

Man and the Presence of Evil in Christian and Platonic Doctrine

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OF the main theories to account for the existence of the world, or its apparent existence, one is the theory of emanation (or manifestation) and another is the Christian theory of creation. The theory of emanation—it may be called Platonic (and this includes its neo-Platonic developments) since it is in this form that it presents itself in western tradition—is briefly as follows. The One—the Good or the Supreme—is absolute and perfect. As absolute, It must contain in Itself the seeds of everything, the possibility of everything, for if there were some possibility outside It, It would be, not absolute, but limited by this extraneous possibility. As perfect, It must distribute this perfection to the fullest extent possible. Its goodness must be everywhere. For if it were lacking anywhere, if there were some part of a possible universe from which something of this goodness were excluded, then the One would be failing Its own nature, It would be contradicting Itself: It would not be as perfect as It could be, It would be admitting a degree of imperfection there where it might impart greater perfection. Thus, not only must the One contain the seeds of everything within Itself, but It must also manifest those which are capable of manifestation. This manifesting activity expresses a necessity, is necessary: manifestation is a necessary consequence of the fact not that the One is absolute, but that It is perfect, is the Good absolute.

This necessity of manifestation, this necessary breaking out of the One from Its self-inclosed isolation, might seem to imply a contradiction: that which affects the freedom of the One. It would seem that the One is under constraint, in that It has to bring Itself forth into manifestation, has to emanate. But in this case it is not the One that is Supreme, but this other power according to which it is compelled to enter into manifestation. Thus, the One, if It is the Supreme, cannot be under any constraint or necessity to manifest Itself. So there is the contradiction that as the absolute Good It must manifest Itself, but as the Supreme It cannot be under any constraint. This contradiction is further complicated by the fact that even if It were not under any constraint to enter into manifestation, still the One could not actualize any of the seeds of manifestation It contains within Itself. To actualize any of these possibilities is to admit that there is something other and less than the One, that the One is not, in Itself, all-inclusive, is not total Reality, and this cannot be admitted. Not only therefore can the One not possess any possibility of self-determination, but also It cannot contain the seeds of manifestation in Itself in any actualized state, or in any state capable of being actualized, or in any state that implies any distinction from or differentiation in Its entirely simple and totally self-sufficient nature. The One therefore, in Itself, cannot be the principle of manifestation. What then brings forth or emanates is not the One in Itself, but pure Being. Being is the first determination of the One, and this in its turn determines all the subsequent ranks and conditions of manifestation. This does not mean that it is the One that determines Being: we have seen that this is an impossibility, for it would involve the disruption of the absolute simplicity and unity and self-sufficiency and non-determinable nature of the One. On the contrary, Being determines itself. Thus the One in Itself is exempt from any

constraint. It is metaphysically free. Even pure Being, the principle of manifestation, is still free, even though this manifestation is a necessary act. It is because it is free that it necessarily acts in this way. If it were anything less than free, it would be constrained to act in some other way. As it is, being free, it acts what it is: not in accordance with its nature—which assumes that its action is a consequence of its nature, which it is not—but as it is. Its action is itself, just as its non-activity is itself; and both are what it wills, though the willing and the action and the non-activity are all one.

From the Christian point of view, this theory of emanation seems to leave an unbridgeable gap between the One in Its totally non-differentiated and self-sufficient unity, and any degree of determination or multiplicity. If the One contains in Itself all the seeds of manifestation, It must contain them not only in a state which is not actualized, but also in one which is free from any possibility of actualization. They must be so identified with the One, so totally subsumed in Its original nature, that there is no possibility of any distinction : they are essentially and necessarily one with Its entirely simple indivisibility. In a way, they constitute a kind of Godhead without a God. They have no author. And in so far as they are identified with the One, they cannot themselves produce or manifest anything. They could only produce or manifest anything on condition that they became distinct from the One, and this is impossible, since the One, subsuming in Itself total Reality, cannot admit anything other than Itself. How then does distinction or differentiation, or even the appearance of distinction or differentiation, first arise? In Platonic and neo-Platonic theory there is and can be no answer to this question—or at least no answer which is not a kind of *deus ex machina* like, for instance, Proclus' theory of the *henads*, which is an attempt to bridge this gap between the One and multiplicity, or the appearance of multiplicity, while leaving unimpaired the perfect unity and non-determination of the One.

In Christian theory—and here reference is to Patristic authors, not to the Scholastics—God, the Absolute or the Supreme, is not regarded as the logical God-Unity of the Platonic tradition. Certainly, God is One, but this unity includes multiplicity, includes the divine energies and powers. God's essence is, like the Platonic One, totally transcendent, totally non-differentiated, totally undetermined and incommunicable; but His energies and powers are multiple, creative, communicable. And it must be stressed that though these energies and powers are distinguished in this way from the divine essence, they are not on that account said to be any less real or less absolute than the essence; nor must one think of the essence apart from the energies and powers, or vice versa, in such a way as to conceive of the essence as unenergized or of the energies as inessential; nor finally is the essence to be regarded as a superior order of Reality in which the energies and powers are subsumed and lose their differentiation and distinction. God is not to be identified with His essence alone, nor is the essence to be thought of as His superior or more inclusive or absolute nature, and nor are His powers and energies to be identified with His essence. It might be said that while in Platonic theory God's essence is abstracted from all His principal determinations, including that of His Being, and this essence alone, in its perfectly undetermined, non-differentiated, and entirely simple nature is thought of as embracing in Itself the totality of the Real, as itself constituting the Absolute, so that all determinations—all powers and energies, even pure Being—are in the final analysis seen merely as contingent and relative modes or aspects or attributes of the essence, in Christian theory it is precisely this act of abstraction that is a primal doctrinal error. Thus, in Christian theory there is no question of how differentiation and distinction arise from the unity of the One: differentiation and distinction are inherent *in an actualized state* in this unity "in the beginning." God, the Absolute, is One-in-Many, simplicity-in-distinction, a divided indivisibility; and, as has been said, to seek to resolve

this paradox by appealing to a higher principle in which its contradictory terms are subsumed and reconciled is a basic doctrinal error.

It is because of this paradoxical idea of the Absolute that Christian theory is able to envisage an act of creation which is entirely free and spontaneous, and no necessary consequence of the Absolute being what it is. God creates, brings forth out of nothing, through the spontaneous, undetermined operation of His powers and energies. What He creates—the whole intelligible order, including the intelligible archetypes of the visible world—is not a necessary part of His nature; neither is it to be principally identified either with His essence, or His Being, or His multiple powers and energies. It is a new mode of reality, not necessary in any way. In other words, this theory seems to emphasize God's free-will, His freedom, in a manner that amounts to an exclusion of the idea of divine necessity which plays so important a part in the emanation theory. God creates because it is His "pleasure," His "glory," to create, and that is all, humanly, to be said. It is understood in both theories that nothing is added to God's nature by the existence of the world: His plenitude and power are full and unimpaired, self-sufficient and self-contained, before either emanation or creation. But while the emanation theory posits manifestation as a necessary consequence of the absolute goodness of the One, the Christian theory of creation appears to do away with all idea of necessity where the Divine is concerned: it might equally have been God's "pleasure" not to create; He could be God, absolute and infinite Power and Perfection, without showing forth His power and perfection in any creature. He could refrain from creation and still be omnipotent.

At first sight this seems an absurdity. Logically it is an absurdity. There is no escaping the logic of the fact that if God is perfect—which is also Christian teaching—He must wish to distribute His goodness in all possible ways, so that to refrain from creating or emanating would mean that there were some possible ways of distributing His Goodness which He denies Himself. Or if God is omnipotent, which again is part of Christian teaching, how can He refrain from manifesting this omnipotence in all ways possible?—one of these ways being through the existence of the world. If the Christian is to deny all idea of necessity with respect to God, even the necessity of necessarily acting in a certain way because He is absolute and infinite freedom and omnipotence, then the Christian must say that his account of creation is not only one that transcends logic but also one that contradicts logic. He must be able to affirm what implies a logical contradiction—what is, in other words, an impossibility from a logical point of view.

Although it is impossible to enter into any full discussion of the theme here, something must be said at this point of the different understandings in Platonic and Christian theories of the relationship between logic and what transcends logic, for this difference very much determines their subsequent doctrinal formulations, especially with regard to what they consider possible and impossible. What Platonic theory presupposes in this respect is that divine, or metaphysical, principles, although they stand above logic in their essence, yet do not contradict logic; and that doctrinal formulations or metaphysical ideas must comply with the laws of logic because these laws rest upon an essentially metaphysical basis. This being so, it follows that the hierarchy of metaphysical principles is reflected (in so far as it is or can be reflected) in the human intelligence in a purely logical order, so that there is a strict relationship of analogy or correspondence between metaphysical principles and their formulation on the mental and logical plane. The converse of this also applies: where the formulation of metaphysical principles is concerned, the formulation that stands highest in the logical order will demonstrate the precedence of its corresponding principle in the metaphysical order. The structure of logic, that is

to say, reflects and reproduces on the level of human thinking the structure of the universe; and anything which from the logical point of view presents itself as an absurdity is on that account known to be also a metaphysical impossibility. In fact, absurdity and impossibility in the Platonic view are interchangeable, or synonymous, terms.

In Christian theory, this kind of relationship between logic and what transcends logic is not admitted in anything like the same way. Indeed, it might almost be said that Christian theory maintains in this respect a set of presuppositions opposite to those of Platonic theory: that there is no necessary pre-established analogy or correspondence between the logical order and the metaphysical order; that so far from doctrinal formulations having to observe the strictest logical laws on the assumption that these laws have a metaphysical basis, there is in fact no integral accord between logical human thought and what transcends it; and that our inability to accept a contradiction as expressing more adequately the truth of things than any logical statement derives, not from our wisdom, but from our foolishness, as St. Paul has it. Thus, from the Christian point of view a logical absurdity by no means on that account denotes a metaphysical impossibility; and what is really absurd, and really betrays our impotence, lies not in thinking that God can be and act in a way that is logical, but in thinking that He cannot be or act in any other way. Indeed, from this same point of view, a condition of attaining metaphysical understanding itself is a battle against allowing the mind to be captivated and subdued by the logical constructions of thought and language. In more positive terms, this also means that Christian theory must assert that the highest ideas the human mind can grasp of metaphysical realities are likely to be those which are essentially paradoxical. Such ideas are trans-logical, in the sense that they cannot be embraced by logic, or surpassed or resolved by any idea whose terms are logically consistent. They excel the limits of purely logical thought. Faced with these ideas, the mind constrained by purely logical categories will always seek to eliminate them, either by affirming one proposition of the paradox at the expense of the other, or by formulating a "superior" logically consistent idea in which both propositions of the paradox (mutually exclusive from the logical point of view) appear.. to be absorbed and reconciled. Such elimination, justified so long as the realities indicated by the paradox themselves pertain to the logical order, is not so when the realities indicated are supra-logical. The law of the logical order that "a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be" is valid on the quantitative level to which it applies; it is meaningless when applied to supra-logical qualitative truths. To argue that what may be logically stated about metaphysical realities is necessarily ontologically true is to maintain a paralogue involving a radical confusion of levels. Thus, the essentially logical argument demonstrating that the nature of the Absolute is so and so and that from this it follows that manifestation is a necessary consequence, is neither here nor there. This is not to say that logical deductions relating to the existence of man in this world cannot be made from the Christian doctrine of creation. But it is to say that this doctrine itself involves a logical absurdity. It is also to say that other aspects of Christian teaching deriving from this initial doctrine must also have about them something that is logically absurd.

Both Platonic and Christian theories agree that manifestation "in the beginning" is good. This goodness is not of course goodness absolute, for this belongs to God alone. It is a relative goodness. Compared with the perfection of God (if comparisons may be made in this sphere) a degree of imperfection has entered in. But it should be made quite clear that neither in the Platonic nor in the Christian theory is the presence of evil in manifestation a necessary consequence of this degree of imperfection. It is sometimes argued that in so far as anything falls short of the absolute perfection of God, to that extent it is bound to be implicated in evil. There

is, according to this argument, some necessary connection between imperfection, or relative perfection, and evil; they are even in some sense identified, as if they were the same thing. This is not the case with the two theories under review. In neither does a relative perfection necessarily imply the presence of evil; it may imply the possibility of evil, but that is another matter. In both theories, on the contrary, what is relatively perfect may be entirely free from evil. In both theories, manifestation may be free from the actual presence of evil. This is something particularly emphasized in the Christian tradition ; indeed, in a certain sense, it is at the core of Christianity, being one of the essential aspects of the Incarnation : Christ assumes human nature in every respect except that in Him this human—and created—nature is free from evil. It is from this that derives the Christian promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth—of a created existence, that is to say, which while not identified with the perfection of God Himself is none the less entirely free from evil; and it is from this too that derives the Christian theory of the sacraments, a theory quite meaningless if evil is necessarily inherent in everything that is created. Hence the actual presence of evil for the Christian is no necessary consequence of creation. If it is a necessary consequence of certain phases of manifestation in Platonic theory, this is not because what is manifest is necessarily imperfect and hence evil. It is because certain "lower" phases of manifestation bring it into contact with evil.

(To be continued)