world bringing goodness and decoupling us from the inherent darkness that would otherwise destroy us when put into the light of God's good presence!

- 1. The benefit of the traditional schooling system, at the very least, lies in the fact that children are exposed to subject matters to which they would not gravitate or even have any talent in whatsoever.
- 2. Today I know that there is a distinction between colours of light, and pigments (as found in, say, paints). The more different paints you mix, the more likely you will end up with a darker colour (although probably something brownish, not black, but definitely not white). But the more different colours of refracted light you shine together, the lighter, whiter the colour will be. For the reason I would say that white is a colour (the composite of all primary colours), but black, like my classmate had said, is not a colour.
- 3. This paraphrased is by David Hume.
- 4. This quote crops up on the Internet from time to time. I would like to provide a few clarifications around it. Firstly, this quote is attributed to Epicurius, but we do have any evidence that Epicurius wrote or taught this view. Next, Epicurius lived before Jesus, therefore he was not addressing Christian theism, nor could he engage with Christians on the matter. Lastly, Epicurius lived in ancient Greece, which was polytheistic. Thus, speaking of "God" would not be something which was common, or appeal to, most Greeks of the time. It is true that some Greeks had monotheistic inclinations, particularly after the theology of Xenophanes of Colophon, who pre-dated Epicurius by nearly 200 years. But this was not a

dominant view in ancient Greece. Interestingly, it also applies to the *Euthyphro dilemma* that the discussion is addressed towards the gods, and piety and holiness. In any case, the Christian need not be troubled by this apparent paradox any more than the Eutherphro dilemma [4], as will be demonstrated below.

- 5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.12.18.
- 6. Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, 11.
- 7. For this reason we can also think of "evil" not having the power to "pull" by its own. Instead, because of our existing sin, we are repelled from God, like one pole of a magnet repels the same pole from another magnet.

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