

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

WHAT IS THE GOOD FOR MAN? ¹

BY THE REV. J. PAUL S. R. GIBSON, M.A., F.I.A.,
Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

GOOD AND EVIL.

THE problems raised by these two apparently simple words are world-wide and as old as the birth of man's moral sense. In their merely material connotation they are of greater antiquity still. Yet thinkers and philosophers have failed to agree as to the definition of good and evil. There is no one word coming down the ages to express the idea lying behind either word. No single etymological root can be traced in ἀγαθός, bonus and good, nor in κακός, malum and evil. This in itself is suggestive, and we are not surprised to find that philosophy has in turn tried to locate final good or final evil in widely differing spheres.

Ever since the early a-moral conceptions of good and the blend of moral and a-moral in Homer, good has been thought of ethically, and placed in the will of man. Socrates rejects mere hedonism and pragmatism, and replaces pleasure and utility by joy and happiness, and Aristotle defines the good of man as *an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue in a perfect life.* (*Nichomachean Ethics*, I. 7. 15.)

Plato considers the good from the more intellectual standpoint and centres it in the mind, the right grasping of the Eternal Ideas whose copy only is seen within our universe. He would endorse the words of the Clown in *Twelfth Night*, "There is no darkness but ignorance" (IV. ii. 46). The Epicureans place the seat in right feelings and emotional reactions and interpret the good hedonistically. The four great goods of health, beauty, fairly won riches and being young among the young, are well known. The Stoics, more pragmatic in outlook, still emphasise the essentiality of the right emotional attitude. Following Aristotle for them, as for the Buddhist, the good was the mean between two extremes. "Nothing neither way." Akin to this is the tranquillity of passionless action of the Greek Sceptics.

"For gnarling sorrow hath less power to bite
The man that mocks at it and sets it light."
(Rich. II, I. iii. 292.)

Or to take another method of analysis, the good is conceived either as right action associated with correct mental interpretation, as does Plato, or as right communion with the everlasting realities,

¹ A paper read before the Cambridge University D Society. It attempts to summarise some of the main points that emerged during the weekly discussions of the Society and to formulate, so far as possible, the conclusions that gradually crystallised. The subject for the term was "God and the Problem of Evil," and the conclusions are framed round the answer to the question, "What is the good for man?"

as do the Neo-Platonists. The two key-notes have been summarised as "They alone with Him," and "Help thy fellowman." In most of these there enters the concept of purpose later pressed by Coleridge, good is that which men are intended to accomplish. However it has to be worked out, the vision of it is obtained by the intellect, and it is regarded as objective. Nevertheless, from the days of Heraclitus the idea of the relativity of good has been sensed, and to this day we recognise that what is sauce for the goose is not necessarily sauce for the gander. One man's provender may be another man's poison. This is not due to the variability of the objective good, but to the limitations of the subjective man.

These considerations of the good have always been faced with the problem of evil. For a long period the clear distinction between moral and physical evil was not felt, but eventually, both among the Greeks and the Jews, the difference emerges. There is always a tendency for the urgency of the lesser physical evil to make it appear of paramount or equal importance, and this attitude exists to this day. But while our Lord showed the tenderest sympathy to physical sufferers He resolutely set His face against regarding these two evils in the same light. While sin is unnecessary and is forgivable, tribulation is promised to those who would follow Him, and they are commanded to take up their cross and follow Him. This is not a policy of despair, but the challenge to take the only way of victory with joy. "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

The difference between the two classes of evil is clearly seen in the reaction of the individual to them. The effect of physical calamity may be of many kinds, but it does not include remorse. The sense of guilt, with which remorse is closely associated, only arises where personal moral evil is concerned. This is related to the problem of free will and individual responsibility into which we cannot now enter.

Another contrast is apparent when we approach the problem of the prevention of moral and non-moral evil. In both cases the mind seeks for a cure, but while in the case of moral evil this is the paramount question, as regards non-moral evil our mind finds rest if it can discover a purpose that is good. For moral failure there is no question of a good, and the agent of the evil recognises with a grim awareness that even if vestiges of good may arise from the evil deed, it is at most but a lamentably inferior second-best.

It is interesting to note how late the distinction between temptation and actual evil, or between a state of imperfection and actual guilt, was appreciated. In all the controversies concerning original sin the point is obscured. Our Prayer Book confuses the issue. The fact that our Lord was tempted, yet without sin, should have made the difference clear.

The problem of evil is treated by various writers along the same lines as those followed in connection with the good ; regarded

from the standpoint of the will it is an unsocial and rebellious spirit ; from the standpoint of the mind it is ignorance ; from that of the emotions, pain. In every case it is seen as deeply affecting the life of man and, like the poor, it is ever with us.

“ For all the water in the Ocean
Can never turn the swan’s black legs to white
Although she lave them hourly in the flood.”
(*Tit. And.*, iv. ii. 101.)

One point stands out clearly in the whole study. It is never suggested that good leads to evil, but again and again we find stressed the purposeful character of calamity. The great chapter in Hebrews comes to our mind at once. Chastisement is corrective, educative, remedial, preventive. It is thus also illuminative, and by contrast brings the good clearly into the conscious horizon. Even those who regard it as imaginary see in it the guide into the realm of reality where it does not exist.

Another important consideration is that the committing of evil invariably blunts the senses for the appreciation of good, whereas the doing of good quickens the sensibility to moral evil and gives a clearer and ever more clear apprehension of its destructive nature.

Again, moral evil disintegrates the personality, and good integrates.

Thus, however insoluble the problem of evil may be in connection with the goodness of God, it is slight compared with the problem of good.

For suppose, for argument’s sake, so argues Principal Whale, that we abandon the idea of a good God, then the problem of evil vanishes and we are left only with the fact, serious enough however, of evil. But one problem has merely given place to another. In such a world how can one account for good, for self-sacrifice, for heroism ? What meaning have these now got in a world under the sway of mere indifferent powers or the caprice of evil demons, or the relentless rule of fate. Surely it is philosophically sound to prefer as more probable a solution which accounts for good, and sees much good in calamity, even though certain unresolved factors remain, than to accept even tentatively a solution which does not touch the awful fact of evil and offers no conceivable meaning to all that humanity has progressively learned to prize as of the highest continuous and integrating value.

THE RELATION OF GOOD TO EVIL.

We are next faced with the question, What is the relation of good to evil ?

Pessimistic and optimistic theories have at various times held the field. The pessimists see the world as the battlefield of opposing forces, each eternally existing in its own right. God and Satan ; Spirit and Matter. There is no guarantee of good being victorious.

The optimists are in two classes ; those who recognise a kind of dualism, but good is superior. Evil is in some way the offspring

or creation of good, and eventually good must become supreme. They are able to point to the wonder of the constant re-emergence of good from the ashes of its destroying fire. Phoenix-like it rises from the flames. Moreover, though progress is slow there seems to be an ever-widening circle of people for whom the values of the good are more real. Furthermore, the idea of beneficence being the final explication of unsolved problems is not an idea that belonged to the human species in its immature stages, but on the contrary is one that has steadily gained ground as the understanding of the universe has increased. It has won its way against earlier ideas of fate, indifference, caprice or malevolence as supreme guiding principles, and its position becomes stronger as each new discovery reveals more distinctly the "shade of His Hand outstretched caressingly."

That evil is in the world is a problem, yet if, as science assures us, the process began with nebulae, we can at least feel that evil, though it has retarded the development, has not succeeded in frustrating the plan, for there has issued man with his life and mind and, as most of us believe, soul also. Nay, more, as Dr. Tennant maintains, moral goodness can only become possible in a framework where temptation arises and calamities occur.

The other class of optimists strikes me as in a less secure position. For the Christian Scientist as for the Hindoo, evil is mortal mind or maya. It has no final reality. For Bosanquet, too, evil is appearance only ; it is good in the wrong place. For this philosopher, as for the Jew, evil is in the absolute. We here have a full monism in one case and a full monotheism in the other.

"I am the Lord and there is none else. I form the light and create darkness ; I make peace and create evil. I am the Lord that doeth all these things." (Is. xlvi. 7.)

In course of time owing to its self-contradictory nature, evil will be squeezed out and only good remain. The squeezing may be of a philosophical nature or more drastically apocalyptic. In the former it overstresses the immanence of good ; in the latter the explosive power of a transcendent good is unduly emphasised.

The relation of good and evil has also been approached from the corporate and the individualistic standpoint.

The Greeks felt the claim of the City State and could see their personal calamities at least transcended in the common good. The Epicurean was more individualistic.

We see the whole process well exemplified among the Jews who began on the assumption of personal rewards ; when this failed (the Book of Job dismisses the theory) the reward was to be sought for in children's children, or in other words, in the race. The destruction of their final hopes led them to the apocalyptic expectation. No corporate explanation of the problem is satisfactory that entails on the race the good or evil of individuals now dead, so the conception of immortality of each soul came into the field. The individual was still part of the race and shared in its heritage. The reward might be delayed but it was sure.

Medieval Christianity with its stress on heaven and hell returned once again to the more individual explanation.

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL.

The question of the relation of good and evil leads inevitably to the problem of the origin of evil. The explanations are numerous.

Some see evil created by God as necessary to His purposes. Archbishop Temple in *Christian Veritas* seems to imply this. One can grant that calamity may be part of the whole creative process, but to me one cannot grant moral evil as necessary or in any way beneficial to that process. One must admit the *possibility* of moral evil as an essential constituent of moral good and of freedom, but failure to rise cannot be a *sine qua non* of the challenge to do so. The knowledge, that is the experience, in one's self of evil is not the way to the knowledge, that is the understanding of the relation of good and evil. Is not this the truth enshrined in the old creation story which commands the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil not to be tasted. If we accept the position that the possibility of evil, though not actual moral evil is necessary, we can, as Dr. Whale has remarked, find the birth of evil in free will though we may still be unable to fix the birthday. If we refuse to accept that calamity, for which there is no cause in a human moral agent, is a necessary part of the process of creation, then, like N. P. Williams, we must throw the problem into the safe realm of the inscrutable and posit a pre-cosmic fall, which if it is unproven cannot at least be disproved. Traces of this idea can be found in Genesis. The later Jews, however, explained the arising of evil from the evil imagination given to each soul at birth. This was a bias towards, if not a cause of, evil and philosophically does not amount to more than the giving of free will to man in a world where accumulated acts of evil have prejudiced the issue. Dr. Tennant's solution still seems to be the best. Each stage of evolution inherits the habits of a previous stage which, while necessary to the existence of the lower stage, have to be sublimated in the higher. At a certain point the moral conscience emerges, and what was not sin before becomes morally guilty. Sin is thus relative to the stage in which man is. The relativity of sin is well worked out by R. E. D. Clark in his recent book, *Conscious and Unconscious Sin*. The same thought runs through Dr. Oman's philosophy, and finds expression in his clear distinction between the fallibility of conscience and the inescapable claims of conscientiousness. The presence of sin acts like a mist ; the vision of what is good is blurred. The problem is not only in the will, how to do the good, but also in the mind, how to discover what good is. The only path to a conscience that correctly senses the good, is the hard road of a rigid conscientiousness.

THE REDEMPTION OF EVIL.

We cannot avoid the consideration of the redemption of evil. The sheer legalism of Karma knows no forgiveness. The

materialist seeks none. The biological humanist sees in each fall the means to rise to better things. If, however, as we mostly do, we accept the supremacy of good and a personally directed purpose of good for the world, we must, at the same time, recognise that the plan has been vitiated by the abuse of free will, and that good is responsible for finding a way of adjusting the order of things that has gone astray, for the remedy lies beyond man's powers. A struggling elephant sinks but deeper into the treacherous quicksand. This fact is immortalised in Macbeth's agony :

“ Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
· Clean from my hand ? No ; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.”

(Mac., II. ii. 60.)

Early thinking regarded the supreme Power as angry with the evil doer. Human or animal sacrifices by man to placate him were the result. Ideas advanced, and it was grasped that readjustment in man's character was required. A lightening flash came to the writer of Isaiah liii, and he sensed the redemptive value of vicarious suffering by the innocent. This implies an appreciation of the meaning of solidarity without which vicarious suffering is meaningless. Only with the coming of Christ was the truth revealed that the chief sufferer when man sinned was the Good One Himself. The Cross was the revelation of the undreamed-of truth that apart from the unmerited agonising of the One sinned against there was no reconciliation. The essential problem in redemption was no longer the reconciling of God to man but the reconciling of man to God. St. Paul completes the conception by declaring that even human unmerited sufferings share in this redemptive process by which the forgiving love of God is ever held before the eyes of men down the succeeding ages. “ I fill up in my body that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.”

We have now examined various conceptions of good and evil ; we have reviewed certain ideas as to the relation of good and evil ; we have tried to probe the origin of evil and stood in awe before the development of the redemptive process.

WHAT IS THE GOOD FOR MAN ?

We are now ready to act eclectically and put together those elements which seem to us to be essential in the good for man. I would summarise these as follows, amplifying the words of the Prophet Micah (vi. 8) : “ He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good ; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God ? ”

First, the *intellectual attitude* that realises that the world is not self-explanatory. It is but a cross-section of a higher dimension. Untranscended immanence is no sufficient interpretation of the forces governing the universe. There is that above us which is transcendent even though it includes us in its totality, and therefore is at the same time immanent.

Secondly, the *feeling awareness* that though largely determined in our conditions by material circumstances and laws, we yet have a freedom of action in and of reaction to our environment. Such freedom is not given fully developed, but grows with our use of it. We are not possessors of full freedom even of spirit, but win to it. Also, we must include the *emotional awareness*, revealed as fact by Christ and confirmed partially by experience, that it is love that lies behind the veil which our limited intelligence can but dimly pierce. The apotheosis of justice as supreme is but an earlier faulty approximation which, though it lives on, cannot survive. The nature of that love we see in Christ. The controlling love is no weak sentimentality. It is a strong Christ we have to deal with and His love is strong as death. The love behind our universe is not only powerful to create but self-sacrificing to redeem, and in that self-sacrifice expresses its truest self.

Thirdly, the *pragmatic response* of the will to the appeal of love. Here is implied a realisation of sin as separation from God and of reconciliation to Him made possible by His love expressed to us on Calvary and made actual by our penitential acceptance of it. This leads to the combination of two conceptions of good previously mentioned. The sense of fellowship or communion with the eternal Lover after having accepted the fact of forgiveness, and the readiness to follow His lead in redemptive activity towards our brother. Joy and activity must both be included. The good is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Aristotle's definition so far is correct, but it need not necessarily be "in a perfect life," but finds full expression in meeting the demands of an imperfect life. We learned

"on that first Christmas Day
What 'twas to be a man; to give, not take;
To serve, not rule; to nourish, not devour;
To help, not crush; if need to die, not live."

(CHARLES KINGSLEY.)

One further point is essential. The good for man must be viewed corporately as well as individually. Nothing can be good for the one that does not benefit the body corporate of the community. Nothing can eventually advance the body corporate that does not consider the value and claim of the sacred individual personality. It is on this rock that Communism, Fascism and Hitlerism must eventually be broken to pieces. The future lies with a spiritualised and personalised democracy.

VINDICATION.

A man possessed of this good has an understanding of moral evil in its worst light, contagious, infectious and soul-destroying.

"the apprehension of the good
Gives but the greater feeling to the worse."
(Rich. II, I. iii. 300.)

He has a vision of good that in its essential love redeems evil.

He stands aghast at the problem, but in awe and wonder at the unhaunting, unshakable, imperturbable love that wins to victory by the new and living way of self-sacrifice. He has the joy of being called into co-operation. His mind, will, feeling, the corporate and the individual in him, his need of communion and his urge to activity all find their satisfaction. And in it all, he is conscious of forces not only operating in, but pressing upon this world, from beyond it. In his body he may be but dust and ashes, but in his spirit he is a denizen of the heavenlies. As he faces the world in which he lives, with its catastrophies and calamities, he realises that it is God's world, in which God still energises to achieve His purposes of education for the individual, and of the establishment of His Kingdom of righteousness. He shares in that reverence for life claimed as central in goodness by Dr. Schweitzer, in his *Civilisation and Ethics*.

From much that is the result of man's sin, he can learn its dire lessons and set himself to remedy as he is able. Much else remains for which he can find no just cause. Here confident that purpose, though veiled, is not absent, he sets himself to deal with it in loving trust, treating it not as good or evil in itself but as malleable potentiality, something from which good is meant to be obtained and which only love and trust acting as analytic hammers and also as creative moulding tools, can eventually fashion into the shape intended by the eternal Architect. Passing through the valley of weeping he turns it into a place of springs. (Ps. lxxxvi. 4.) Through the divine Light in which he lives his tears are transformed into rainbows.

In this conception of the good we have found place for the whole complex personality of man, and also for the still less understood community of men—the fellowship of all life. We have reached conclusions upheld by Kirk in his *Vision of God*, Whitehead and Pringle Patterson, Oman, Macmurray and Fearon Halliday. We have culled flowers from many gardens and our garland reminds us of our manifold obligations. Perhaps the whole might have been summed up in some well-known words and the writing of the paper obviated, for after all have we surpassed the twofold commandment enunciated by Him who not only knew but was the Good?

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul
and with all thy mind,
And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

(Matt. xxii.)

THE HAPPY WAY. A Course of Religious Lessons for Beginners.
By Nöel E. Nicholl. *Lutterworth Press.* 2s.

An ideal book for an ideal Sunday School. It can readily be adapted for use in Church of England Schools if the lessons are started with the "Winter Quarter" at Advent, and should certainly prove a very "Happy Way" to the knowledge of Jesus for both teachers and scholars.