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Christian Thought and the Problem of Evil part I

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In a series of four articles, M. Blocher offers us a critical description of the principal attitudes of Christian thought on the problem of evil, before presenting his own reflections on the subject.

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It is not enough to say that evil is 'problematic'; it is, rather, *the* problem, the *probléma opseôs*, that is, the obstacle which blocks the view,¹ which irritatingly impedes the intelligence wishing to see clearly. Nonetheless, each generation reviews the effort to understand. Ours has not forgotten the cries of Dostoevsky, nor the coldly indignant analyses of Camus; it, in turn, and especially as represented by those thinkers influenced by Judaism, meditates passionately on evil. And Christians cannot side-step the issue, for, as Jürgen Moltmann puts it, 'Without the theodicy² question, where is the risk of faith?'³

It seems to us high time to take stock of the principal attitudes taken by Christian thought, 'theological' in a narrow or broad sense, in coming to terms with the problem of evil. Our purpose in describing and classifying them is, of course, simply to appreciate them better and to bring out the teaching of Scripture, the Word of God.

To introduce the study (necessarily done in schematic fashion), it will no doubt be useful to recall which questions constitute the terms of the problem, as well as which major responses have claimed, and at times subjugated, those spirits outside the zone of biblical influence. But first we must situate the notion itself.

The rudimentary phenomenology

All languages have a name for evil. What do they include under the term? A rudimentary 'phenomenology' allows one to locate the correlate of the judgements formulated, and sentiments expressed, in order to so close in upon the common, raw notion. Even if the method only approximates, one ought not to look down upon what it achieves: that is, the sense of evil nearest to living experience, still naïvely free of all the composition, make-up, and conjuration at

which the adept excel. What is one aiming at with the word 'evil'? That which arises in experience but ought not to; that to which the best in man says 'no'—in two words: the *unjustifiable reality*. Evil provokes *indignation* as well as fear, rebellion, stubborn acknowledgement, disgust. Evil is followed by *shame*, remorse, penitent confession, and pardon. More certain, more obvious than the classical distinction between natural evil, moral evil, and metaphysical evil is that between evil which is *suffered* (misfortune) and evil which is *committed* (malice). Indignation, above all, is linked with evil which is suffered (though it also happens that one becomes indignant over evil he himself has committed), while shame attaches to evil which is committed (though again it happens that one becomes embarrassed about evil where he is the victim, as in the case of the child beaten by its drunken father). The connected themes and symbols abound: *ruin*, illness, aggression, failure, *night*, errancy, loss, *disorder*, oppression, *defilement*, vanity. In the entire cycle of elementary, unaffected 'discourse', evil seems to have both a *positive* side (that is, evil is something and not nothing; one experiences it only too well) and a *negative* side (that is, evil tends to be destructive; it represents a lack with respect to what ought to be, a lapse with respect to an at least implicit norm)—reality/unjustifiable!

The three questions

At the heart of the problem of evil one generally finds the logical-speculative question of its origin, cause, or reason. Why? Why? From whence comes evil? The ancient Greeks had already posed the question, *Pothén ta kaka?*⁴ Plotinus, followed by St Augustine in his response to the Manicheans, argued for the priority of the question (a metaphysical one, if you like) concerning the essence or nature of evil: *Quid sit malum.*⁵ Yet the oldest question may well have been that concerning the end or elimination of evil: *ad mâtay* (until when)? This stereotypical formula found in the supplications of the Old Testament, and also present in Babylonian prayers, gives occasion to say that the existential and religious question merits being called the ultimate, if not also the original, question concerning evil—in the final analysis, the one that counts.

Pagan 'solutions'

Optimism, dualism, pessimism: these school labels remain convenient to express the orientations (or disorientations?) of non-Christian thought concerning evil.⁶ The first way is of the highest lineage, having indeed the name of wisdom. Wisdom, writes Etienne Borne,

... places man in a beautiful totality which cannot be other than it is, and the knowledge of which has the virtue of removing the evil from evil, that is to say, of cutting out that in evil which seems unjustifiable.⁷

The optimistic negation of evil extends from the extreme forms of the Vedic religion and Christian Science, where evil is nothing but *maya* (cunning illusion) to the more common mitigated forms characterized by the reduction to subjectivity which one finds in Spinoza. (Parmenides also plays a part in this with his views on appearance, but unlike Spinoza does not distinguish the subject.) The Stoics offer an example of strained optimism, incapable of ignoring evil on the one hand, but nonetheless wishing to do so in order to be faithful to the dogma of divine, universal Reason, that all-encompassing, beneficent destiny. Plotinus, who tied together the sheaf of antique philosophy, sings of the harmony in which evil finds its place: evil 'reveals itself necessarily captured in the bonds of beauty, as a captive loaded down with chains of gold'; given the image of individual instruments in the concert of the world, 'the wickedness of souls has its place in the beauty of the universe—that which for them defies nature, for the universe conforms to it.'⁸ Given the evidence, the optimistic doctrine *represses* the spontaneous apprehension of evil. It reminds one of the two-faced advice addressed to the unfortunate: 'Life has its own reasons'; and in its exaggerated versions it can resemble an anaesthesia produced by excessive pain or by certain pathological states.

Pure dualists are rare. As in the Mazdaism of Zoroaster and the Manichaeism of Mani (offspring of Persia's royal family) they dare to make evil a primary metaphysical principal. Evil takes on a substantive character, eternally at war with the good (despite the inconsistent hope in the latter's ultimate victory). An asymmetrical, mitigated dualism is encountered more frequently: while always affirming the superiority of the principal of good, it explains evil in terms of the interference of some independent metaphysical factor, often that of the resistance of matter (an idea found even in Aristotle and, of course, also in the Platonic doctrine of the 'receptacle', substratum of the sensible world). The evolutionary systems which explain evil in terms of the inertia of a mass which evolution pushes ahead, are dualistic to the extent that this inertia figures in the schema as a primary given, opposed to the progressive tendency. On the other hand, they are optimistic when they minimize the gravity of the phenomenon and interpret it simply as indispensable to the global process.⁹ Dualism seems to intensify, exacerbate, the spontaneous apprehension of evil; but in reality it diverts this apprehension from its object, replacing the unjustifiable disorder with a more or less symmetrical order and so rendering indignation useless. Gerrit C. Berkouwer hits upon this nicely when he comments, 'Dualism is only a universal excuse clothed in metaphysics.'¹⁰

The pessimistic option is perfectly expressed in Buddhism, where ultimate reality is the void, and empirical reality, because of the bonds of attachment, is suffering. But the Buddhistic void seems to

be the brother of the Vedic self to such an extent that the extreme generalization of evil rejoins in the end the extreme 'optimistic' negation of evil, an idea which would seem to accord with the role of reformer of the old Indian religion taken by Gautama (the Buddha).¹¹

After Schopenhauer opened the breach which let in contemporary irrationalism, it is as the philosophy of the absurd, according to Camus, and as a finally consistent (almost!) atheism, according to the early Sartre, that the pessimistic option is now presented to us. As admirable as it is ineffectual, the courage of Sisyphus cannot have any meaning in a world which has none itself, which is nothing but dark and distressing disorder. More recent writers—we think especially of Michel Foucault—who confirm the death of man following the death of God, seem to delight in skirting the edges of nihilism, but their desire to subvert language and their praise of deception do not facilitate a ready interpretation of their theses. The 'new philosophers' tend to confuse the world, completely 'master' and in some sense completely law, with evil, but they distance themselves from pessimism by invoking transcendent Intention, that which reveals itself through horror and defines itself through its absence in the world; they await 'the Angel to come'.¹²

Pessimism, in improving on the spontaneous apprehension of evil, actually profoundly contradicts it. It is intrinsic to the perception of evil that it be mixed with good, that it actually assumes good; but the generalization of evil effectively cuts the protesting nerve in this clash. The modern pessimists are excessively given to indignation, but they also cut out the very basis of this indignation and so render their own excess, to use the celebrated term, insignificant.

A proposed itinerary

We need not go further with our critique of non-Christian thought on the issue. Suffice it to say that, in general, the biblical record does not ratify any of the three described orientations. But given the background which our brief sketch has provided, we would now like to examine the relevant 'Christian' doctrines, that is those which at least wish to take account of the Judaeo-Christian Scripture, before putting together a synthesis of the scriptural affirmations. Once again the proposed solutions will be grouped around three key themes: that in which the vision of an encompassing order predominates, that in which the passion for freedom predominates, and that in which this or that dialectic predominates. It goes without saying that we can only deal with a selected few thinkers, those who appear most important or have been most accessible to us. Our account will show that pure doctrinal models are rare. One will discover right away the affinities of the first group with pagan optimism—it is not at all necessary to dig very deeply into history to rediscover the lines of

communication! The second group shares in common with pagan dualism the idea of God's independent causality, but the absolutization of freedom is an original trait. The third corresponds to pessimism only in the presence of an original negativity; one also perceives in it a kinship with optimism and dualism. In any case, these correspondences allow for neither domination nor exoneration—they aid in putting things in perspective, but the critical task remains intact.

The solution of universal order

The church's most venerable discussion concerning the problem of evil has two main characteristics: evil, with respect to its origin and nature, is closely linked to the mark of *nothingness* imprinted on every creature as such (as finite, each creature was created *ex nihilo* and retains the imprint of this origin); on the other hand, evil as phenomenon or event is included in the universal order, contributing in its own fashion to it.

Coming first to mind is the version advocated by Gottfried Leibniz, well known due to Voltaire's famous publication.¹³ Leibniz, the most commanding intelligence of his time and an ecumenical Lutheran, went to a great deal of trouble in dealing with the theodicy problem on several occasions in order to remain consistent with a faith in a sovereign and wise God. Unless one suspects the Lord of blunders or unworthy choices, one must suppose that there is a *sufficient reason* for all that happens. Since God must *morally* choose the best, this world can only be the best of all possible worlds. Evil is ineluctable in finite beings; as the pure privation of being, it is the ransom of the creatures' inequality. One cannot attribute it to God as if he were its author, since evil is as the *inertia* of the body carried by the river current: 'The current is the cause of the boat's movement but not of its retardment.' It is a 'concurrence for the beauty of all', like a fortuitous dissonance in music or those irregularities in mathematical series which become part of the rule.

Who today can allow themselves to be tempted by Leibniz's theodicy? One has become too aware of the horror of evil (a horror which is biblical). An optimism attempting somehow to be Christian strikes us as 'naïve or cynical—Auschwitz with a "happy ending"'.¹⁴ We have unmasked the ruse which domesticates the freedom of God in the name of some preconceived view of his moral perfection, and instead makes the most of his mystery. Lurking behind the eagerness, which is just a shade *too* vigilant in proving universal harmony, we suspect there is a repressed doubt. Georges Friedmann convinces us with his flashing perspicacity: 'The Leibnizian optimism is in reality one of the first forms of the modern philosophies of anguish and despair.'¹⁵

It is therefore noteworthy that Claude Tresmontant has really only one essential criticism of Leibniz, that is, that Leibniz would have

ignored the genetic or evolutionist perspective according to which man is called to co-operate in his own divinization. This co-operation demands that man become 'more and more autonomous', and it is in this way that evil is explained.¹⁶ It is well known, of course, that as a young man Tresmontant came strongly under the personal influence of Father Teilhard de Chardin. So it is only natural that his critique of Leibniz should lead us to the philosophy of Teilhard, which along with its 'cousin', Thomism—Teilhard received a Scholastic education in theology and philosophy—represent the two doctrines of evil in our first group which remain live options today.

Evil as the waste product of evolution

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's prodigious project is summarized, as is well known, in the formula 'Christianizing Evolution'.¹⁷ He was the visionary of convergence, of synthesis, of union. The least surprising synthesis for the uninitiated is that of Evolution and Creation (Teilhard always uses such capitalization). Others before him had so identified it, and the synthesis is virtually self-evident for the Christian evolutionist. The philosophy of Teilhard comes out more distinctly when he affirms Evolution's equivalence with Incarnation, the latter being a 'prodigious biological operation'. In Christ, God becomes an 'element' partially immersed in things, in order to 'create, consummate, and purify the world' and so take 'charge of and be at the head of that which we now call Evolution.'¹⁸ And looking through the same glasses, Redemption can hardly be distinguished as well:

... Christianity, sensitized by the conquests of modern thought, has finally realized the fact that its three fundamental, personalist Mysteries are in reality nothing but the three aspects of the same weighty process (Christogenesis), seen in either its principal motor (Creation) or its unifying mechanism (Incarnation) or its elevating effort (Redemption)—all of which lands us right in the middle of Evolution.¹⁹

One could add to this the equation with divinization, the great theme of Teilhard's major mystical work, *Milieu divin*,²⁰ as well as the idea of the transubstantiation of the universe according to the vision of the World-Host.²¹ In order to link together all of these notions, the idea of the unification of the many plays the decisive role. As Teilhard in fact says, 'Plurality and Unity—the single problem to which all physics, all philosophy, and all religion is ultimately reduced.'²²

But what about evil, that all too human phenomenon? Teilhard adds the Fall to the three mysteries already mentioned: 'all four become co-extensive with the duration and totality of the World; they are in some way the aspects (truly distinct but physically linked) of

the same divine operation.²³ The Fall as well! Indeed, original sin 'is the reverse side of all creation';²⁴ it 'tends to become confused with the mechanism itself of Creation.'²⁵ Does one dare talk of necessity? Teilhard, that intrepid Jesuit, doesn't hold back, and his position has the merit of limpidity: 'Evil (not at all by accident—which would trivialize it—but by the structure itself of the system) appears necessarily ...'²⁶ It is a *rigorously inevitable* accompaniment to Creation: '*necesse est ut adveniant scandala*'.²⁷ 'One notices that not all is absolutely false in the old idea of Fate reigning over the Gods as well.'²⁸ Evil arises inevitably alongside creation; it is 'the truth confusingly expressed in all the myths where one finds the ideas of birth and evil associated.'²⁹ In the different passages related to the subject, Teilhard associates suffering with error or sin. Moreover, it is the essence of his method to merge physics and ethics.³⁰ In either case the distinctions are not essential, but relative to the stages of Evolution.

How does Teilhard conceive of the necessity of evil? At times he calls it 'statistical'.³¹ But he explains it most precisely where he speaks of the resistance of the many to the unifying hold of God. 'Our tendency is to imagine God's power as being supremely at ease in the face of the "Nothingness". This is wrong.'³² 'The general laws of Becoming, regulating the progressive apparition of (created) being from an unorganized many', are 'the modalities imposing strictly upon the divine action.'³³ The Nothingness which can be created is identified with the pure many, burst forth at the antipodes of God through the single fact of God's self-'trinitizing'. To create is to unify this many into ever more complex arrangements, a process which even for God cannot be done without difficulty, without waste and by-products.³⁴ Evil attaches to us due to the many out of which we are born and which marks us still. It will disappear with the perfect unification in the 'plerome'.

Teilhard's theoretical solution provides us with the consolation of understanding, but the vision remains unsatisfying. For Teilhard the painful waste products are salvaged. By a singular turning round, they change into factors of divinization—such is the major thesis regarding the 'passivities of diminution', physical and moral sufferings by means of which God recoups and avenges, 'subjugating evil itself to the superior good of his faithful ...'³⁵ Evil becomes the motor in some auxiliary way of the progress which it engendered. It serves as the goad which keeps us from stopping at the present stage of Evolution, detaching us from a still imperfect world and projecting us on, *offsetting* us in God.³⁶ There must be an 'uprooting' in order for one 'to become unified in oneself or to unite with others.' And beyond this uprooting of 'the inertia which tends to immobilize them', humans must abandon themselves to the 'agony' of a total transformation in order to further mature.³⁷ The last section of *Comment je vois* summarizes well this turning round of the negative:

... the sufferings (themselves!) of failure and diminution, transformed into the factor of unitive offsetting ... no longer appear as a waste product of Creation but rather become, through a marvel of spiritual energy, a positive factor of over-evolution [*sur-évolution*]³⁸—the supreme and true solution to the Problem of Evil.

The optimism would be thoroughgoing if one could foresee the continuation of the process. Often Teilhard seems sure of it: 'Under the tension of the personalization pressing them, the elements are urged on in an infallible direction ...'³⁹ Due to the mass effect, and despite the tentative gropings, 'the process tends to become infallible.'⁴⁰ However, Teilhard also notes that at the moment the machine seems to be running 'backwards'.⁴¹ He stigmatizes the large modern cities as 'Molochs without heart or face'.⁴² Now and then he can picture possible failure, yet his optimism, ascetic as the visage of a Jesuit, continually buoys him up. Since the Christ is found at the end of the process, in Omega, and since it is his ('redeeming' [*amorisant*]) attraction which propels the entire Evolution, the universe cannot miscarry, nor can humanity go on strike.⁴³ The present difficulties are eddies caused by a crisis of belief, the 'critical passage to the Equator' (of a symbolic globe) of the waves of hominization, passing 'from Dilation to Compression'.⁴⁴ But the tide of Life, of the Spirit, never stops rising. This optimism seems to feed off the energy of despair, as when Teilhard, in 1942, speaks of the war then raging as a phenomenon with a 'positive sign' because it is universal, and so goes on to wish for a synthesis by convergence of the three great currents of democracy, communism, and neo-fascism.⁴⁵ One can only hail the courage of the Teilhardians when they publish such texts!

Criticism of Teilhard's philosophy must needs be global, implicating for example the homogeneity postulate lucidly formulated at the beginning of *The Human Phenomenon*. But does it not implicate itself (if the Bible serves as the rule)? The statements themselves suffice, which is why we have simply gathered together the various citations and references which the hurried reader passes over, and Teilhard's advocates prefer to ignore. As for evil, we must only note Teilhard's exaggerated pretensions: 'the famous problem *no longer exists*'!⁴⁶ Regarding necessity, pagan kinship is acknowledged—Fate's superiority to the Gods, the truth of the myths. Only one scriptural 'proof' is ever invoked—Jesus' teaching on the necessity of scandals (Matt. 18:7)—but Teilhard is not about to get tangled up in exegesis. If the necessity about which Jesus is speaking is not simply that of the completion of the Scriptures or of the manifestation of latent sin, if it even refers perhaps to God's plan, it is certainly no reference to creation and to involvement in the many. Indeed, Jesus immediately underlines the responsibility of the sinner, an aspect

which disappears in Teilhard's view of necessity. And so the indignation of the prophets is choked off, the meaning of the cross is overthrown, and judgement and grace are distorted.⁴⁷

Evil as the bite of nothingness

Coming to the Thomist doctrine of evil, one is not simply confronted with the grandiose and vulnerable dream of a solitary thinker. The great work of a powerful and durable community of thinkers, tried and tested through controversy, sculpted by the centuries, it must be approached with fear and respect. Saint Thomas of Aquinas only built upon previously laid foundations, those of Saint Augustine above all, not to mention those of Origen, and the Thomists of our own era are not content with a servile repetition of their master's thoughts—their originality, though bounded by fidelity, asserts itself no less and bears its own fruit. The decline in influence suffered by Thomism since 1950, all the more brutal following generations of hegemony in the Catholic camp, must not lead one to believe that its voice has become negligible. And, moreover, it must be remembered that there exists a Thomism which is non-Roman Catholic, but rather Anglican or Protestant.⁴⁸

The key insight involved here was formulated by Augustine in opposition to the Manicheans: that is, that evil is *nothing*, neither principle, nor substance, nor entity. It is strictly relative to good, default, lack, *privatio boni*.⁴⁹ Etienne Gilson speaks eloquently of a 'fundamental unreality, determined and encircled on all sides by the good which limits it.'⁵⁰ With this understanding, not only does one avoid dualism, but one also shows that evil cannot come from God nor exist apart from creatures, good as they are. But misunderstandings must be anticipated. Privation is not just any absence—there is evil in lack of good only if good were somehow *owed*. Saint Thomas clearly distinguishes between *privation*, taken in this sense, and pure *negation* (for example, man does not have the agility of the goat nor the power of the lion), which can in no way be called evil.⁵¹ Thus the inequalities among creatures are cleared of any accusation and evil is not confused with finitude as it is in Leibniz.⁵² On the other hand, the anti-dualist analysis does in no way minimize evil. Like privation, evil exists in things: 'the paradox of evil is *the terrible reality of its privative existence*.'⁵³ One does not water down the denunciation of the evil of deception by defining it as the privation of truth, nor that of the evil of blindness in recalling that it is the privation of sight.

From whence comes privation, however? The origin of evil is found in the 'bite of nothingness' (an expression coined by Jacques Maritain) which marks every creature.⁵⁴ All finite being, coming from nothingness, retains a sort of affinity with nothingness—it is mutable, corruptible, *fallible*. The nothingness tendency is 'knotted to its bowels', as Journet expresses it.⁵⁵ And the Thomists could

heartily concur with such sentiments: 'God can ... no more make the creature naturally perfect than he can make a circle square.'⁵⁶ According to P. Sertillanges (member of the Institute and one of the most notable figures in French Thomism during the first decades of the century), the analysis of the nature and causes of evil rests

... upon a doctrine of ontological emanation whose influence informs the entire Thomist system. Evil is presented there, in the final analysis, as a result of being's descent into the many and so into the imperfect, having left from the One, from the Supreme Being, which it realizes in a simple state, without any imperfection. In leaving this state, however, it necessarily degrades itself and the good with which it is identical. The multiplicity of the limited, and thus fallible, natures is compensated by the unity of order, and it is with respect to this order that evil is permitted. In this way evil returns again to good ...⁵⁷

Not all Thomists perhaps would ratify the terms of this declaration, but none would contest that Sertillanges' view is at least representative.

But has evil been sufficiently explained? *Fallibility* and *corruptibility* are terms not quite as strong as *fault* and *corruption*! The Thomists must go one more step. To do this, St Thomas appeals to a principle he feels is unquestionable: 'It is in the nature of beings that those who can fail, do in fact sometimes fail.'⁵⁸ The Thomists follow his lead in this,⁵⁹ and Sertillanges explains that, unless this were the case, the ability to fail (the creature *can sin*) would not be 'real or objective'. 'Since the ability is supposed in a nature which changes perpetually and is governed by the *wheel of fortune*, it is only inevitable that, one day or another, possibility becomes fact, that the lottery number is actually drawn.'⁶⁰

Saint Thomas treats natural evil and moral evil in joint fashion. Justifying the presence of many evils by the many goods which result, he offers these three illustrations in the same breath:

Fire would not be generated if the air were not tainted. The lion could not live if the ass did not die. And one would not praise avenging justice nor the patience of the persecuted man if the iniquity of the persecutor disappeared.⁶¹

Gilson does recognize that 'the problem seems to become more complicated' when applied to rational beings, but he figures that 'it would be as well not to introduce new principles' to the given solution.⁶² Maritain and Journet, on the contrary, explore the difference. The prince of the lay Thomists warns that 'if one does not read it correctly ... one could confuse Saint Thomas' position with Leibniz' ... a rationalist corruption of Christian truth'⁶³—since the machine of the world will not console the mother weeping over her

child, the idea must be forcefully opposed.⁶⁴ When one considers *persons*, each one a whole, a universe, 'the existence of evil in things throws an incongruity into being which nothing can set at ease: *Et noluit consolari*'; it is an 'incomprehensible anomaly'.⁶⁵ The future cardinal (Journet) is no less emphatic: 'Moral evil, contrary to natural evil, is linked not only with the self but also inseparably with the good; it serves only to destroy the divine work.' But if this is the case, 'it does not then imply that it ought to be accepted, consented to, tolerated, in a word, desired in some indirect way since it is the reverse of the good sought by God.'⁶⁶ Not that Journet rejects the idea of the evil backside of good (*Felix culpa*, he recalls, like the chant of the Roman liturgy: 'Blessed fault which has brought us such a redeemer!'), 'but to think sin desirable for redemption's sake would be a blasphemy along the lines of the Hegelian perspective.'⁶⁷ In all of this, Journet is in agreement with Saint Thomas that the evil of pain in punishment is not an evil as such since it re-establishes order, and in this way natural evil, for man, is entirely a punitive evil—his physical suffering and death is entirely his fault.⁶⁸

The new accents of our neo-Thomists, it seems to us, do not readily mix with other theses simultaneously defended by the same authors. According to them, God permits (without desiring) the evil of sin because he brings about good out of it. But isn't that a sort of 'consolation' which imagines itself dissolving the 'incomprehensible'? Maritain explains that 'the sin of Adam has been permitted to bring about the redemptive Incarnation' and does not shy away from the formula: 'Sin—evil—is the ransom of glory.'⁶⁹ Recalling Saint Thomas' illustration of the usefulness of the death of the ass to the lion, Journet writes: 'The response remains valid, though transposed on to a much more mysterious plan, in allowing for the evil of fault.'⁷⁰ The Augustinian-Thomist axiom, according to which God permits evil because he brings about good from it, 'remains valid, but in a transposed manner, proportionally similar but essentially different, when one moves from natural evil to the evil of sin'.⁷¹ '... The order of freedom and of morality is an order especially made to facilitate re-entry, in one way or another, into order.'⁷² What remains then of the consideration of the person as a whole, rather than as a part of the whole? Spicing up the statement with words such as 'transposed', 'mysterious' and 'in one way or another' is more a sign of embarrassment than of elucidating assurance. The structure of the argument is not affected by these powerless attenuations.

Jacques Maritain has another passage from Saint Thomas to which he is quite attached, a passage which he feels has not been sufficiently noticed.⁷³ It concerns 'the cause from which it results that a free action is evil', 'a particularly difficult problem', but one in which 'the solution proposed by him [Saint Thomas] is one of his most original philosophical discoveries.'⁷⁴ It is necessary that the source of moral

evil be in the will without itself being at fault ('which would be a vicious circle').⁷⁵ The solution is simple in its subtlety. Because he ignores the rules, the carpenter cuts corners. Likewise, *because* the will ignores the rules (the divine law), because it does not pay attention to them as it is free to do or not do ('and herein lies the essence of liberty'),⁷⁶ it commits the fault when it proceeds to act according to its choice. The lack of attention, the non-consideration of the rules, *is not a fault, is not an evil* 'because the soul is not responsible for, nor is it capable of, always paying attention to the rules while in the process of acting.'⁷⁷ It is indeed a sort of negation, not that of a debt of good, but in such a way that the creaturely nothingness is seen as the cause of evil. The initiative not to act, not to observe the rules, 'is not yet sin itself, but the root of sin ... it is a pure absence, a pure nothingness, but one which is the original root of evil action.'⁷⁸ Saint Thomas and Maritain do not have quite the same objectives in their use of this demonstration. If we read the former correctly, he seems to be combatting dualism above all, wanting to avoid attributing evil to an initially evil cause and thereby setting up a *principle* of evil. Maritain underlines rather that since the primary initiative of evil comes from the creature alone, God can in no way be its cause.⁷⁹ This difference, however, does not render Maritain unfaithful to his master.

To conclude, one recognizes in Maritain and Journet leftovers of the theodicy of the second type, which we will examine later on, when the one excludes any idea of the divine plan as some 'scenario written in advance'⁸⁰ and the other throws out accusations against Calvin.⁸¹ but these elements are hardly characteristics of the Thomist doctrine of evil, which resolves the problem with the idea of universal order and of the efficaciousness of the nothingness.

Evaluation

Let us give due credit to the efforts of the Fathers. The analysis of evil in negative terms, as the privation of good, constitutes an irreversible acquisition. In rejecting any confusion of evil with a primary substance or form, it performs a liberating service. It allows the absolute dependence of all things with respect to the most good, God, to shine out. It denounces evil as a parasite or a perversion. It accords well with living experience and above all with Scripture—the biblical language interprets evil with the help of terms evocative of the nothingness (four of them in a single verse, Zach. 10:2)⁸² and one also notices the privative prefix used in the New Testament vocabulary of evil: *adikia*, *anomia*, *asébéia*, etc. With the Thomists, we too subscribe to the beautiful lines from Saint Augustine:

Haec tua sunt; bona sunt quia Tu bonus ista creasti.
 Nil nostrum est in eis, nisi quod peccamus amantes,
 Ordine neglecto, pro Te, quod conditur abs Te.⁸³

The danger accompanying this lovely lucidity is that evil is perhaps under-estimated—if it is *nothing*, it ought no longer to weigh one down so much ...⁸⁴ But this snare can be foiled. When one recognizes with Journet the paradox of the positive aspect of this negative and its ‘terrible reality’, one begins to fully appreciate the horror of evil preached in Scripture, realizing that the positive aspects of evil establishes itself on credit (fraudulently!) borrowed from God’s good creation.⁸⁵

The Thomists indeed offer consolation when they proclaim the reversal of evil through redemption: God’s using evil in the service of his glory and of the salvation of man—*etiam peccata!* Without doubt God’s plan, in its sovereign wisdom, takes into account even the perverse machinations of his free creatures and somehow brings about good from evil. But what if we follow out this line of thinking? Is the permission of evil justified by the wise, universal order encompassing it?

First, one must more decisively disassociate so-called ‘natural’ evil from the evil of sin and its consequences. To be sure, the cycle of physical phenomena is awe-inspiring and so justified, despite the perpetual destruction it causes. But where is the evil involved here? By what rule ought one to define it?⁸⁶ With all due respect to Saint Thomas, it is simply abusive to call the union of the air’s oxygen to carbon *evil!* Similarly, for the cell, death is life! Even with respect to the ass devoured by the lion, the term ‘evil’ is contestable, since the ‘evil’ in this case has to do more with an anthropomorphic projection, an imaginary identification with the victim (not necessarily without good reason, mind you!). Properly speaking, evil is linked only with persons. Maritain and Journet intuited this but did not dare follow out the idea to the end. Furthermore, the evil involved in penalty ought also to be better distinguished. Inasmuch as there is penalty, that is, the satisfaction of justice and the restitution of order, it is for the good. But inasmuch as it springs from sin, it is an evil, or more precisely, an effect of evil, since *the* evil is the will contrary to God. ‘The characteristic of Christianity is just that it situates this infinite difference between what is called evil sometimes of one thing, sometimes of another, in a way which eliminates the confusion. Christianity properly consists in speaking of suffering and temporality with ever more frankness and victorious joy, because for it sin, and sin alone, is corruption.’⁸⁷

As for spiritual and moral evil, it is one thing to say that God is capable of using it for good once it has already established itself,⁸⁸ and another to conclude from this that God permitted it with this good *in mind*. One moves from the wonderment at the news of an unheard-of, liberating wisdom, to the possession of a ‘reason’ which makes God’s decree comprehensible. Yet Scripture itself never takes this step of bridging the qualitative abyss. For if sin is truly, as

Maritain says, 'the ransom of glory', can the Lord be exonerated from his part in the affair? He is not perhaps the author of evil, but he is the author of the law which makes evil the ransom or 'reverse' of good! Isn't he thus linked to it? 'Ransom' and 'reverse' are images not far from the notion of a means. When some agent (sovereignly) permits a thing *in order to* further his own ends, how does this differ from using a means to an end? Isn't the agent responsible for the means he uses? It is not necessary to 'demagogically' evoke the most horrible forms of evil in order to feel the full atrocious force of the suggestion that a God had chosen them as his means. The scandal of personal evil explodes the idea of justification through universal order.

As for explaining the rise of evil in terms of the creaturely nothingness, the pagan parallels and links are so manifest that one wonders at the assurance of the Christian proponents of this view. Sertillanges goes to the extent of calmly confessing that 'our author concedes to Plotinus that being itself is the source of evil if one understands by this common being' (mixed with power).⁸⁹ The nothingness which is something, the nothingness substantialized which, before the creation, enters into the composition of creatures, is actually the *mê on* of the Greeks! The argument over fallibility, inevitably entailing the idea of fault, marvellously illustrates the equivocations surrounding the notion of the *possible* when linked with that of nothingness. When the Thomists talk of fallible man, they do not simply want to say that he is not infallible like God, but additionally that there is a 'real power', a tendency in him to commit the act like a germ of evil present from creation onwards. In this case, the notion of possibility slanders God's good creation. And since the terms 'necessary', indeed 'fatal', come from the pens of the Thomists, why shouldn't the sinner excuse himself from fault? In other words, it is God, responsible for all being and for all the laws of being, who is rendered responsible for this necessity, unless one wants to appeal to some higher law (like the idea of Fate in Teilhard) to which God is subject. Does not Sertillanges in the end also invoke the 'wheel of fortune', the super-God of Chance?

Jacques Maritain's attempt to explain the origin of evil acts also tries to rejuvenate the idea of a natural evil created as such, to establish a *continuity* in place of the discontinuity of the shameful scandal. One can criticize his demonstration by simply stressing that the discontinuity remains intact, a gaping hole, when viewed in the light of Scripture. Let us suppose that for a given period of time it were actually legitimate not to take the divine rule into account—this in no way accounts for the idea of sin acting without respect for this rule! In this single move one finds the monstrous ingratitude, the criminal disobedience, the abominable arrogance of the creature, who owes everything to his Creator and so *must* respect God's will

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when he acts! Once again a qualitative abyss opens up between an anterior inattention which was permitted, and the inattention contrary to God's explicit command. And can we even agree that the 'non-respect', which Maritain refers to in the first instance, is legitimate? It is troubling that the agent he describes seems suspended in a moral void. Has one forgotten the first and greatest commandment, that is, to love the Lord with *all* one's heart, with *all* one's soul, with *all* one's mind, and with *all* one's strength? Doesn't this imply a *permanent* orientation of desire and intelligence towards the divine Will? If this ceases for a single instant, it is *anomia*, violation of the law, sin. Of course, what we call an 'orientation' is not an unceasing conscious, meditative concentration on the particular commandments; but then neither does J. Maritain first describe the 'respect' of which he is talking (not a requirement, he would say) before placing it at a level of metaphysical analysis similar to ours. Out of the heart of total love (the minimal obligation of the creature!) there is no continuity which leads to sin. Evil arises as a foreign intruder, without reason, without excuse.

Despite the riches and subtleties of the Thomist doctrine of evil, we are constrained to conclude that it ultimately fails. As in the less refined systems of Leibniz and Teilhard, it tends to excuse evil via a false idea of necessity, diluting the horror by viewing it, horribly enough, as a means to divine ends, permitted *in order to be* so used. Like the optimism of the Stoics and of Plotinus and Spinoza, it tends to take the evil out of evil. But this is simply not the case—the disorder is not so easily encompassed and thus justified by some greater order. Thomism provides a valuable service in stressing the privative reality of evil, but its explication of evil's origin must be denied. Let us listen rather to the 'voice of truth', the voice of *Job*, according to Philippe Nemo, where

... evil is not a being of the world, being in the world, co-ordinated with the world in a unique Order. The being of evil, says the voice of truth, is of the being of horror, throwing the soul into battle against horror.⁹⁰

to be continued

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NOTES

1 J. Bernhart is the one who makes this etymological note in his article 'Mal', *Encyclopédie de la foi*, edited under the direction of H. Fries, vol.III, p.20.

- 2 'Theodicy' literally means the 'justification of God'. It has to do with explaining the coexistence of God and evil. In French Catholic writing the word has taken on a larger sense, coming to encompass all of 'natural theology'.
- 3 *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, ET by M. Douglas Meeks (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1969), p.55, with allusion to Martin Buber; cp. pp.62, 204.
- 4 As cited by Paul Ricoeur, *La Symbolique du mal* (vol.2 of *Finiude et culpabilité* [Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1960]), p.15.
- 5 Plotinus, 1st *Ennead* 8, cited by Charles Journet, *Le Mal. Essai théologique* (Desclée de Brouwer, 1961/2), p.27; St Augustine, *De natura boni*, 4:4.
- 6 Despite the weak conclusions it draws, we recommend the simple and clear summary of the various systems given by Charles Werner (*Le Problème du mal dans la pensée humaine* [Payot, Paris 1944]), 126 pp. The brilliant essay by Etienne Borne, *Le Problème du mal* (PUF, Paris 1958/1), 119 pp., contains relevant historical information, on the views of the optimists especially.
- 7 Borne, op. cit., p.67.
- 8 1st *Ennead* 8:15 and 3rd *Ennead* 2:17, cited by Journet, op. cit., p.21, n.1 and 2.
- 9 The personal views of Charles Werner fall in this area. Evil comes out of the dissociation in creatures between (material) desire and intelligence. The submission of desire to intelligence demands a lengthy period of evolution. This need, along with the given dissociation, constitutes a second metaphysical principle, the cause of evil.
- 10 *Sin* (from Dutch, ET by Philip C. Holtrop [Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1971]), p.70.
- 11 cp. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hindouisme et bouddhisme*, French tr. (collection Idées, Gallimard 1949/1), pp.69ff., thus on p.69: 'Buddhism seems to differ quite a lot from the Brahmanism out of which it came if one only studies it superficially; yet the deeper the reading, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between the two or to say in which respect, if any, Buddhism is not actually orthodox.'
- 12 Within the scope of this work it is not possible to enter the debate over the views of the 'new philosophers', a rather fiery debate as one can well imagine. What one can say briefly of these views is that they manifest striking foundational and formal insights and so provide rich soil for Christian reflection, despite the frivolity of their speculative acrobatics and gnostic temptations. The work closest to our subject would be that of Philippe Nemo, *Job et l'excès du mal* (Grasset, Paris 1979), 247 pp. The excess of evil, the beyond therein revealed in comparison with every technical solution (and so the breach made in the world), awakens the soul. It is the intention of Intention which then allows us to discover the good, the Father outside of the world, who is a soul related to our own and to every weakness—for us, it is *nothing other than the inexplicable confusion of the excess of good and evil*' (p.194). Against Nemo (and his friends), we would first like to argue that evil is nothing but disorder, defection, and perversion of a good norm, violation and corruption of the just law. Without this reference, the word no longer has any sense, a dead leaf blown about by every wind.
- 13 For what follows, see Claude Tresmontant, *Introduction à la théologie chrétienne* (Seuil, Paris 1974), pp.683 ff., and the admirable work by Georges Friedmann, *Leibniz et Spinoza* (collection Idées, Gallimard, new ed. 1962), 444 pp.
- 14 Werner Post, 'The Problem of Evil', in *Concilium*, 56, June 1970, p.96, n.2.
- 15 Friedmann, op. cit., p.32.
- 16 Tresmontant, op. cit., pp.685, 694; also 688.
- 17 Teilhard goes as far as to say that 'truly the Christ saves—but shouldn't one immediately add that he, at the same time, is saved by Evolution?' (*Le Christique*, [1955], last work completed by Teilhard before his death) in vol.13 of his *Oeuvres* (Seuil, Paris 1976), p.107—the same symmetry: 'One could say that Evolution saves the Christ ... the Christ saves Evolution ...', *Introduction à la vie chrétienne*, (1944), in vol.10 (Seuil, Paris 1969), p.184.
- 18 *Le Phénomène humain*, vol.1 of his *Oeuvres* (Seuil, Paris 1955), p.327.
- 19 *Introduction à la vie chrétienne*, p.183 (cp. p.156 in the same vol.10).

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- 20 *Le Milieu divin* (as early as 1926–7), vol.4 of his *Oeuvres* (Seuil, Paris 1957).
- 21 cp. the second and third of the *Trois Histoires comme Benson* (1916), in vol.12 of his *Oeuvres* and in the volume *Hymne de l'Univers* (Seuil, Paris 1961), pp.48–56; and also in 1955 in *le Christique*, p.109: 'It is the eucharistic mystery itself which extends to infinity in an observable universal "transubstantiation".' cp. *Le Milieu divin*, p.150f.
- 22 *Esquisse d'un Univers Personnel* (1936) in vol.6 of his *Oeuvres* (Seuil, Paris 1962), p.73.
- 23 *Note sur quelques représentations historiques possibles du Pêché originel* (1922), in vol.10, p.69.
- 24 *Chute, Rédemption et Géocentrie* (1920), in vol.10, p.53.
- 25 *Le christ évoluteur* (1942), in vol.10, p.175.
- 26 *Le Phénomène humain*, p.347.
- 27 *Note sur les modes de l'action divine dans l'Univers* (1920), in vol.10, p.43.
- 28 *ibid.*, p.44.
- 29 *Christologie et Evolution* (1933), in vol.10, p.103n.
- 30 In his *Lettres à Léontine Zanta* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1965), p.129, for example, he exclaims: 'Little by little all is transformed, ethics merges with physics ...', a citation noted by Jacques Maritain, *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1966), p.182.
- 31 For example, in *Réflexions sur le péché originel* (1947), vol.10, p.227: 'Statistically ... it is absolutely "fatal" ...'; *Le Coeur de la Matière* (1950), vol.13, p.62.
- 32 *Notes sur les modes de l'action divine*, p.42, n.4.
- 33 *ibid.*, p.43.
- 34 The explanation is clear in numerous places, indeed already in the appendix on evil in the *Phénomène humain*. On the other hand, Teilhard scarcely discusses the initial arising of the Nothingness-Many, except in *Comment je vois* (1948), published in vol.11 of his *Oeuvres*, and partially reproduced, with comments, by Georges Crespy, *La Pensée Théologique de Teilhard de Chardin* (Editions Universitaires, Paris 1961), pp.113–22.
- 35 *Le Milieu divin*, p.89 (cp. the whole section).
- 36 *ibid.*, p.92f., and again in *Le Coeur de la Matière*, p.63.
- 37 *Esquisse d'un Univers Personnel*, pp.107ff.
- 38 In Crespy, *op. cit.*, p.231.
- 39 *Esquisse*, p.111.
- 40 *Le Phénomène humain*, p.342.
- 41 *ibid.*, p.285.
- 42 *Esquisse*, p.99.
- 43 One can follow the laborious debate Teilhard has with himself in the final section of *La Place de l'Homme dans la nature. Le Groupe zoologique humain* (Union Générale d'Editions 1962, Albin Michel 1956), pp.160–9. G. Crespy, pp.100–5, in order not to impute to Teilhard the idea of optimism as a scientific thesis but merely as the hope of faith in Christ, relies on a text from 1948, recognizing that the earlier *Le Phénomène humain* 'doesn't yet provide all the desired clarity'. Crespy neglects *Le Groupe zoologique humain*, upon which we rely (as already in our article 'La Vision cosmique de Teilhard de Chardin', *Chantiers*, 49, Winter 1966, p.22), which is from 1949 and speaks the most 'scientific' language possible. In 1955, Teilhard, beginning from the form of the Cosmogénésis, judges 'that it is necessarily in the senses where it coils back upon itself (and not in the inverse direction) that the universe takes on consistency' ... (*Le Christique*, p.101). Teilhard's faith and his view of the phenomenon intimately interpenetrate (herein lies the soul of his work). If he distinguishes them at times, it is only a matter of linguistic precaution so that scientists do not reproach him for too hastily imposing his Christ on them.
- 44 *La Place de l'Homme*, p.142f.
- 45 Passages cited by Jean-Marie Domenach, in *Esprit*, 326, March 1964, p.327.
- 46 *Comment je vois*, in Crespy, p.121.

- 47 For an expansion of this critique, see our 'La Vision mystique de Teilhard de Chardin', in *Chantiers*, 50, Spring 1966, esp. pp.20-5.
- 48 We think, for example, of the Anglican, E.L. Mascall (*High Church* tendency, brilliant polemicist against reductionist modernism). The pastor, Henry Chavannes, and the American evangelical theologian, Norman L. Geisler, have Thomistic philosophical positions but we have not read anything from them on the problem of evil.
- 49 Ch. Journet, op. cit., pp.31ff., presents the patristic testimonies in this sense, in particular those of Origen (*ouden esti*), Athanasius, Basil (neither *hypostasis* nor *ousia*), and Gregory of Nyssa, preceding Augustine.
- 50 *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (J. Vrin, Paris 1932), vol.1, p.119.
- 51 *Summa Theologica*, treatise on Creation, Ia, qu.48, arts 2, 3, 5.
- 52 Ch. Journet, op. cit., p.44, criticizes this sort of confusion in the German thinker's ideas. One notes, however, that Gilson, op. cit., p.116, in explaining Augustine's thought seems to admit that 'the less good, in one sense, is evil' (he is referring only to inequalities relative to creation).
- 54 *De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin. Essais de Métaphysique et de Morale* (Hartmann, Paris 1947), p.295.
- 55 *Le Mal*, p.165.
- 56 J. Maritain, op. cit., p.280; same image in Gilson, op. cit., p.124.
- 57 Doctrinal note in the cited treatise of the *Summa* (ed. of 'La Revue des Jeunes', Desclée, Paris-Tournai-Rome 1927).
- 58 Ia, qu.48, art.2; cp. qu.49, art.2.
- 59 Maritain, op. cit., p.274; Journet, op. cit., p.280f.
- 60 Note in edition of treatise cited, p.218 (the italics are those of Sertillanges).
- 61 Ia, qu.48, art.2.
- 62 *L'Esprit de la philos.*, p.120.
- 63 J. Maritain, op. cit., p.274.
- 64 *ibid.*, p.275.
- 65 *ibid.*, p.277.
- 66 Ch. Journet, op. cit., p.160; cp. p.87.
- 67 *ibid.*, p.161.
- 68 *ibid.*, pp.56f., 201, 240f.; cp. St Thomas, Ia, qu.48, arts 5, 6, esp. pp.151ff. of edition cited.
- 69 J. Maritain, op. cit., pp.278, 282.
- 70 Ch. Journet, op. cit., p.87; cp. the following pages, including part of p.90.
- 71 *ibid.*, p.160.
- 72 *ibid.*, p.306.
- 73 Maritain, op. cit., pp.282-98; Maritain is commenting on *De Malo* 1:3, to which the corresponding part of the *Summa Theologica* (Ia) is qu.49, art.1. Gilson, op. cit., pp.264ff., n.25, refers to the same passage, and Journet briefly, p.76.
- 74 J. Maritain, op. cit., pp.284ff.
- 75 *ibid.*, p.285.
- 76 *ibid.*, p.287.
- 77 *ibid.*, p.288.
- 78 *ibid.*, p.293.
- 79 *ibid.*, p.298.
- 80 *ibid.*, p.300.
- 81 Ch. Journet, op. cit., pp.88f., 176f.
- 82 cp. our study 'La foi et la tentation du néant', in *Pour une Réforme permanente* (Rencontres Protestantes 1973; Société Evangélique de Genève, Geneva), p.28.
- 83 Cited by Henri Marrou, *Saint Augustin et l'augustinisme* (collection *Maîtres spirituels*, Seuil 1955), p.141, and translated by him in this way: 'All these things are Yours, and they are good because they have been created by You who are Good. There is nothing of us in them except the sin in which, despising order, we love instead of You what comes from You.'

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- 84 As heirs of the Reformation, we suspect a slip into this underestimation of evil when Gilson polemicizes against the idea of 'corrupted nature' (p.126: Luther, Calvin, Jansenius) and then affirms that nature remains unaltered, p.128f.
- 85 Again, Journet doesn't seem to have plumbed the unfathomable wickedness of sin when he affirms that the sinner *always* desires good (but is then diverted from his final goal), p.82. Yet is the good desired in the suicidal bitterness of hate against God? Perhaps—if one conceives of the sinner doing it in order to affirm himself (is this the most *profound* reason, however?). In any case, the negative analysis still holds. Note that the great orthodox dogmatician, H. Bavinck, also subscribes to it, according to Berkouwer (*Sin*, pp.63f.).
- 86 Thomism tends to treat, rather surreptitiously, *essences as norms*; but this vestige of Platonism is not indispensable.
- 87 Soren Kierkegaard, *Discours chrétiens* (French tr. by P-H. Tisseau [Delachaux et Niestlé, Paris-Neuchâtel, 1952]), p.101.
- 88 Note that no biblical text says, strictly speaking, that God *changes evil* into good. Genesis 50:20 reads literally: 'you had thought evil, but God has thought it for good ...' Just a nuance?
- 89 *Summa Theologica*, treatise and edition cited, p.277.
- 90 *Job et l'excès du mal*, p.28.