

# Man and the Presence of Evil in Christian and Platonic Doctrine

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## PART II

The question of evil in Platonic and neo-Platonic theory is intimately linked with that of the descent of the soul into a bodily form. The existence of the soul at all is itself a further consequence of the initial necessity of emanation. The first degree of emanation from the One, the Supreme, is pure Being. Being is the first determination of the undetermined One. Pure Being contains all the possibilities of particular beings—all the souls—in a unified state. Just as Being is necessarily determined, so it necessarily determines all its own possibilities—necessarily, because it is in the nature of things for the One to manifest Its goodness in all ways possible. Hence particular beings—souls—receive their particular existence. These souls must have some activity different from that of pure Being, for otherwise the two would be identical. They must have a different manner or mode of being. This different manner or mode of being involves the assertion of variety and individuality which, since they are possibilities in pure Being, must be made manifest. This outward movement, movement away from the centre, the One, must continue without any halt until all possible degrees of manifestation are accomplished and exhausted—until there is nothing left to manifest. This is a natural and necessary accomplishment deriving from the original nature of the One.

Where, then, into this process of emanation does evil enter? It cannot be imputed to the process itself, since, this process being in the nature of things, so to do would be to impute evil to the originator of the process, to the One Itself; and what is the Good absolute cannot also be the source of evil. Nor can it be imputed to individual souls as such, for these, in spite of their differentiation, are still essentially modes of the intelligible world of pure Being, rooted in the substance of pure Being, and so free from evil. Evil, therefore, enters into the process in some sense from without, or, rather, from a sphere opposite to that of Being from which the soul derives, of which it is a mode, and which knows no admixture of anything evil. This sphere is that of Matter. Matter is the total opposite to Being. It is total Non-Being, total lack and destitution, unformed and measureless, having no share whatsoever in Being; so inconceivable in its unreality that it may be apprehended only by a kind of spurious reasoning. But if it has no share whatsoever in Being, and Being is essential goodness, it can have no share in the Good, it is the negation of the Good. It is, therefore, evil, evil utterly. And it is from its implication in Matter that the soul is implicated in evil. In the last phase of its outward manifestation, soul, naturally good, and seeking to distribute this goodness to the farthest extreme, seeks to give Matter, essential Non-Being, some share in Being; seeks to confer on it some form. It is from this determination of Matter by the outward-flowing soul that bodily

forms come into existence, and it is from the soul's commerce with or entry into bodily existence, and hence from its contact with Matter, that it becomes prone to evil. It is inherence in a bodily form and a sharing in the body's states that corrupts the soul.

Three observations are relevant here. The first is that evil is only actively present in the world of corporeal existence. The second is that it is necessarily actively present in this world, for a pre-condition of this world is an actualization of Matter, and hence of evil. In soul free from body and bodily states there is no evil. The third—and in this context the most significant—is that since a condition of his being at all is the possession of a corporeal nature, man only exists and can only exist in a world in which evil is actively present: as man, he can never be free from evil and the suffering that goes with it. At the same time, since it is in the nature of things that soul descends into a bodily form (for it is a necessary phase of the process of manifestation), it would seem that no blame can be attached to the soul or to man for this actualization of evil: no blame, and hence no responsibility for evil done.

Yet there is another aspect to this descent of the soul in Platonic theory which introduces the idea of definite choice on the soul's part and hence of culpability. On the one hand, the soul's descent is a necessary spontaneous outward movement of its nature. But on the other hand it is a turning away from a greater good to a lesser good.

It is a failure to choose what is better. It is better for the soul to remain in the intellectual world, free from body and its accompanying evils, for this is a better world. At the same time, the soul (that soul, that is, whose task it is in the process of manifestation to distribute the Good to the farthest limits) is under compulsion to participate in the sense-world. A condition of its descent is that it in some degree separates itself from its source, becomes self-centred, ignores the Divine, falls into forgetfulness, lapses. Thus, viewed from this angle, its descent into bodily form is a kind of punishment for its failure to choose the Good. It is its nature to enter into the sense-world; its descent, its "fall," is pre-determined by its allotted task in the process of manifestation; yet the performance of this task involves an apostasy and a degree of self-ownership which brings its own punishment: complicity in evil and in the sufferings that spring from it.

So that in Platonic and neo-Platonic theory one gets finally a situation something like this: given that the Good is the Good, it is inevitable that certain souls should come into being whose nature predetermines an apostasy from their source; at the same time, this apostasy is a consequence of their own self-will and deliberate choice; the descent which follows on their choice is both an actualization of the choice itself, a punishment for it, and, thirdly, a natural fulfilment of the task appointed to that soul in accomplishing God's purpose in the universe. God is only to "blame" for this descent, and the suffering in which it involves the soul, to the extent that God is to blame for being God. The alternative would be no God, no Being, no differentiation, no souls, no sense-world, nothing, absolute blank. If this would be a better state of affairs than the present one, with all its tribulations yet with its real possibilities of release from these tribulations by a return to the Source, then God is to blame. If it would not be, then God must be absolved: God is blameless, as Plato puts it.

In spite of the assertion of an element of choice in, and hence of responsibility for, the

soul's suffering condition in this world, it is difficult to see how, according to Platonic theory, things could have been other than they are, how they are being as good as they can be, given the circumstances in which necessarily they must come to be. "Fallen" existence is in the nature of things, and the individual souls present in this existence are present because in this way they fulfil their appointed nature: there are necessarily certain weaker souls predestined to fall, and it would have been contrary to nature, as well as a breach in God's purpose, for them not to have fallen. In other words, fallen existence, and man's presence in a world inseparably involved with evil, are perfectly natural, indeed, inevitable, a direct consequence of the Absolute being what It is. This does not make evil any less real, or any less shameful and vicious, or lighten the suffering it entails; but on the other hand it is unavoidable, since it has its roots in a certain lack of Being, a certain lack of Reality, that is inseparable from the sense-world itself and so from created human existence itself. One might say that evil is an accident that occurs not in all manifestation as such, but certainly in all manifestation that includes man as a created being.

The whole of the Platonic theory of manifestation and of the presence of evil within manifestation is, in short, an inevitable development of the introduction of the idea of a necessity—of a logical necessity, it might be said, for that is the way it presents itself to us—operating in the original "fiat lux" according to which the first emanent, pure Being, is determined. It follows from this necessity that this world is as good as it possibly can be—and it must be—in the circumstances under which it has come into existence. This means there is really very little scope for what one might call moral responsibility on the part of man, or for its correspondent, moral guilt: if someone acts destructively, inflicts deep suffering, murders, he will be punished for his crime by a process of natural retribution (the justice of Adrasteia, ineluctable Retribution) which will keep him bound to the wheel of becoming until he has exhausted the proclivities that attach him to it; yet at the same time if, in committing his crime, he acts truly according to his nature (which he must do, for otherwise he could not act as he does), he is ultimately morally blameless. Evil, as we said, does not cease to be evil, but, first, it contributes to the good of the whole and, second, the individual instrument is not to blame that he or she acts in an evil manner, since the harmony and well-being of the whole demands that this evil should be manifest through him or her: as Plotinus writes, the well-run state has to have an executioner, or from the adultery or the violation of prisoners may spring fine children.

Compared with the Platonic theory, the Christian teaching on the "fall" presents an illogicality similar to, and indeed deriving from, that we noted when speaking of the Christian idea of creation. Just as the original act of creation is essentially free and excludes all idea of necessity, so the fall is a consequence of choice and not something accomplished under the constraint of a natural divine law. There is no need for it to have happened as part of the inevitable process of manifestation. It happened because primal man—Adam—chose that it should happen. This in its turn presupposes two conditions. The first is the possibility, already noted, of a creation including man that is free from evil—of a creation whose perfection, though relative (when compared with the perfection of God), does not necessarily entail the presence of evil; and the second is that it is possible for Adam to have chosen not to fall. That both these possibilities are real, and not simply ideal, or sentimental, or "anthropomorphic," is established for Christians in the revelation of the Incarnate God, the second Adam, who, as man (and not in so far as He is God), and as therefore a created being, is free from sin, and who, again as man,

does not succumb to the temptations of the Devil in the wilderness. Christ, in other words, fulfils the destiny that Adam failed to fulfil. What from the Platonic point of view is a metaphysical impossibility is thus seen to be the central message of the Christian revelation: that there can be, and is, a created existence which is free from evil and suffering; that evil and suffering are no necessary characteristics of creation as such.

From this point of view, then, man's fall as well as his consequent implication in evil and suffering are neither necessary nor natural. Or, rather, evil and suffering are a necessary consequence of Adam's choice, but this choice itself is both undetermined and involves man in a state of existence that is not his by nature. If this is the case, it may be asked, why did God allow it? If He could create a world that is free from evil (not from the possibility of evil, which is another matter), and a human nature capable of resisting the seduction of evil (and that He could is demonstrated by the incarnate life of Christ), why did He permit Adam's fall? And further, since He did permit Adam's fall, must not this fall have been in the original scheme of things, and therefore as much according to nature as the fall of the soul in Platonic theory? In any case, does not Christian theory implicate God one way or another in man's fall and fallen state and therefore in the evil and suffering inseparable from it?

The Christian answer to this is again by reference to the freedom in which man (Adam) is originally created. God's intention in creating man is that he should be a creature that, once having been given existence, should be responsible for what he does with it. His freedom to turn to God or to turn away from God, to exist in life or to exist in death (for existence is the one thing he cannot get out of), is therefore an inherent property of his original nature: Adam, unlike the soul that in Platonic theory is predestined to manifest the Good in the sense-world, could have chosen not to fall. If God had created an Adam incapable of falling, or in some way have prevented him from falling, or had abstained from the creation of Adam knowing that he would, certainly or possibly, fall, He would have been frustrated in His purpose. In other words, from the Christian viewpoint, God is to "blame" for man's fall and the consequent evil and suffering in which it involves him only in so far as He is to blame for wishing to create man free from constraint in his choice of accepting or rejecting His love and life; for wishing that man should participate actively and voluntarily and not merely passively and compulsorily in this love and life. Had He created man in a state from which he had no possibility of falling, man's goodness would have been conditioned in a servile and arbitrary manner and would not be the consequence of any choice or co-operation on his part. One can say that God is "at fault" in wishing man to possess this freedom; but once it is granted that this freedom is within the intention of God's original creation of Adam, the responsibility for the fall and for all its disastrous consequences lies with man.

Several further distinctions between Platonic and Christian theory are implicit in these primary distinctions. Four seem to be of direct relevance in this context. The first is one about which something has already been said, and concerns the difference in attitude to freedom and necessity. In Platonic theory, the notion of necessity plays a far greater part than it does in Christian theory, where on the contrary freedom is pre-eminently stressed. But this does not mean that the pre-eminence attributed to freedom in Christian theory, and its refusal to recognize categories of necessity where the Absolute is concerned, are the result of arbitrary prejudice or sentimentality. The difference between

the two theories in this respect derives from their different attitudes to logic and their different understandings of the relationship between logic and metaphysic, of which mention has already been made. The notion of necessity, which involves relating one thing to another (part to whole, effect to cause, and so on) in a purely logical manner is one that itself can only arise within the logical order. In Platonic theory, it is legitimate to transpose such a notion to the supra-logical order, on the grounds that the laws of logic reflect or correspond to metaphysical realities. In this way it is legitimate to speak of necessity in connection with the Absolute Itself. From the Christian view-point, freedom—the absence of any constraint, logical or other—is of the nature of the uncreated divine order, while necessity, taking its rise in the relative and quantitative sphere of the created order within which logic also arises, merely characterizes certain aspects of this order and its conditions. To apply this notion to the divine order, as if there were a necessary and pre-established analogy between the divine and the logical orders, is to assume a relationship between the two orders which Christianity does not assume.

A second distinction is connected with the first. According to Platonic theory there is a necessary relationship between man and God—or, rather, between man's soul and God. Man's soul, though it adds nothing to God, is yet the natural and generic offspring of divine Being; it is rooted in this Being, is of the same essence as this Being. The soul may go up and down the scale of Being, but it cannot lose its essential identity as a mode or phase—an emanant ray—of God. There is an essential continuity of all things with their ontological Principle. This means that the line of demarcation between the Divine and "other than Divine" does not in Platonic theory pass between God and His Being on the one hand, and soul and sense-world on the other, but between soul and sense-world *tout court*; or, rather, since soul is a mode of Being, it passes between Being and the whole intelligible world including soul on the one hand, and the sensible world on the other. In Christian theory, on the contrary, not only does the creation of man not add anything to God, but also there is no necessary (natural and generic) relationship between God and man or God and man's soul; man, either as soul or body, or as both together, does not participate in Being as a natural right, nor is there any essential identity between his soul and Being. Soul and body are an independent act of creation, an establishing of a new form of existence in the presence of God. The line of demarcation therefore, in Christian theory, between the Divine and "other than Divine" does not pass between the intelligible world of Being and the world of sensible existence, but between God and His Being on the one hand, and the intelligible and sensible world considered as a single organic creation on the other; and there is no essential identity or continuity between these two spheres. It is because of this that Christian theory is able to envisage a degree of human independence and freedom that is impossible according to Platonic theory.

A third distinction between the two theories is also one that has already been touched on. Both theories agree that evil has no substantive existence, that it is a kind of negation, a defect, a total lack of Being. Both further agree that it is not a natural property of all manifestation as such: in Platonic theory the whole realm of Being is free from evil, and in Christian theory both Paradise and the new Heaven and the new Earth are free from evil. Nor is either theory Manichaeic. But while in Platonic theory evil is a necessary function of existential manifestation, and hence of man's existence, this is not so in Christian theory: evil is no necessary part either of existence as such or of man's life as such. In Christian theory, both existence and man's life become implicated in evil as a

result of the fall, which in itself is neither a necessary nor a natural occurrence. Evil is a possibility inherent in creation (a possibility which measures the distance, if one may put it like this, between the uncreated and the created), but one that need not ever be actualized. That it is actualized, through Adam's choice, brings about a rupture in creation. It is not because evil and suffering are a natural and inescapable condition of existence that man must sin and suffer so long as he remains an existential creature—a notion which has as its counterpart a theory of deliverance according to which man can only be free from evil and suffering on condition that he ceases to exist as a creature altogether. It is because man has perverted existence that he sins and suffers, and with him the rest of creation; so that deliverance from evil and suffering is not a matter of escaping from the natural and inevitable limitations of creaturely existence, but of restoring or remaking its integrity. This means that the Christian idea of the fall introduces a tension into fallen human existence quite alien to the life of man as envisaged in Platonic theory. In Platonic theory, everything basically is in its place, is where it has to be according to its nature, and there is "injustice" and stupidity in wishing human life, for instance, or existence in general, to be other than it is. It is only possible to find fault with the ordinance of things in the sensible world, and so with human life, on the assumption that everything ought to come into existence in this world with all the perfection of those beings that, since they have remained in the intellectual world, have never known such a coming into existence at all. Such an assumption is ludicrous, for things in the intellectual realm cannot have an unbroken continuity with things in the world of sense. It would be better if things had not come into existence in the world of sense, for the simple reason that this has involved a lapse from the intellectual world, which is a better world. But this lapse has to be because God has to be: the soul guilty of it is under divine compulsion. In Christian theory, on the other hand, man's existence as he now knows it, is not as it should be: there has been this breach in creation, this rupture, and this, since it has been brought about by man and not by any natural or necessary divine process in which man is inevitably involved, places on man a different kind of responsibility and introduces this tension to which reference has been made.

Fourthly, and partly as a consequence of what has been said immediately above, there is a distinction between the two theories in their attitude to time and in the significance attached to it. In the Platonic theory, time is the life of the soul in its various transmigrations in the world of sense: it comes into being as a consequence of the soul's descent and its flight from eternity. As this descent and flight are part of a natural and necessary process, so also is time. In one sense, time must always exist: intellectual beings are eternal and as these must necessarily generate their own likenesses, the images they produce in time must stand for as long as their archetypes, which is always: God ever is, and so must all that is sequent to God ever be. Thus evil, which is inseparable from the becoming-process, is inseparable also from time; and as the becoming-process is perpetual, so too is the actualization of evil perpetual: there can be no final end of evil, as there can be no final end of time. On the other hand, this perpetuity of time is punctuated by a certain inner cyclic rhythm, and one of the phases of this rhythm is the return of all things to their pre-manifest source: the becoming-process, and time with it, are brought, for this phase, to a halt; and consequently, during this phase, evil lies dormant, unactualized. But this phase is only a phase, for God cannot cease from being God and so the necessary process of manifestation must again be radiated forth. This being so, time is

really a function of a certain lack of true being; it is the movement of the fallen soul, a kind of fragmentary flight splintering eternity, which eternity can reclaim only by destroying.

In Christian theory, time, as an aspect of the fallen world, also indicates a certain lack of reality, and is implicated in evil. But as man's fallen state, so too this condition of time has about it something that is unnatural: it has been wrenched apart from eternity, divorced from its proper nature, has become only a negative kind of time. This is not its natural state. This kind of time is time under constraint, in duress, subject to evil, devouring itself. But the alternative to this is not the destruction of time, just as the alternative to man's fallen state is not the destruction of his created nature. As the proper destiny of created human nature is to share in God's uncreated life and love without becoming other than it essentially is, so the proper destiny of time is to share in eternity without becoming other than it essentially is. Both participations—and one is a condition of the other—require not a change in nature, but a recovery of the integrity of this nature, an integrity obscured and disrupted by the fall and its consequences. And this recovery in its turn can only be brought about by a victory over evil. In other words, a condition of the end of the active presence of evil is not the end of time or of created human nature. Time and created human nature are not inseparably linked with evil, or with its consequences. Both, while remaining what they are, with such limitations of what is created as are inescapable, may be free from evil and its presence: free through ever-increasing communion in the eternal "now" and unconditioned freedom of the inexhaustible depth of God.