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HEGEL, PLOTINUS, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract. The article begins by defining evil, rejecting proffered negative definitions, for example, evil is privation, from which little further insight is obtainable, nor progress to be made towards a resolution of the problem, in favor of a more a constructive definition of evil in terms of an abnegation of responsibility for, or commitment to, one's dictions or actions. This is an attitude that is both irrational and unintelligible, enabling a connection to be made between Plotinus' view of evil as unintelligible matter, that is, impassive and inactive nature; and Hegel's view of evil as that which is real and active, but against reason. For Plotinus, evil is formless matter, matter that is unintelligible, separated from the intellect, unlimited because not bounded by conceptual categories; and hence, what is evil is all darkness. For Hegel, for whom the rational is actual and the actual is rational, evil is an irrational perversion of the world's inner essential rationality. But these ideas can be connected, for the purpose of finding a solution to the problem of evil, through a more specific understanding of the concept that we offer; that evil is a failure of commitment, a denial of responsibility for one's actions; and this is in itself both irrational and unintelligible. We can then demonstrate that what that evil, though it certainly exists, is imperfection, and the good, being rational, is already complete and fulfilled and firmly established in the world, and therefore evil cannot possibly oppose it from any position of equivalence; for the good is rational and therefore true, whereas evil is irrational and therefore false.

Key words: Hegel, Plotinus, neoplatonism, evil, ethics, logic, dialectic, metaphysics

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING EVIL

One of philosophy's most important undertakings, according to Hegel, is 'that the ill is found in the World may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil' [2. P. 17]. And what is evil? In this instance Hegel is primarily concerned with philosophy's proficiency with regard to furnishing us with an explanation for the occurrences of iniquitous events, together with their injurious consequences, throughout history's unfolding; with justifying, or at the very least delivering a reconciliation with, such actions, each of which is in itself such a hideous blemish in the archives of human proceedings.

'Evil may be taken metaphysically, physically and morally', said Leibnitz. '*Metaphysical evil* consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin' [6. P. 77]. And his explanation for evil is to concede that the world is indeed imperfect; there are natural catastrophes; there is desolation, contagion, depravity, inhumaneness, hardship, and so on; for not even a perfect God can create a world that violates the laws of logic; and just as being implicates non-being, profusion and privation

are necessary components of a material world. Furthermore, were a perfect God to concoct a world as perfect as God then such a world would simply be God, for there can only be one perfect being, and that is God. The world is impaired as a consequence of the limits of logic, but nonetheless this world that God created cannot be improved upon except that it assume a deterioration; the eradication of what is an apparent evil from one viewpoint would establish a more detrimental evil from another viewpoint. Take away the opportunity for sin, what enfeebled and one-dimensional creatures we would be with no provocations toward misdemeanors to subdue. Take away natural catastrophes, what poor prospects there would be for the advancement of science given the lack of causal consistency.

Whatever can be said against an apparently imperfect world, with its manifestations of evil sounding its discords and disturbing the harmony of the completed work, Leibnitz can forever gloss over all of this in order to deliver an account of how it is indeed compatible with this being the very best of all possible worlds; as we could but know, were we only capable of experiencing the world in its entirety. But then the best of all possible worlds thesis becomes devoid of meaning, as there is nothing that can ever be reckoned as evidence against it; the universe may be infinite, with an infinite stockpile of imaginable countervailing evidence that can set off any empirical evidence that suggests that this supposed best of all possible worlds could indeed have been much better. It may be objected that were we to confine ourselves to nature's realm, then the world could have certainly been worse, were it not so accountable, as it is, through descriptions characterized by exquisite causal laws. But evil, we contend, is a moral phenomenon; whatever particular set of moral values may be advanced by which we can evaluate (morally speaking) the actual world, that is for the moral philosophers to dispute over; but we do at least know that there are criteria necessary for the constitution of a morally perfect world; and evil cannot be explained away as a mere regional discord, an momentary incongruity that in due time will contribute to the greater harmony of the whole work.

Equally, evil doing is surely not a necessary means by which God could achieve goodness; are there no other options? But then, the attempted exoneration of divine providence, encumbent on those who believe in such providence, by virtue of the existence of evil, is an endless project. It would be more profitable were we to conceive of evil as a moral phenomenon, as indeed Hegel does, for then we may identify and analyse an array of distinctions; we can examine the synthesis between good and evil with regard to the instrument of its resolution, which for Hegel is commitment. For goodness cannot be considered in abstraction. Good for what? Good for whom? It is apparent enough that acting for the good while in ignorance of any knowledge of the possible consequences of an act is meaningless and vacuous; so too is acting on a presumption that whatever means are chosen to achieve an end are justified in terms of that end, for though the ends are the consequences of actions, so too are the means. There is but one thing needful for this good part to exist; commitment, taking heed of what we are and assuming responsibility for what we do; an active life bereft of this is a life without the good part.

It may be understood from this how it is that evil is the one shape of many names; the one shape of evil is the moral being that washes its hands of responsibility; or through

an acceptance of ignorance or a failure of imagination disunites intent and consequence; making realizable a claim of good intent, despite a bad consequence; and the one shape of the (morally) good is the taking hold of responsibility, for both intent and act; to properly comprehend a consequence of an act; for to meander through life with good intent, but with no substantial resources whereby that intent might be realized, is the shape of evil too; that is merely an assumption of remoteness from the realities of existence, with its struggles and its complexities, through an abnegation of one's own ideas, and one's own actions. As Hegel explains: "When all previously valid determinations have vanished and the will is in a state of pure inwardness, the self-consciousness is capable of making it into its principle either the universal in and for itself, or the arbitrariness of its own particularity, giving the latter precedence over the universal and realizing it through its actions — i.e. it is capable of being *evil*" [1. P. 167].

In the absence of a plan, of commitment, shaped by an understanding of one's self, the will is arbitrary, and sufficient thereof to be evil. With such considerations as these, it may now seem somewhat bewildering for us to suggest that Hegel working together with Plotinus can propose to us a solution to the problem of evil. Does not Plotinus operate with a totally different understanding of what is meant by evil, one that takes us back to evil as privation? That is, for Plotinus the one shape of evil, so to speak, is matter, as opposed to mind or reason; matter is to be identified with evil because matter in itself is the privation of all reason, of all intelligibility: "...the ultimate of every partial thing is its Matter, which, therefore, must be all darkness since light is a Reason-Principle. The Mind, too, as also a Reason-Principle, sees only in each particular object the Reason-Principle lodging there; anything lying below that it declares to lie below the light, to be therefore a thing of darkness...." [9. II. 4. 5. P. 282].

The principle of reason is light, the principle of matter is darkness; it is matter with which all natural things are constituted, and it is matter that accounts for the diminished reality of the sensible world, the world of experience. But then, that is to say that matter, or evil, is that which is beyond the limits of the intelligible, it is the realm of darkness; it *is* the limitless, in effect, and already a connection emerges with the definition of evil we are proposing, the unlimiting, the arbitrary, like a river flowing into a boundless ocean while becoming disconnected from its source, its origin, its reason for being. And, as Plotinus informs us: "It is not in the soul's nature to touch utter nothingness; the lowest descent is into evil and, so far, into non-being: but to utter nothing, never. When the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien but to its very self; thus detached, it is not in nothingness but in itself; self-gathered it is no longer in the order of being; it is in the Supreme" [9. VI. 9. 11. P. 1309]. This will hopefully become clearer as we proceed, but first, given our stated intent, that is, an explanation and possible resolution of the problem of evil, having defined the concept we now need to know what kind of explanation of evil will satisfy us.

EXPLAINING EVIL

If science were to discover all of the properties of the effluvium, and gain a full knowledge of the laws of its activity. We have discovered the cause of evil, and yet, evil still appears to us as. Are we now satisfied, with regard to the problem of evil?

Most assuredly not, not even if science were to discover all of the properties of the effluvium, and gain a full knowledge of the laws of its activity. We have discovered the cause of evil, and yet, evil still appears to us as something unfathomable and irrational. The mystery of evil stems from its apparent irrationality; in what way can it be reasonable for such a thing as evil to exist? ‘What is rational is actual’, said Hegel, ‘and what is actual is rational’ [1. P. 20]. Is, then, evil not actual? But a genuine explanation of the whole world would consist in demonstrating that the world is rational; which is to say, in finding a reason for the world, and not a cause; for an initial cause of the world would itself be uncaused, that is, it would be a mystery, and then the world remains a mystery, originating from a mysterious cause. If we wish to explain the world, it is necessary to think on it, not as the effect of a mysterious cause, but as the consequent of a reason.

Evil is not rational, but it does exist; for the rational is actual, but not every existence is actual. This is so because rationality and necessity are equivalent, and what exists is contingent; with existence we are dealing with mere facts that might have been otherwise. ‘In common life’, said Hegel, ‘any freak of fancy, any error, evil and everything of the nature of evil, as well as every degenerate and transitory existence whatever, gets in a causal way the name of actuality. But even our ordinary feelings are enough to forbid a causal (fortuitous) existence getting the emphatic name of an actual; for by fortuitous we mean an existence which has no greater value than that of something possible, which may as well not be as be’ [4. P. 10—11]. Actuality is distinguished from the fortuitous, which has existence, for that which exists fortuitously does exist but it might not have done, whereas the actual, being necessary, has to be real. The fortuitous are mere surface, they do not reveal the world’s interior logic; that is to say the reason of the world. Actuality, then, is the uniting of what is all surface with what is interior necessity; and what is necessary is also rational. It is not causal necessity that is at issue here, but logical necessity; and, to comprehend logical necessity, necessarily we use reason. In the realm of mathematics, however, we are dealing with propositions that are indeed necessary; that five and eight make thirteen is true necessarily and will forever be so; and so too with the truths of logic. And if the actual is that which unifies the world’s interior logical necessity with that which in its exteriority is fortuitous enough to exist, then the actual is logically necessary; the actual is therefore reasonable, and what is reasonable is actual. And only that which is rational in the exterior world reveals truly the world’s interior logical being.

And where does this get us, as far as the problem of evil is concerned? A suggestion is given in Hegel’s statement that: ‘The object of philosophy is the Idea; and the Idea is not so impotent as merely to have a right or obligation to exist without actually existing. The object of philosophy is an actuality of which those objects, social regulations and conditions, are only the superficial outside’ [4. P. 12]. This is such a penetrating observation, in that the existence of evil, of imperfection, is allowed to be no mere subjective illusion and is most certainly real; and yet this is consonant with the actuality of absolute goodness, of perfection, having, by this present moment and forevermore, been consummated; just as five and eight already make thirteen and will always do so; and the world is therefore perfect: “‘The consummation of the infinite End... consists merely in remov-

ing the illusion which makes it seem yet unaccomplished. The Good, the absolutely Good, is eternally accomplishing itself in the world: and the result is that it needs not wait upon us, but is already by implication, as well as in full actuality, accomplished. This is the illusion under which we live” [4. P. 351—352].

If absolute goodness has always already been firmly anchored into the world, then evil cannot oppose it from a position of equivalence. And yet, this is so very abstract, whereas our definition of evil was of something concrete in terms of a disavowal of responsibility. In the proffered solution to the problem of evil that follows, we are in effect remoulding Leibnitz’s notion of metaphysical evil, evil as imperfection, into a universal facet of spiritual life; concrete evil is constituted in part with the contingent, with the fortuitous; with ‘social regulations and conditions’, that is, ‘the superficial outside’, in Hegel’s words; a phenomenon of history and society. And to understand the abstract as concrete we can then incorporate Plotinus’ notion as matter as evil, because in itself it is unintelligible and non-rational, towards a solution to this most obstinate of puzzles.

THE PROBLEM OF CONCRETE EVIL, TOGETHER WITH ITS SOLUTION

‘By what faculty in us could we possibly know Evil?’ asks Plotinus [9. I. 8. 1. P. 198]. The fact that we can so much as formulate the question already suggests an answer; and we can also ask, as Plotinus does, given that not every animating principle, call it the ‘soul’ if you prefer, is evil, and therefore not every such principle is of an evil kind, so then what is it that counts as an evil soul?: “It is, we read, the Soul that has entered into the service of that in which soul-evil is implanted by nature, in whose service the unreasoning phase of the Soul accepts evil unmeasure, excess and shortcoming, which bring forth licentiousness, cowardice and all other flaws of the Soul, all the states, foreign to the true nature, which set up false judgements, so that the Soul comes to name things good or evil not by their true value but by the mere test of like and dislike” [9. I. 8. 4. P. 203]. Evil is a failure of rationality. Evil makes its appearance, as we have seen, in the very attempt to befuddle the issue through revising the concept; as privation for instance, which is so much idle chatter, as if that could possibly serve as a criterion for evil; in effect it is dissociating the concept completely from how it is ordinarily applied. And this reminds us of Hegel’s complaint against stoicism, in that it furnishes us with a resolution to the problem of evil in thought only, like the stoic who, ‘*indifferent* to natural existence’ [5. P. 122], acquires freedom in thought only, whatever that may be worth; it certainly does not ensure any kind of genuine social freedom. And further: ‘To the question, *What is good and true*, [stoicism] again gave for answer the *contentless* thought: The True and the Good shall consist in reasonableness’ [Ibid.]. The criteria for truth and goodness the stoic provides is simply thought without content; but abstract freedom is not genuine freedom, just as abstract evil is not genuine evil; such thinking can only lead to scepticism, the actual experience of what freedom of thought in itself amounts to. And ‘The True and the Good, wisdom and virtue, the general terms beyond which Stoicism cannot get, are... in a general way no doubt uplifting, but since they cannot in fact produce any expansion of the content, they soon become tedious’ [Ibid.].

It may be objected that we ourselves are arguing that ‘the True and the Good shall consist in reasonableness’, for are we not proposing evil to be irrational, which is to say, unreasonable? But this is not so; on the contrary, our particular thought concerning evil is full of content. As Plotinus warned, ‘the Soul comes to name things good or evil not by their true value but by the mere test of like and dislike’; and this is the crux; this is what an evil soul does. Indeed, an evil soul is evil in virtue of not naming evil itself as evil, but giving it some other name, for example ‘privation’. And as Plato warned, ‘mis-statements are not merely jarring in their immediate context; they also have a bad effect upon the soul’ [8. P. 180]. Which is to say, false words are evil in themselves and they defile the soul with evil. Evil then becomes merely something that we do not like; it is deprived of its true value; that is, its lack of commitment to its decisions or deeds, its refusal to assume responsibilities for them, the one thing needful to be good. And this is not just unreasonableness, this is irrationality in its most complete sense, for it repudiates logic; commitment and doings, responsibility and decisions, are internally related; there cannot be one in the absence of the other. ‘When I deliberate, the chips are down’, said Sartre. ‘There is therefore a choice of deliberation as a procedure which will make known to me what I project and consequently what I am. And *the choice* of deliberation is organized with the ensemble motives-causes and end by free spontaneity. When the will intervenes, the decision is taken, and it has no other value than that of making the announcement’ [11. P. 451]. Sartre presents this as a general fact about the human condition, but it is rather a necessary condition for a soul to be evil, (though not a sufficient one); a soul that deliberates, but the decision has already been taken; in the way that a Catholic attending his confessor is already committed to the decision he will take, because he knows full well the kind of advice he will obtain.

Sartre would have us believe that there are no genuine impulses to action, that there are no legitimate ethical formulae to direct us, that our feelings, far from being our guides, are rather the consequences of what we have already decided. So much confusion between the truths of reason, which are universal, and those of the individual, which are particular. For there can be rational and irrational impulses to act, rational and irrational ethical formulae to follow; even feelings can be rational or irrational. The world continually presents us with signals in need of interpretation, and appropriate response; and none are vouchsafed, but they can be interpreted rationally or irrationally. And to inquire from whence evil arises is to investigate into the source of the irrational; and Plotinus furnishes us with an answer: “But what is the root of this evil state? how can it be brought under the causing principle indicated? Firstly, such a Soul is not apart from Matter, is not purely itself. That is to say, it is touched with Unmeasure, it is shut out from the Forming-Idea that orders and brings to measure, and this because it is merged into a body made of Matter... Matter, the Kind so evil as to saturate with its own pravity even that which is not in it but merely looks towards it” [9. I. 8. 4. P. 203]. Matter is not evil in and of itself, but it is evil for beings that are so attached to the bodily that they find their bearings in the direction of evil; that is to say, passive unformed nature, to which the reasoning principle is applied only dully, is the object of their desires; for while such beings, specifically ourselves, *are* self-conscious of their objectives, and while the body in itself is not evil, nevertheless the evil that is in bodies is that constitu-

ent in them that is not domineered so much by how matter is configured; that is, matter is not subjected to the reasoning principle; which is to say, evil is all darkness, unenlightened by the cause of that configuration, that is, reasonable conscious intent, that which incorporates a commitment to, and a responsibility for, their objectives; for such causes are not seen as such under the murkiness of evil.

Matter in itself is all darkness, whereas the reasoning principle, that is, mind, is that which brings to light its own principle that dwells in every particular object; and the ultimate intelligible source of the configuration, or form, of matter, is in the intellect, and this is the good; whereas attachment to the body represents a desire not for the form of matter, but is an abject desire for the unintelligible, the limitless. And the limitless is evil because matter is the very condition for the possibility of there being ideas, that is, intelligibility, (and intelligibility is limitation), in the world of sensation; and the very presence of a realm of sensation that confirms its own possibility also guarantees its inclusion in whatever comes from the ultimate source of all things, which Plotinus refers to as the One; for the One, being the source of all things, must include everything that is possible; and the realm of sensation consists of delineations of the intelligible world, and such delineations depend for their existence on matter.

This is so very abstract, but to give it some body, so to speak, a human person is embodied, making possible the narrative of a human life to proceed; and within which both good and evil play pivotal roles; for there is a conflict within this compound of bodily and non-bodily. Who are we? We are our thought processes, the subject of our cognitive states; whether cognition is best thought of as processes or states is not important here. But we are also the subject of non-cognitive processes or states, as a consequence of our embodiment; inclinations, cravings, passions, emotional disturbances. And so, taking Plotinus conception of evil as the limitless, the unintelligible, and hence the unreasonable, what is now required for a Hegelian dialectic to play itself out and the conflict between good and evil to resolve itself is a third term; which is commitment, that which is repudiated by evil, because evil is irrational; but the dialectic plays itself out anyway, as a matter of logical necessity.

CONCLUSION: THE FALSIFICATION OF EVIL

Matter, lacking perfection, is assuredly responsible for metaphysical evil; for Plotinus it is evil in the moral sense also, when it becomes an end that serves as a hindrance to a return to the One; but Plotinus is conflating causal necessity with logical necessity. Both Hegel and Plotinus would concur that to deny the necessity of evil is to deny the necessity of the good, but Hegel makes clear that this is a logical, not a causal, necessity. The contingency and arbitrariness of evil is thereby eliminated, and the problem of evil satisfactorily resolved; for Hegel, echoing Plotinus, points out that evil is in limitless, that is, formless nature, and that it is through the very constraints of rationality that the ideal form, that is, the good, realizes itself: “What we find such a state of Nature to be in actual experience, answers exactly to the Idea of a *merely* natural condition. Freedom as the *ideal* of that which is original and natural, does not exist *as original and natural*. Rather must it be first sought out and won; and that by an incalculable medial disci-

pline of the intellectual and moral powers. The state of Nature is, therefore, predominantly that of injustice and violence, of untamed natural impulses, of inhuman deeds and feelings. Limitation is certainly produced by Society and the State, but it is a limitation of the mere brute emotions and rude instincts; as also, in a more advanced stage of culture, of the premeditated self-will of caprice and passion. This kind of constraint is part of the instrumentality by which only the consciousness of Freedom and the desire for its attainment, in its true — that is Rational and Ideal form — can be obtained” [2. P. 44—45]. Just as for Plotinus evil has its source in the intellect separating itself from the One, so too for Hegel the good is fought for and won by the intellect reuniting with the inner rationality of originary nature. And the good, being a logical necessity, has therefore, like any truth of logic, already established itself in the world; and evil is a logical falsehood that is not in the least on a par with the good. Furthermore, this solution to the problem of evil avoids explaining evil in the completely unsatisfactory terms of the impenetrable actions of a perfect and personal God that acts in mysterious ways; that all the suffering in the world is merely illusory; that what we take to be evil is in effect good, were we only to see the completed picture: “If God is all-sufficient and lacks nothing, how does He come to release Himself into something so clearly unequal to Him? The divine Idea is just this self-release, this expulsion of the other out of itself, and the acceptance of it again, in order to constitute subjectivity and spirit... This then is the position of nature within the whole; its determinedness lies in the self-determination of the Idea, by which it posits difference, another, within itself, while maintaining infinite good in its indivisibility, and imparting its entire content in what it provides for this otherness” [3. P. 205]. If matter or evil is ultimately caused by the One, as Plotinus proposed, then the One, it would seem, is the cause of evil; but the end of the creative process by which all possible things emerge from the One defines a limit, a rational limit, and given that evil is the limitless, then evil is thus overcome. Similarly, for Hegel, the good is logically determined by the interior logic of the world, a logical process that is already completed; and evil, as a mere logical falsehood, like any logical falsehood is impotent when confronted with logical truth.

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ГЕГЕЛЬ И ПЛОТИН: ПРОБЛЕМА ЗЛА

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В статье исследуется одна из фундаментальных проблем философии — проблема зла, рассмотрение которой выходит за пределы этических концепций, приобретая метафизическое значение в философии Плотина и Гегеля, что позволяет дать более конструктивное определение зла с точки зрения отмены ответственности за свои решения или действия или приверженности к ним. Данный подход к исследованию проблемы зла позволяет установить связь между взглядами Плотина на зло, как следствие возникновения косности материи, не могущей полностью воспринять и воспроизвести совершенство и полноту эйдосов, порождаемых Благом Единым; и взглядами Гегеля на проблему возникновения зла как одного из действующих моментов диалектического противоречия, отождествляемого с творческим источником мирового бытия и процесса становления. Для Плотина зло — это бесформенная материя, которая отделена от интеллекта, она не ограничена концептуальными категориями, тогда как для Гегеля, для которого рациональное является действительным, а действительное — рациональным, зло выступает как иррациональное извращение внутренней сущностной рациональности мира. Но эти идеи взаимосвязаны, поскольку зло можно трактовать и как метафизическую сущность, и как этический выбор субъекта связанный с отказом от обязательств, отрицанием ответственности за свои действия; что само по себе иррационально и одновременно ложно.

Ключевые слова: Гегель, Плотин, неоплатонизм, зло, этика, логика, диалектика, метафизика

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