

EVIL'S HOLD ON HUMAN LIFE

MAN RECOGNIZES, early in life, the divisive presence of evil in human affairs. Even children's games sometimes reflect the conflict of Good and Evil. Cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, are a childish acting out of this conflict. The good guys and the bad guys fight it out to the finish. In the hopeful minds of children, good is always victorious, for the good guys carry the day, and the bad guys bite the dust. Adults are often not as hopeful, for they have a clearer understanding of the power of evil. They know from bitter experience that good sometimes goes down in stinging defeat. As a result, their confidence in the power of goodness to stop the inroads of evil may be weakened or totally lost. Only the sophisticated adult comes up with such cynical statements as: "Nice guys never win," or "Crime doesn't pay enough."

One need only read the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis to discover the true place of evil in human life. Genesis tells how God created each thing in the universe to be good, and how He created man to His own image and likeness that he might have dominion over the work of creation. But Genesis also relates the sad story of the fall of our first parents. Adam and Eve sinned against God in disobedience, and this first sin marked the entrance of evil into human life. Evil is an aftermath of an infinite insult delivered to God. Since the Fall, good and evil have divided the universe. But if evil has crippled goodness, it has not destroyed it. Man still remains orientated towards good, but evil makes it a struggle until death. The wondrous goodness of things remains the first and finest fact, for, apart from good, evil is incomprehensible. To understand evil, we must first understand good.

Goodness is the native attractiveness of being. It is being advertising itself, and exciting our appetites. Goodness and being are in reality one and the same. Things must first be, before they can be good, and they cease to be good only when they cease to be at all. Although being and goodness are really identical, they are logically distinct. The human intellect, because of its finite character, must break reality up in order to understand it. Our minds are like the little boy whose small mouth is unable to swallow a pie whole, so he must consume it piece by piece. The human intellect, then, distinguishes goodness from being. It perceives that goodness is being precisely as desirable.

Goodness is desirable because it represents perfection, which denotes completeness and wholeness. Perfect things lack nothing; they possess themselves fully. A perfect diamond radiates from its blue depth the fullness of beauty. But the measure and hallmark of perfection is the actual. The mere promise of a wage hike leaves auto workers dissatisfied. They will strike until they actually get an increase in pay. The prospective home owner is impatient with plans for his house, he wants to see it filling out the vacant lot, and pushing out the sky. The actual sets fire to our hearts, for it is the marrow of perfection.

Evil is the absence of goodness. Moreover, this absence is known and felt by the beholder. The death of Dag Hammarskjold illustrates this forcefully. The removal of this titanic peacemaker affected everyone. When the assembly of the United Nations stood in prayerful silence to mourn the loss of this good man, it symbolized an absence that was known and felt by all. That is how evil affects us, by its absence. Evil is so striking, in fact, that to many it appears positive. But when we acknowledge evil, we are acknowledging an absence of goodness. The sense of evil is at bottom a sense of loss. Evil distresses only those who know and love what is good. Those who like filter tip cigarettes, warm September days, and sirloins well done dislike black bitter cigars, bleak January days, and undercooked sirloin. Evil is good's opposite. It is to good as the bitter is to the sweet.

Because being and goodness are really one and the same, distinguishable by our minds alone, the absence of goodness equals the absence of being. Evil, then, is a kind of non-being. To ask whether evil is animal, mineral, or vegetable, is useless, for it is not a thing. It is not real as sunlight, rose bushes, and ice cream cones are real. Evil is as shapeless and formless as fall out. Its reality is the missing arm of the soldier, the blighted oak tree, the cancerous torso of the middle aged executive. Evil, of itself, adds nothing, achieves nothing. It burrows into goodness like termites into wood, leaving a big hole behind.

Not every absence of good is evil. If the contrary of this were true, simple negations or utter denials of being would be evil. It is ridiculous to decry as evil all the babies that could not possibly be born, or to deplore the fact that the Jazz Age cannot be relived. A sheer negation amounts to nothing. It is the only thing, therefore, that you can say absolutely nothing about, not even that it is evil. Consider also that every creature, by the fact of its finiteness, lacks some good which other creatures possess. The moon lacks the brilliance of the sun. The lion has not the elephant's size. This finiteness is rooted in the essence of the creature, which determines it to a

particular kind of existence and activity. Creatures, because of their essences, are necessarily limited beings. Only God is a being encompassing perfection unlimited, since His uncreated essence enables Him to have an infinite and sublimely perfect hold on His own existence and activity. Creatures are finite because they are not God, but from God.

But essence is also the principle of all perfection and completeness in the creature. A creature in full possession of its essence is good and in no way defective. A dog exists and operates as such because of its essence. Dogs have four legs, hair from head to foot; they bark and wag their tails all because of their doggy essence. That they don't have ivory tusks and the mane of a lion takes nothing away from the perfect nature which they enjoy. Yet, these are real goods absent to the dog. But the absence of these perfections works no evil in the brute, for they are unnecessary to him. He is a dog for all that.

Finite essences of created beings mirror uniquely the perfection of God, their Creator, Who has willed a heterogeneous creation; one that is filled with a marvelous variety and diversity. God, in creating, intended to communicate and diffuse Himself that creatures might represent His goodness. Although no one creature represents the Divine Goodness perfectly, to the extent that it does represent God's perfection, it does so uniquely. Each creature reflects the Divine Goodness in a way peculiar to itself. Since created beings are what they are according to the essence which God has given them, within the limits imposed by it, they declare the glory of God.

The heavens tell the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands. Day to day pours forth this word, night to night sends out this knowledge (Psalm 18, 2-3).

We have already said that not every absence of good is evil. But when we meet the blind and the deaf, or see ignorance or insanity in someone, we are aware that here is an absence of a good which ought to be there, and is not. This is evil, the privation of a good which is demanded by the nature of the thing. Blindness is evil because it subtracts from the physical wholeness of man. But the power to destroy, which is so characteristic of evil, is limited. Evil cannot totally consume goodness. Blindness destroys the sight of a man, it cannot destroy the man who is blind. Every living man and some animals are fit subjects or underlying receivers of the perfection sight. Now every fit subject of a perfection is in potency to that perfection; or to put it another way, it has a capacity for that perfection.

Since to be capable of receiving good is in itself a kind of good, potency derives its goodness from that good to which it is ordered. Human nature, which is in potency to sight, is, therefore, a fit subject; not only for this perfection, but also for its privation blindness. Evil is like a parasite, it must reside in something as blindness resides in a man. And that in which it resides is good, because it has a capacity both for the perfection and its privation. And since this capacity is a kind of goodness, the good is indirectly a cause of evil.

When the Apostles asked Our Lord to teach them how to pray, He taught them the Our Father. The last petition, or rather, passionate plea of that prayer is: "Deliver us from evil." Although evil's hold on man and the universe is limited, as we have seen, it threatens man's efforts for good. Man cannot face evil alone. He needs God. And this is why Our Lord gave to man the perfect prayer: to remind him that only in God and with God can he be victorious over evil.

—Vincent Watson, O.P.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

"**F**OR THOU HAST DONE the things of old, and hast devised one thing after another; and what Thou hast designed hath been done. For all Thy ways are prepared, and in Thy providence Thou hast placed Thy judgments" (Judith 9:4, 5). Throughout the centuries, all who have believed God's revelation, have also believed in His providence. For it is evident from the whole history of salvation that our God rules over and takes care of man's world. Thus the Jews, and then we Christians, have always believed in providence.

In our everyday speech, we all know that providence means God's plan for taking care of us. The word comes from the Latin verb *providere*—which means to prepare, or to provide for. It has this same signification in English. We use it to mean both God's plan of caring for us, and also the carrying out of that plan. Here we wish to speak primarily of the first meaning, without going into detail about how God accomplishes His holy plan. And so we will merely give some general ideas about God's taking care of creatures.

Yet before we do this, it may be well to point out that not all men have believed in divine providence. Those who deny providence generally