

The Problem of Evil

Didn't like the pawn shop, Goodwill. How about a garden? Trauma as weeds, and accident and tragedy as the unpredictable ravages of weather and even climate (our upbringing). We garden, we pull weeds, they grow back, but we keep planting, refining, watering, nourishing. Better?

Sonnet 29

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

My questions for you Friday afternoon:

- What is evil?
- Are there different kinds of evil?
- Does it even exist?
- What is it that makes evil, in fact, evil and not just, say, misfortune or bad behavior?
- Is it intent to harm? Is it cruelty? What?
- Is evil necessary for good to be good? (If evil didn't exist, would goodness?)

Group up: Define evil. Tackle these questions.

When we re-assemble:

My quote from The Negro Magician: "I believe evil is real, that it is out there, and that it has a plan."

Human evil simply cannot be contained in the same mind that contemplates the beauty and order of the universal world. The contradiction is too extreme. We know of the horror of mankind's collective depravity and cruelty. The

obscenity of war, the intentional destruction of human life in service to greed, power, resentment, pride, neuroses. Goodness opposes all of this, and goodness expresses itself in love, beauty, intelligence, reason, honor. Lives that pursue goodness stand against, to name a few, the violation of children, rape, genocide, murderous religion, murderous ideology, sexism, racism.

We discussed why we don't do what is good? Why we often do the opposite of good. Why we lie; break promises; steal; hurt others; break rules and laws and principles; even those we hold dear; how we cheat; take the easy path; betray trusts; gratify the self; and so much of all of this based almost entirely on how we feel (the elephant).

So, a new angle on a question we keep returning to: To what extent are morality and goodness relative to how we feel? To our affective reality? To what extent should our discussions of good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and morality engage with or otherwise include how we feel?

If it feels good, do it. What if it feels guilty? Is guilt (mostly) a feeling?

What is the right or proper role of the conscience? How dependent is it, or should it be, upon a desire for truth (or honor or goods), wherever those pursuits may take us? Do we love truth? Are we interested in truth and truth-seeking? If we're honest, as we examine our thought lives and our conversations, our desires are only fleetingly concerned with truth and its correlates (knowledge, wisdom, conscience). So, what is it that we actually love and desire and pursue?

In asking these questions, what is our goal? Perhaps it is a moment – just a moment – of communal moral power, or at least awareness, out of which the meaning of ethics might spring.

Dean Kennedy presented virtues as corrective. Is man a ruined animal who needs to be held in check by the illusion of morality backed by psychological threats of guilt and mythologies of heaven and hell, not to mention the threat of physical annihilation and punishment? Or is there such a thing as a conscience, the collective power of which capable of producing a stable society, adherence to the rule of law, and enough beneficial circumstance to enable a growing number of people to pursue life, liberty, and something Aristotle called happiness? Or is it all an illusion, a soap bubble that bursts with the slightest disturbance?

The stain of human evil covers the earth and seeps into all of humankind's achievements in art, science, religion, psychology, government, and the institutions of society. If we looked only at commerce and business, heedless of the cost to human life and welfare, at how the heartless calculus of

exploitation and morally blind profit have infected nearly every aspect of human life, we would have to be concerned. There isn't much we can do as individuals, but we can cultivate a conscience, or that part of us that tells us what kind of person we ought to be.

How do we cultivate this conscience? (It's just another way of asking how we might pursue a life of goodness.) In the flow and momentum of the choices we make, that comprise our lives, how do we cultivate and inform this conscience?

If we're paying attention, we can see that a big part of our project is striving for a more intentional relationship to one's own mind. Attention. (That word again.) Only when we become more deliberate in being ever more conscious of the self through the increasingly difficult project of attending to the self, to one's own mind, to one's own emotions, only then might it be possible for the nobility of reason and the power of directed love and affection (feelings) to flow into our actions. Only then can we hope to become good(er).

Listen to Marcus Aurelius, emperor of Rome, from his *Meditations*, a series of personal writings from the second century recording his private notes to himself and ideas on Stoic philosophy. Marcus Aurelius wrote the 12 books in Koine Greek as a source for his own guidance and self-improvement.

"To what use am I now putting the powers of my soul? What kind of soul inhabits me at this moment? That of a child? An adolescent? A tyrant? A woman? A dumb ox? A wild beast?" This is from 2,000 years ago!

Let's hear more:

"If you do the task before you always adhering to strict reason with zeal and energy and yet with humanity, disregarding all lesser ends and keeping the divinity within you pure and upright, as though you were even now faced with its recall - if you hold steadily to this, staying for nothing and shrinking from nothing, only seeking in each passing action a conformity with nature and in each word and utterance a fearless truthfulness, then the good life shall be yours. And from this course no man has the power to hold you back.

Turn your attention within, for the fountain of all that is good lies within, and it is always ready to pour forth, if you continually delve in.

Each and every hour make up your mind . . . to accomplish the matter presently at hand with genuine solemnity, loving care, independence, and justice, and to provide yourself with relief from all other worries; and you will achieve this if you perform every action in your life as if it were your last, putting aside all aimlessness and emotional resistance to the choices of reason, and all pretense, selfishness, and discontent with what has been allotted to

you. See how few are the things which a person must gain control of in order to live a peaceful and godlike existence. The gods ask nothing more of us."

There could very well be wisdom and the guidance of wisdom in your actual, lived Berry lives! His is the power of the mind and the theater of the mind. It's not a fantasy or pretty sentiment. This power and capacity you might already have. Your academic work is important, but it isn't what we are considering here. This power and capacity is irrespective of your field of study or career aspirations or activism or hope of a family and a two-car garage. This is attention! This is the source, the fountain of all that we might be and perhaps even owe ourselves (ooh: What do we OWE ourselves?), to God, and to neighbor and countryman (and woman).

Let's consider Iago, the character with by far the most lines in Othello. Iago is the consummate deceiver. He is jealous, hateful, self-reliant, and, perhaps above all, resentful and bitter. "Virtue? A fig!" he tells Rodrigo.

Virtue to Iago means what? (Strength, nature, and NOTHING ELSE, nothing more.)

"Tis in ourselves that we are thus and thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners." Smart. Useful. Our (new) metaphor.

The key for Iago, then, is reason, not virtue. Rationality.

"If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conditions."

He's a realist, a rationalist. Man is indulgent and lazy. Only with the mind and will can he re-assert control. This is the Rider and the Elephant in Shakespearean drama!!

"We have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts." 1.3.320

He even uses a rider-and-animal metaphor - the bridle and bit. Man is carnal, he says, and love, therefore, is a myth. Love is and can only ever be simply lust, however we dress it up as, say, Juliet, Rosalind, or the sonnets.

Watching the play, we see Iago use reason to defeat those he has determined to undo. His chief weapon is the syllogism. If x is true (and it isn't), then y must be true, regardless of how loose or even absent such a linkage might actually be. If human love is only lust (x), and Desdemona and Othello are human, their "love" is not love at all. They will change, especially the Moor,

because Moors are unreliable anyway (this is racist, of course). Rodrigo is convinced, and the tragedy unspools from this simple illusion of logic.

How does Iago pull off his grand scheme, or nearly so?

The syllogism, the fallacy makes it plausible that Desdemona loves (lusts for) not Othello but Cassio. "Just watch them," Iago advises. (My example of my sister: "You're adopted. Just look at your nose in the mirror. None of the rest of us have a nose like that." I have repented, and I have sought and received her forgiveness.)

The Milgrim experiment: One ordinary man is artificially induced to seemingly commit violence to another man. What's his problem? Why is this evil? And Sterling's submission from a few weeks ago provides the answer. Mr. Prozi can't feel what he was doing as he overrode the screams of the subject. Mr. Prozi failed to see and to feel that it was he who was pressing the levers, that he himself was doing this violence. He wanted to shift responsibility to the psychologist, the university, science. He cannot perceive what he has done. He cannot hear or attend to the psychologist asking him if there was anything that could have persuaded him to stop pressing the levers. He cannot allow himself to understand the question when it is emphatically repeated. He merely stares blankly as the psychologist's questions pass right through him. "I'm asking is there anything that Mr. Wallace could have done that would have caused you to stop no matter what the experimenter told you?" Prozi: "he said it's got to go on!" He's not evading the issue, which would be evil, because it would involve intention. But his inattentiveness, his inability to see, imagine, feel and attend to the subject prevented moral action.

We have looked at some remarkable women in Shakespeare's invented worlds. Juliet, Rosalind, and now Desdemona. How is she like most women? How is she unique? Well, she's extraordinarily innocent, generous, and constant. She is sacrificed. She is the heroine of the story, and in her most innocent sacrifice, she is a complete and even poignant refutation of Iago's premise about universal human carnality. She has a soul. She has a conscience. She loves.

Iago, then, is a challenge to the moral order. Desdemona is that moral order's beautiful, eloquent, animated defense. An imagined character furnishing the theater of our minds with a paradigm. It is Desdemona who reveals Iago's philosophy to be bankrupt and void. And it is Desdemona (and Othello's repentance) that devastates Iago.

In this context, the commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain" could be read to mean that thou shalt not use the gift of language and

thought in service of egoism or to serve the 'idolatry' of delusional cravings.
Of this, Iago is guilty, and his penalty is death.

NEXT: Othello, victimhood, and racism