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God Is Good II

We are considering the problem of evil. Of course, what I am doing is only a sketch, not even a portrait, of what is really the mystery of God. My explanation carries a logical weight, a reasonable account in accord with the revelation of God in the Bible, and the Theology of the Church. Still, the glory and majesty of God and His use of evil transcend all understanding. Only God knows and loves perfectly. We see through a glass darkly, truly but incompletely.

The inevitable and perennial question asks how God can allow evil. I suppose it is better to ask "why" instead of "how," although when it comes to the being of God these two ideas flow into one another.

How God can do something has to do necessarily with His wisdom and power. He knows perfectly what must be done, and He has the power to accomplish what He intends. Why He does anything at all must refer back to the same personal origin of wisdom and power. The reasons why He does what He does are absolutely His own, infinitely above anything that we might imagine. His power conforms to His wisdom like a stream to the contours of its path.

From the human perspective the how and the why are a matter of distinction. God's power answers the question how and his wisdom the why.

But there is another attribute, necessary to the Divine Being, which contributes both to the how and to the why, without which God would not be God. It is His goodness. God's power and wisdom are guided by the fact that His being is in every respect perfectly and unchangeably good.

And so it seems that such a God as God is, good, all knowing, and all-powerful would have nothing to do with evil. In the first place, it appears that God would not permit evil, because He is good. If He so desired, He could prevent it, because He is omnipotent. And God could surely find another way to proceed with creation, other than to allow evil, because He is omniscient. And yet, evil happens, and Christianity claims that God is immutably good, omniscient, and omnipotent.

Somehow, and I shall try to say something credible about how it is so, God allows evil. But it is not a matter merely of permitting evil. The Christian Religion claims that God allows it and then uses it. While He is not the author of evil, He turns it to a good purpose, and He can do

this and wills to do this because of the very fact that His nature is perfectly good, and all wise, and all-powerful.

I said in the last article that the Christian answer to evil is to be found in the realm of creation, freedom, and love. Now, I shall attempt to explain.

To begin with, it is absolutely, fundament-ally crucial to give a definition of evil. The Church, following St. Augustine, has considered evil as the privation of what is by nature good. Evil has no substantial existence of its own. There is no such thing as pure evil. Bourbon is not evil, but the abuse of it is. Power is not evil, but the misuse of it is. Even the devil, insofar as he exists, is good; God created him good, but in his rebellion he has become wicked, and has twisted his will away from the good in an attempt to rule both creation and mankind.

Evil as the privation of good means a loss of what is by nature whole or pure. For instance, evil is the loss of health, as in the blindness of an eye, or the deafness of an ear. Or evil is the pollution of acid rain in a pure mountain stream, or the blight of disease in a dogwood tree. In this sense evil is a loss, a privation, of a thing's wholeness or inherent quality. But beyond this sense of the loss of what is whole or pure is the more acute occasion of evil as the privation of a good will.

In this sense, the cause of evil is in the angelic or human mind that turns away from the goodness of God to its own ambition and desire. Evil in this more radical sense is the loss of the good of intellect, a denial of the truth of God, and an intention to love what is other than God before and above God.

The Church has understood evil, not as a substance, but as the privation of the good. And so when we turn to consider the different forms of evil, we have this definition in mind. It is already beginning to become clear that God is not to blame for creating evil in the sense of other created substances like a peach or a hippopotamus. And yet He has permitted a privation of things and of souls to arise in His good creation.

As for the privation of things, evil in the midst of the created order, at least two points must be made. First is that of C.S. Lewis, where he takes account of the material world. In this realm, he says, it was possible from the beginning of creation that we should feel and be subject to pain. If we were to live in a world where things are really hot and cold, rough and smooth, sharp and dull, then our bodies would be made sensible of all of these. The possibility of accidental evil, the privation of good, was there originally.

How man would live in such a world, capable of so many accidents, and never have one, or what might become of an accident in an unfallen world, is a matter of speculation. (But even with this speculation, what must be maintained in order for an actual world to exist would be the natural laws governing it.) What is crucial to our present argument is the fact that our world was created with the built-in possibility of accidental suffering.

The second point about the privation of things, evil in the midst of the created order, is this. If we believe, as our religion teaches, that this world has been subjected to the dominion of fallen, and therefore

weakened, angelic and human minds, and that God has permitted this world to suffer this subjection within a limit known only to Himself, then we have an account of a universe that is out of order, and accidental evil not just a possibility but a daily occurrence.

This is no small intrusion of evil. Heartrending accidents are part of the harsh fact of our present existence. No one is spared this most difficult experience. We must conclude that accidental evil is permitted, devastating as it is, as part of our world of concrete objects and genuine choices, but that God in his mercy uses such evil for our ultimate good. How glorious it is then that St. Paul speaks of the whole of creation groaning to be free of this fallen dominion, which he says will be realized with the final revelation of the children of God. But before we can speak of the new heaven and the new earth we must consider the more grotesque evil.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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