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What Evil Must Be in Order to Exist

If God created the world, then what we *call* “the evil in the world” is made possible, and practically unavoidable, by the conjunction of four facts: (1) the fact that God created a finite world and determined the laws of nature to be precisely thus as he in fact determined them to be (and not otherwise); (2) the fact that the created world – in spite of finite resources – is *full* of beings which are conscious and sensitive to pain, which want to live and to live well; (3) the fact that many creatures, in order to live and live well, use and consume other creatures against the will those creatures have to live and to live well, being more or less forced to do so by the constitution of the world and by their own will to live and to live well; (4) the fact that God gave to the created world a certain amount of independence, not with respect to its sheer existence, but with respect to its development over time: an independence that stems from absolute (ontic, non-epistemic) chance and from free will.

However, is what we call “the evil in the world” really evil? Does the evil in the world really *exist*? Evil poses a problem for God’s perfection – and for *his existence* if God is, qua God, taken to be perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient – only if evil does itself *exist*. But the existence of evil has again and again been denied. It has been alleged that evil does not exist, more precisely: that it does *not really* exist and is therefore *properly speaking* non-existent, although it might *in a sense* be called “existent”; that evil is only the substanceless, in-itself beingless, shadow of being, which will “pop up” quite unavoidably if beings distinct from God are present on all the countless levels of (greater or lesser) *similitude to God* in the manner of existence. It is alleged that the plenitude of creation, on all levels of being, is a consequence of God’s perfection; and so is, therefore, the shadow of negativity that *necessarily* accompanies that plenitude. This *shadow* is the evil in the world, and although God does not specifically will it, he does accept it and permit it. Indeed, he *must* accept it and permit it as a sort of “collateral damage” of his creating the world in God-imaging plenitude. Nevertheless, no opprobrium falls on God – for evil, it is alleged, does not exist, because it is “without substance”.

Against this classical way of denying the existence of evil, it can, with justice, be objected that it makes use of an overly demanding concept of existence: According to the classical denial, *to exist* (in the primary, proper sense) means *to be substantially real*, that is: *to be actual and integrated into a substance*, or in other words: to be something actual that is a substance or belongs to the “contents” of a substance; in short, to exist means to be a *res* (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, *qu.* 48,

a. 2, ad 2; p. 239, column 1).¹ But this concept of existence cannot serve as an adequate general concept of *existence* (which is, for now, conceived of as *predicative existence*: existence which, in propositions, takes singular terms and not predicates as arguments, in striking contrast to *quantificative existence*). For according to that concept, evil is not the only item that is non-existent; according to it, many other plausibly existing items are non-existent, too: in the first place, all *privative accidentia*, whether individual or universal, and in the second place, all events, states of affairs, and external relations. Moreover, it can be objected that the argumentative goal — the *well-justified* denial of the existence of evil — is not quite attained. For if there were an *actual personal substance which is essentially evil*, then one could not help admitting — in spite of using the demanding concept of existence under consideration — that something evil *exists*. Note that it cannot be with certainty excluded that there is an essentially evil personal substance; even common human experience affords *prima facie* candidates which are far from being obviously inadequate.

Defining (predicative) existence as *substantial reality* is, structurally, the same mistake as defining existence as *necessary being*, which definition would entail that, except for God and perhaps some ideal entities (numbers and the like), nothing at all exists (that is, exists *properly speaking*). It is, structurally, the same mistake as the mistake Plato made, and before him Parmenides, when he defined being or existence as *changeless actuality*, with the consequence that the entire empirically given world, and especially the material world as we know it from experience, *does not exist*, that is: does not *properly speaking* exist, and is therefore *properly speaking* non-existent, although it may *in a sense* be called “existent”; for the empirical world is certainly not changeless. The identical structural mistake in each of these three cases is the following: existence is conceived of in too narrow a sense. The motivation for such narrowness is not far to seek: it allows one to disregard, or at least to relegate to the darker corners of the background of one’s attention, areas of actuality that one feels disturbed or oppressed by in one’s intellectual dealings with the world — a manner of coping with actuality that is quite typical for philosophers, contemporary philosophers not excluded (in consideration of the fact that, like the majority of their predecessors, contemporary philosophers are fascinated by *monistic* ontologies). If one has an intellectual dislike of *the contingent* — well, if existence is taken to be necessary existence,

¹ The second objection to the thesis that “malum invenitur in rebus” — in *articulus 2 of quaestio 48 of the Summa theologiae* — starts with the assertion “ens et res convertuntur”. Thomas is responding to this objection in *qu. 48, a. 2, ad 2*. Note that he does not reject “ens et res convertuntur”.

then nothing contingent exists, or in any case, nothing contingent exists *properly speaking* (as one certainly prefers to put it), everything contingent does *properly speaking* not exist (though *in a sense* it may be taken to exist). If one has an intellectual dislike of change, and in particular of transience — well, if existence is taken to be changeless actuality, then all changing and transient items do not exist, or in any case, they do not *properly speaking* exist, they are *properly speaking* non-existent. And if evil is a thorn in one's side (and for which person of good will is it not a thorn in her side?) — well, if existence and *goodness* are interchangeable (*ens et bonum convertuntur*), then nothing evil exists, or in any case, everything evil does not *properly speaking* exist, does *properly speaking* not exist.

Two classical attempts to deny the existence of evil — or at least to *belittle* it (as not being *properly speaking* existence), for *absolute* denial seems counterintuitive — by means of *narrowing the concept of existence* have now been presented: (a) allegedly, existence *conceptually requires substantial reality*; (b) allegedly, existence *conceptually requires goodness*. Both these attempts originate in the philosophy of antiquity, primarily in Platonism, and were used by Christian thinkers — Augustine and Thomas Aquinas primarily — to relieve the considerable pressure that evil exerts (in human thought) on God, on his perfect goodness, on his omnipotence and omniscience, and, yes, on his existence itself. But there is yet another classical attempt of *malum*-elimination by purely conceptual means, an attempt, however, that has nothing to do with classical theistic, Christian philosophy. This other attempt can be extracted from the powerful appendix to the first part of Spinoza's *Ethica (ordine geometrico demonstrata)*. If *to exist* means *to be actual and wholly objective* (which, for Spinoza, is to be actual in the objectivity of the *deus sive natura*, we would say today: actual in the objectivity of *natural science*), then nothing evil exists; for according to Spinoza, everything evil is, *qua evil*, not purely objective. According to Spinoza, good and evil are merely a matter of parochial egocentric interests, first, *of the species* — of Man — in competition with the egocentric interests of other species, and second, *of the human individual* — this man, this woman — in competition with the egocentric interests of other human beings. Whether something is evil or not, is, according to Spinoza, always and necessarily relative to certain egocentric interests. The predication of "evil" varies with those egocentric interests: the same event — for example, the killing of a human being — which is evil relative to the egocentric interests of X, for example, the victim, is not at all evil relative to the egocentric interests of Y, for example, the killer. But now, what is *wholly objective* is *ipso facto* not relative to any egocentric interests whatsoever, and therefore: everything evil is, *qua evil*, not wholly objective (since what is evil *is, qua evil*, relative to certain egocentric interests). And therefore — now the specifically Spinozistic manner of *malum*-elimination by means of narrowing the concept of existence is put into operation — every-

thing evil does not exist, or in any case, it does *not properly speaking* exist, that is, it does *properly speaking not* exist. Consider an event which, in common parlance, is said to be an “evil act”. If one insists that the act is *evil*, then it is, qua evil, not wholly objective, and hence it does not exist (not *properly speaking*); and if one insists that the act *exists (properly speaking)*, then it is, qua existent, wholly objective, hence not evil. In any case, existence and evil are not to be had *together* in one and the same object.² Doubtless, this is counterintuitive; yet it is the inescapable result of conceptual decisions which have seemed plausible not only to Spinoza. And, note, the two Spinozistic suppositions that value-concepts are relative to egocentric interests (and therefore do not have a wholly objective content) and that existence is actuality in pure objectivity together entail the following: Everything *good* does not exist. For if value-concepts are relative to egocentric interests and if existence is actuality in pure objectivity, then also everything good is, qua good, not wholly objective, and hence (*properly speaking*) non-existent.

In the atmosphere of *true existence*, of actuality in pure objectivity, *sub specie aeternitatis*, both good and evil *disappear* (in a sense). This is Spinoza’s vision and the basis of his peculiar theodicy, in which a very icy wind is blowing: the wind of superhuman indifference, called “perfection” by Spinoza:

For many are wont to argue as follows: If everything follows from the necessity of the most perfect nature of God, how is it, then, that there are so many imperfections in Nature, the decay of things till they stink, the nauseating deformity of things, confusion, evil, sin, and so forth? But [...] they are easy to refute. For the perfection of things is only to be appraised on the basis of their nature and power; and things are not more perfect or less perfect because they delight or offend the senses of human beings, or are amenable to human nature, or repugnant to it. To those, however, who query why God has not created all human beings in such a manner as to be ruled solely by the guidance of reason, I answer nothing else but this: Because he did not lack matter for creating everything, from the highest degree of perfection, doubtless, down to the lowest. Or speaking more properly: Because the laws of his nature were so vast that they sufficed to bring forth everything that can be conceived by an infinite intellect³ (the translation into English: U.M.).

2 According to this manner of thinking, what is not wholly objective, and therefore non-existent, may (and will as a rule) have an actual kernel which is wholly objective and therefore existent. What in an evil act can be described by using merely the vocabulary of physics constitutes such an actual and wholly objective kernel; Spinoza would not have doubted the existence of the purely physical goings-on that enter into the constitution of a *murder*. Spinozistically, one can, therefore, say that the evil act, *the murder*, does exist if taken in abstraction from its evilness, but does not exist if taken in non-abstraction from its evilness, or in other words: the murder, *qua evil*, does not exist; the murder, *qua physical event*, exists.

3 “Solent enim multi sic argumentari. Si omnia ex necessitate perfectissimae Dei naturae sunt consecuta, unde ergo tot imperfectiones in natura ortae? Videlicet, rerum corruptio ad faetorem

Spinoza's concept of *perfection* (that is, what he *calls* "perfection") is a perfectly naturalistic and therefore perfectly objective concept, but it is also without axiological content that could be even remotely comprehensible to, and acceptable to, normal human beings. In this, Spinoza is very different from the Christian practitioners of the narrowing of the concept of existence with God-justifying intent; note also that *they* made only evil disappear (in a sense), *not* also good along with evil. Nevertheless, many people have seen a deep, a truly liberating wisdom precisely in Spinoza's wholly objective — or rather: *value-rejecting* — conception of existence.⁴

It was not a new conception even in Spinoza's time. Shakespeare makes Hamlet say *en passant* and playfully: "[T]here is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2; p. 932, column 1); and Shakespeare, too, already had this from *somewhere*. Yet it is a conception that impresses us as decidedly modern. Wittgenstein, for example, shares it with Shakespeare (or Hamlet) and Spinoza: "In the world, everything is as it is, and everything happens as it happens; there is *in it* no value"⁵ (the translation into English: U.M.). When Wittgenstein is speaking of "value" here, *negative value* is certainly intended along with *positive value*. Moreover, the tautological formulations "is as it is" and "happens as it happens" are figures of speech: in front of the second "is" and the second "happens", the expression "wholly objectively" is implicit. *Explicitly formulated*, Wittgenstein's apothegm must, therefore, be phrased as follows: "In the world, everything is as it *wholly objectively* is, and everything happens as it *wholly objectively* happens; there is *in it* no *positive or negative value*." If one is able to accept this, make it one's own, live it, then one is with oneself, with the world, and with God — if one still believes in him (but Spinoza, in his own way, certainly did so) — *at peace*.

usque, rerum deformitas, quae nauseam moveat, confusio, malum, peccatum &c. Sed [...] facile confutantur. Nam rerum perfectio ex sola earum natura, & potentia est aestimanda, nec ideo res magis, aut minus perfectae sunt, propterea quod hominum sensum delectant, vel offendunt, quod humanae naturae conducunt, vel quod eidem repugnant. Iis autem, qui quaerunt, cur Deus omnes homines non ita creavit, ut solo rationis ductu gubernarentur? nihil aliud respondeo, quam quia ei non defuit materia ad omnia, ex summo nimirum ad infimum perfectionis gradum, creanda; vel magis proprie loquendo, quia ipsius naturae leges adeo amplae fuerunt, ut sufficienter ad omnia, quae ab aliquo infinito intellectu concipi possunt, producenda" (*Ethica*, First Part, Appendix; p. 106 and 108).

4 *Wholly objective* does not in itself and uncontroversially entail *value-rejecting*; but in the eyes of many — and certainly in Spinoza's eyes — it does.

5 "In der Welt ist alles, wie es ist, und geschieht alles, wie es geschieht; es gibt *in ihr* keinen Wert" (*Tractatus*, 6.41; p. 82).

The attempts to deny the existence of evil that have been considered so far in this essay were based on a *predicative*, not a *quantificative* conception of : each attempt operated with its specific, rather exclusive concept of *predicative existence*. Predicative existence is characterized by the fact that “exists” connects with a *singular term* to form a proposition; for example, in the proposition “Pegasus exists”, “exists” connects with the singular term “Pegasus”. If the predicative conception of existence is embraced, then denying the existence of evil is bound to be logically equivalent with asserting the one or the other of the following two propositions: “Everything evil does not exist”, or in other words, “Nothing evil exists”. But, note, neither of these two (logically equivalent) propositions entails “Nothing is evil”. That nothing evil exists — that everything evil does not exist — does not logically exclude *that something is evil*: If no F is G, if every F is not G (or: if every F is non-G), it simply does not follow that nothing is F. Philosophers who believe that everything evil does not exist may, from the logical point of view, also believe *that something is evil*, indeed, *that many things are evil*; it is only that all this evil they acknowledge must nevertheless have no (*proper*) existence for them — say, because it is, qua evil, not substantially real, or not wholly objective, or, simply, not good.

Now, a far more radical attempt to deny the existence of evil than the attempts considered so far can be launched if one proceeds on the basis of a *quantificative*, not a *predicative* conception of existence. The relevant concept of existence can be simply expressed by the word “something” — i.e., by a quantifier. *Quantificative existence* is characterized by the fact that “something” connects with a *complete predicate* to form a proposition; for example, in the proposition “Something is a winged horse”, “something” connects with the complete predicate “is a winged horse”. If the *quantificative* conception of existence is embraced, then the denial of the existence of evil is bound to amount to asserting the following proposition: “Nothing is evil”.

In contrast to the *predicative* conception, the *quantificative* conception of existence does not invite the interpretation and re-interpretation of existence-expressions. For when one is employing the *quantificative* concept of existence, one is simply formulating a *proposition of cardinality*: “Something is a winged horse” means nothing else than that the number of winged horses is either 1 or a larger number. The negation of “Something is a winged horse” is “Nothing is a winged horse”, and this, too, is simply a *proposition of cardinality*: it means nothing else than that the number of winged horses is 0. Therefore, if one wishes to justify *that nothing is evil* — in other words, if one wishes to deny the existence of evil while embracing the *quantificative* conception of existence — then this means that one must justify *that the number of (what is) evil is 0*. And in the proposition “The number of evil is 0” there is only one element which can be

manipulated, only one *switch*, so to speak, that can be turned this way or that way, and this switch is the interpretation of the word “evil” itself.

But has it ever been really attempted, in the course of the history of philosophy, to justify not only the assertion *that nothing evil exists*, but also the logically stronger assertion *that nothing is evil*? The first thing to be said in response to this question is that, right up to the present, many philosophers — including the founder of modern logic, Gottlob Frege — have confessed themselves entirely unable to distinguish the logical content of the one assertion from that of the other (whereas they would all be perfectly able, I presume, to distinguish, with respect to logical content, the assertion *that nothing evil is good*, or *that nothing evil is substantially real*, or *that nothing evil is wholly objective*, from the logically stronger assertion *that nothing is evil*). To those philosophers, the two sentences “Nothing evil exists” and “Nothing is evil” (or their counterparts in other languages) have seemed to have the very same logical content, have seemed to express that content merely in different ways. And those philosophers are not entirely wrong. The reason why they are not entirely wrong is this: If one takes “to exist” in its widest possible sense under the predicative conception, according to which sense “to exist” means as much as “to be identical with something”, then, indeed, “Nothing evil exists” and “Nothing is evil” have the same logical content, because “Nothing evil is identical with something” and “Nothing is evil” *do have* the same logical content.⁶ Unfortunately, the widest possible sense of “to exist” was not *the intended sense* of “to exist” when philosophers asserted that nothing evil exists; as we have seen, they intended senses of “to exist” that were much narrower (or stronger), logically speaking, than the sense of “to be identical with something”.

Whether philosophers believe or don’t believe that they are able to distinguish logically between “Nothing evil exists” and “Nothing is evil”, it will usually be apparent whether they are inclined, or not inclined, to assert *that nothing is evil*. Leibniz, doubtless, was inclined to assert *that nothing is evil*, considering his notorious thesis that the actual world, *this* world (“the world”, as one also says) is the best of all possible worlds; for Leibniz, the best of all possible worlds can only be one in which, in a certain (Leibnizian) sense, *nothing is evil*. In *what* sense? Consider here that Leibniz, if Voltaire’s *Candide* had come into his hands, would not have needed to read the book in order to be aware that this, allegedly, best of all possible worlds is full of calamities; this fact was known to Leibniz just as

⁶ Consider that “Something evil is identical with something” and “Something is evil” are logically equivalent — and so are, therefore, the negations of these propositions, “Nothing evil is identical with something” and “Nothing is evil”.

much as it was known to Voltaire. However, for Leibniz, not one of the countless calamities of this world is evil (or an evil). *Why* is this so?

The sense in which *nothing is evil* in this best of all possible worlds must be taken to be determined by Leibniz's choice of the sense of the word "evil" (alternative senses of the quantifier "nothing" are not on offer for his choosing). According to Leibniz, only *that* is evil that stays evil even if the totality of the world is taken into account. In other words, Leibniz defined "evil" as "evil *in relation to the whole (world)*". Now, Leibniz was convinced (on the basis of a *a priori proof*, he thought) that the actual world, *this* world, is the best of all possible worlds; among other things, this meant for him that the actual world is a world in which *nothing is evil in relation to the whole*. Hence, according to Leibniz's holistic conception of evil, the actual world is a world in which *nothing is evil*. *Nothing, therefore, is evil* — that is, *simpliciter* evil, evil in the (for Leibniz) primary sense; for of course many things are, though not in relation to the whole, yet *in relation to a part of the whole (world)* evil — evil not in global, but in particular respect. Leibniz was far from denying this.

The strategy Leibniz employed is, in principle, well-known to us. If a calamity happens to us, then the following comforting thought may not be far from us: *Who knows what it is good for?* However, this thought hardly comes to us if we are conscious of failings *on our side* which contributed to bringing about the calamity, or if the calamity simply surpasses a certain size. In any case, that thought proposes to us to consider *the larger context*, the kind of context which, if taken into account, often makes the evaluation of something turn out to be rather different from what it was when the matter was more or less myopically considered — *the larger context* which we automatically, and quite reasonably, take to be the *more appropriate* context for evaluation. And if we insightfully consider *the largest context* (no doubt, the proper context for *ultimate* evaluation), that is, the totality of everything existing, the actual world as a whole — if we manage to do this, then, Leibniz firmly believed, everything which seemed evil *at first* turns out to be good *in the end*.

But we are not really able to effect in us the insightful consideration of *the largest context*. Already for that reason alone we have no idea — Leibniz, too, had no idea — *what good with respect to the grand totality* could be in seemingly meaningless raging pain, in the violent death of millions, in the utter destruction of cities and regions. Nevertheless, what is radically evil in relation to a (comparatively) small part *might* be good, or at least not evil, in relation to the grand totality. *How* this might be is certainly incomprehensible for our limited intellects, but it would not be for the intellect of God. Thus, one is drawing some comfort — only some — from human ignorance, especially in this case, where God, his very existence, is taken to be in jeopardy as an object of belief for the believer.

The idea to nullify (in cognition) what is *prima facie* evil by considering it in the context of the totality of the actual world, the idea to (cognitively) “bonify” it in the grand totality, cannot be *carried out* by any human being; it can, at best, only be firmly believed that this idea is realizable *in principle* (by a being with superhuman cognitive abilities) — for which realizability the idea must, of course, reflect the truth. Leibniz was not the first to have that idea and not the first to believe that it reflects the truth and is *in principle* realizable; the idea is recognizably employed, for God-exculpating purposes, already in the thought of Thomas Aquinas (and likely even earlier).

It must be emphasized that Thomas, just like Leibniz, was far from denying that some things in the world are evil (*malum*) in relation to a *part* of the world. Thomas even affirms that something evil *exists*, provided “exists” (Thomas says “est ens” or “dicitur ens”) is understood in such a way as to be synonymous with the non-copulative “is [est]”⁷ taken in a very wide signification: “[H]oc modo etiam malum dicitur ens” (*S. Th.* I, *qu.* 48, *a.* 2, *ad* 2; p. 239, column 1). If, however, “exists” is taken in the much narrower sense according to which “ens [...] convertitur cum re” (*ibid.*), that is, in the sense according to which “exists” means as much as “is substantially real” (this latter sense is certainly *the primary one* for Thomas), then Thomas affirms: “[H]oc modo, nulla privatio est ens: unde nec malum” (*ibid.*).

And Thomas even believes, like Leibniz, that the actual world — “the world”, in short — is a world in which nothing is *malum* in relation to *the totality* (of the world), which belief amounts for him — as for Leibniz — to the belief that *nothing is (simpliciter, in the primary sense) evil*. Thomas, therefore, does not only deny the existence of evil by means of interpreting existence *predicatively* in some sense that makes predicative denial — the assertion that every evil is non-existent — rationally possible, even necessary (which is the form of evil-denial that emerges, regarding Thomas, at the end of the previous paragraph). He also denies the existence of evil by means of interpreting existence not predicatively but *quantificatively* and proceeding, like Leibniz, on the basis of a concept of *evil (simpliciter, in the primary sense)* that makes quantificative denial — the assertion that nothing is evil — at least rationally possible; it is, in fact, the same concept of evil that Leibniz uses, the holistic one, mentioned (again) just at the beginning of this paragraph:

God, and Nature, and any agent, does what is better in relation to the whole, but not what is better in relation to an arbitrary part, unless it is considered in its function for the whole

⁷ The non-copulative “is” is the “is” which already by itself constitutes an entire predicate, as in “God is [Deus est]”.

[...]. This whole, however, which is the universe of creatures, is better and more perfect if it contains some things which can fall short of the good, and which occasionally do so, without God preventing it. [...] [M]uch that is good would be eliminated if God did not permit anything evil [*evil in parte!*] to be [to be *in a very wide sense!*]. For fire would not be generated if air were not destroyed; nor would the life of the lion be conserved if the ass were not killed; nor would vindicating justice and suffering patience be praised if there were no iniquity⁸ (the translation into English: U.M.).

Taken as a whole, therefore, the world is *good* for Thomas, and indubitably so, in consideration of the authorities Thomas acknowledged; indeed, it is *very good* for him, as we can say in view of *Genesis* 1, 31. The many evils in it (Thomas did not close his eyes to them) are evil only *in parte* (compare footnote 8) — *in relation to a part*. *In relation to the whole — in toto* (compare footnote 8) — they are not evil; for they, by their evilness *in parte*, serve the greater goodness *in toto*. If they were lacking, the degree of goodness of the world would be lower, though the degree of goodness of *parts of the world* would be higher.

The world, according to this way of thinking, is very good, and the many evils in it are evil only in relation to this or that part of it. Is there *anything* that is evil *in relation to the whole (world)*? The world, certainly, (being good) is not evil in relation to the whole (i.e., to itself), and — it is alleged — nothing else in the world is evil in relation to the whole (i.e., the world). This exhausts the universe of quantification of the actual world. Identifying *the universe of quantification* with the universe of quantification of the actual world, it is therefore true (i.e., true in the actual world): nothing (in the world) is evil in relation to the whole, that is, *nothing is (simpliciter, in the primary sense) evil*. This is asserted by Thomas as much as it is asserted by Leibniz. But these two great metaphysical optimists had no proof whatsoever for their thesis (no matter what Leibniz thought); it is for them a thesis of fundamental belief, and as such it seems to have the inestimable advantage of being irrefutable. *Denied*, however, it has been: other people, *other* experiences, *other* metaphysical attitudes.

⁸ “Deus et natura, et quodcumque agens, facit quod melius est in toto; sed non quod melius est in unaquaque parte, nisi per ordinem ad totum [...]. Ipsum autem totum quod est universitas creaturarum, melius et perfectius est, si in eo sint quaedam quae a bono deficere possunt, quae interdum deficiunt, Deo hoc non impediante. [...] [M]ulta bona tollerentur, si Deus nullum malum permetteret esse. Non enim generaretur ignis, nisi corrumperetur aer; neque conservaretur vita leonis, nisi occideretur asinus; neque etiam laudaretur iustitia vindicans, et patientia sufferens, si non esset iniquitas” (*S. Th. I, qu. 48, a. 2, ad 3*; p. 239, column 1).

In the first place, one must point here to the movement of *Gnosticism*,⁹ which flowered in later antiquity. For the Gnostics, the world — the whole, the totality — was not at all good; for them, it was thoroughly evil; almost everything in it was unconditionally evil. For this reason, *God* could not be the creator of the world for the Gnostics. And the god told about in the Old Testament could not be *God*; for they did regard the god of the Old Testament as the creator of the world. For the Gnostics, Yahwe is an inferior impostor, certainly not the father of Jesus Christ. For them, the father of Jesus Christ is the unknowable, true god, who not only transcends the world but is also, as it were, at an infinite distance from it — aside from the fact that he sent mankind a redeemer.

Secondly, one must point to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose deep metaphysical pessimism is a rather rare occurrence in western philosophy. According to Schopenhauer, too, the world is thoroughly evil; almost everything in it is unconditionally evil. The world is the manifestation of a will-to-exist who is divided against itself. This will — at first unconsciously, then with sensation and perception, then guided by reason — surges into being in uncountable particularizations that are pitted against each other in a destructive and utterly painful struggle for existence. On a very high level of its evolution, namely, on the level of humanness, the will-to-exist finally realizes its own nature, after infinite pain, and is enabled by this realization to negate itself at least in part (in the person of a human being), thus reaching a state of liberation from itself which is not dissimilar to the state that the Buddhists call “nirvana”. For Schopenhauer, *God* is no longer a factor to be reckoned with.

Is this world a hell? Who has to live in this world under hell-like conditions will tend to agree with the Gnostics and with Schopenhauer: this world is indeed a hell. Who is more fortunate will tend to disagree, as is only to be expected in view of the fact that the ability of true and deep empathy with those who suffer is fairly underdeveloped among human beings. But the question whether this world is hell-like or not need not be answered; at least it is not a question of primary interest. The question whether the world is (on the whole) evil *is* of primary interest. If the world is (on the whole) evil, a thing that had rather not been, as the Gnostics and Schopenhauer believed, *then* — whether this world is a hell or not (*in places* it is not, otherwise there would be no philosophizing *here and now*) — ... *then* the strategy of Thomas and Leibniz fails, the strategy of making the many local evils of the world vanish, as it were, in the goodness or even perfection of

⁹ It must be noted that aside from its more or less pronounced metaphysical dualism, gnosticism has no unitary form. By “Gnosticism”, I here mean Christian gnosticism, the paradigmatic form of which is Marcionism.

the world as a whole: *as being necessary for the global goodness. If the world itself is evil*, then it cannot be denied that *something is simpliciter, in the primary sense evil*; this is so because the world, if it is evil, is trivially evil *in relation to the whole*, the totality of the world. Then it cannot be denied, moreover, that *something evil exists*, no matter how demanding is the concept of existence one uses; for the world certainly exists in a stronger sense than all of its (proper) parts, even all of its *substantially real* parts.¹⁰ Then also the double strategy of Spinoza fails, which consisted, on the one hand, in defining *existence* as a concept that is independent from the perspective of the egocentric interests of any particular being: *as actuality in pure objectivity*; and on the other hand, in binding good and evil with conceptual necessity to precisely some such perspective or other, thus cutting good and evil off from pure objectivity, and hence from *existence*. Spinoza's strategy fails; for the world is certainly actual in pure objectivity, actual independently from any egocentric interests, and therefore *exists* in Spinoza's sense. *And if it is evil* — under this *hypothesis* my considerations have stood just now, and still stand — then this, contrary to Spinoza, must be so *wholly objectively*, that is, *be so*, but *not* in the perspective of the egocentric interests of a particular being; for the perspective of the egocentric interests of a particular being does not refer to the world as a whole; it invariably refers only to a local, very small part of the world. (This is also the case for human beings; as “global players” they persistently confuse *the world* with *the earth*, and as “non-global players” they often confuse it — in practice if not in theory — with their wider environment, which is delimited by their radius of action.)

But is it true that *the world* is (on the whole) *evil*? Thomas, Leibniz, and Spinoza, whatever their philosophical differences, agree in holding that it is *not* evil. But there are certain indications that it is evil after all. The world appears to be a closed system. Therefore, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the temporal progress of the world is directed at an equal distribution in space of all the energy in it (the quantity of which is constant, according to the Law of the Conservation of Energy), at a levelling of all energy-differences. *Globally*, the degree of energy-levelling in the world is always increasing. In other words, the world is fixedly directed towards destruction and decay; the cosmic desert is constantly growing. Of course, the world is *not everywhere and always* going in this direction; it is only doing so on the whole, or *as a whole*. Consider this dramatic reversal: Whereas Thomas and Leibniz believed that *locally* there is *malum* in the world, but that the world *as a whole* is a *bonum*, even *perfectum*

¹⁰ One might still hold that existence requires goodness, and then conclude *that the world does not exist* from the (presumed) fact *that the world is evil*. But how plausible is that?

(in relation to which every local evil in the world is a global good), natural science strongly suggests that locally there is *bonum* in the world, something that, for the moment, is not heading towards its ruin, but that the world as a whole is a *malum*: something that heads towards its complete ruin. The rare islands in space-time that oppose the cosmic decay, the living beings, are spatially and temporally *extremely local, extremely confined*: they are transitory, ephemeral phenomena. Global decay will sooner or later — usually very quickly — break their resistance. The most horrible thing is this: The global process of decay *itself* brings forth these phenomena, the living beings, apparently automatically (given that the conditions in this or that place, at this or that time, have the right quality and constellation) — only to destroy them later on. Apparently automatically, the global process of decay *itself* provides living beings with many means that might conceivably serve the purpose of resisting destruction — only to smash them in the end, as children will smash the castles in the sand which they build precisely for the purpose of smashing them. In particular, the global process of decay provides action-relevant *consciousness* to many living beings — which, if the animal is in an optimal state, is certainly its strongest weapon in the struggle for survival, but which, if the animal is not in an optimal state, turns out to be the locus of its pain and suffering. Another evil is this: higher living beings can maintain their life-processes only by destroying other living beings; thus, life itself serves annihilation: a living being destroys many others before it is itself destroyed. A further evil is this: *consciousness* does not only protect a living being; on the highest evolutionary level it makes the demands of the animal — and thus the chances for (at least) unhappiness — rise immoderately; on that level, *consciousness* finds reasons and occasions for annihilation — be it of one's own life or the life of others — *everywhere*, even in the biologically irrelevant, and, to boot, produces for annihilation, with never failing inventiveness, the most efficient means. All of this is to be observed, even in a form that endangers all terrestrial life, in *human beings*. Thus, *consciousness*, too, serves annihilation.

The world is directed towards decay and destruction (and is *not*, as certain appearances suggest, in a perpetual cycle of coming into being and passing away — what would be some comfort indeed). The world is heading towards the state of a universal desert in which *everywhere* in the universe the same temperature reigns *forever* — not far from absolute zero. Long before this, there will have been an end to mankind and to all life on earth. Not unlikely, mankind itself will have brought about its own demise; if not, something else will have taken care of that. The great end will come; it is as certain as the “little end” — our own death — is certain to come. *Everything* is under the rule of death. For this reason, one can only succeed by a special form of obtuseness in living up to what Spinoza recommended *per im-*

plicationem: to be a free human being and, *as such*, to think of nothing less than of (one's own) death (*Ethica*, Fourth Part, Prop. 67; p. 580).

Why is the world like *this*? To this question, there is no scientific answer. If there is an answer, it must be a metaphysical one. Indeed, as a metaphysician, one cannot reject that question, and especially one cannot do this if, besides being a metaphysician, one professes: "I believe in God, the father almighty, creator of heaven and earth" — if, in other words, one has already assumed a certain basic metaphysical attitude, an attitude which obviously is especially hard to reconcile with the fact that the world is heading towards universal death.

One does not come near an answer to the question of why the world is heading towards universal death by simply advancing the traditional doctrine of *the Fall* (of Man); for the world had begun to run its course of death long before Man appeared on the stage of evolution and was able to sin. All considerations on evil that refer to the free will of (some) creatures are irrelevant here.¹¹ Although the free will of human beings, and perhaps also of other rational creatures, can very well accelerate the death-run of the world (in any case, *here on earth*, as the past and the present amply show), the free will of rational creatures cannot stop it or reverse it — not even if each rational creature were, out of free will, perfectly good. To speak with the Bible: The form of this world passes away (1 *Corinthians* 7, 31), and we have here no continuing city (*Hebrews* 13, 14). As Rilke says, "We arrange it. It falls apart. We arrange it again, and fall apart ourselves" (from the *Eighth Duinesian Elegy*; translation into English: U.M.).¹²

Man is not responsible for the fact of global decay. The global decay cannot be a deserved punishment for superhuman (immaterial) rational creatures; it is also not a deserved punishment for us human beings. On the contrary, from the beginning human beings have been *victims* of the global decay. Their status as victims is in considerable part also to be diagnosed with regard to the peculiar human proneness to do evil (which proneness is traditionally called "original sin"); for universal transitoriness, as an inexorable constant of nature, brings forth selfishness, immoderate craving, ruthlessness, envy, hardheartedness, avarice; it does so phylogenetically, by dint of biological evolution, hence hereditarily. The vices just named are at the root of the greater part of human evil doings, and with worst

¹¹ In general, creaturely free will is accorded a far too great weight in the debate on theodicy. The so-called *free will defense* (advanced by Alvin Plantinga and many others in the course of the history of philosophy) is really no defense at all.

¹² "Wir ordnen. Es zerfällt. Wir ordnen wieder und zerfallen selbst"; Rilke, *Die Gedichte*, p. 660.

effect if they are combined with a sense of superiority — arrogance — and have forced reason and free will into their service.¹³

No, if God created the world, then *he himself*, not reacting to anything, has from the start doomed it to destruction — certainly in such a way that it is going down with a great amount of sparkling radiance, like fireworks at night, but also in such a way that it is going down with immense creaturely pain, like a sinking ship. But *why is this so* if God is perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing? Or has something or someone other than God produced the world, something or someone whose *malum* of cosmic dimensions has been transferred, in the act of creation, onto the so-called “cosmos” and made manifest in it? This is the position of the Gnosis, and Schopenhauer’s, but completely unacceptable for every orthodox Jew, Christian, or Muslim. Or is the world — after its accidental or necessary coming into being — doomed to darkness by inner, absolute necessity, hence inexorably moved to its death entirely without God and also entirely without “the prince of this world”? Truly, this is the bleakest position, since it excludes all consolation, confronting us with the existence of evil not only undeniably but also without any contingent explanation and, consequently, without any hope of salvation. If the world is *eo ipso* — with intrinsic necessity — evil, if there is a *First Evil* in this sense, then the question of what evil must be in order to *exist inexplicably and irredeemably* has found its answer.

For everyone, however, who continues to believe in God’s existence and who continues to believe that God created the world and is a loving father, there remains, on the one hand, the agonizing riddle that *such a god* (the *Father Almighty*) created *this world*, and, on the other hand, the more or less desperate hope of a change of *this world* for the better and best, a change brought about precisely by God (the *Father Almighty*). For those who believe in Christ, there is, moreover, consolation in the fact that God already acted similarly before, within the history of this world, within the human sphere. For them, there is a unique historical prototype of the fulfilment of a hope beyond hope and of continuing metaphysical incomprehension. There is, on the one hand, the riddle that *this god* (the *Father Almighty*) had *such a man*, Jesus, die on the cross (certainly *not* for our sins), and there is, on the other hand, the miracle not one of Jesus’s companions would have dared to hope for: that *just this god* resurrected *just this man* from the dead.

¹³ Free will which is forced into the service of evil stays free; it is only that its range of choices is reduced.

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