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Analysis of Evil in Four Texts [1365 Words in Paragraphs]

Evil has always been a problem that has occupied many thinkers in the Western tradition. While non-Judeo Christian thinkers have tackled the problem of evil, seeing it as an intellectual mistake (ignorance) or a disordering of or lack of self-control of the soul's reason, *eros*, and *thymos*, the problem of evil becomes complicated with the advent of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which posits that all of Creation is good, and the originator of that Creation – God – is also good, that the universe is not split between order and chaos. But while the Greek and Hebrew traditions may disagree upon the source of evil, both agree that the actor of evil upon the human sphere is Man himself. One can see the workings out of the problem of evil, as acted out by man, in Plato's *Republic*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In Plato's *Republic*, the problem of evil is the problem of injustice. Why are there bad governments? Why do people treat each other unjustly? In the creation of a city in which there is no injustice, Socrates negatively defines injustice without exactly defining injustice, faulting those in power for creating a government that reflects the state of their souls. This is seen in the description of a tyranny, in which only injustice reigns because the only recourse of law and order is within the disordered, arbitrary *eros* of the tyrant who is a slave to his passions. Evil seems to be an imbalance between reason, *eros*, and *thymos*, of which reason, informed by proper education which questions all received knowledge and traditions, ought to be the ruler

over the two parts of the soul but is not. The cure for evil, then is proper education, i.e., better knowledge of what is real and what is not. But, as seen in the nigh impossibility of creating the Beautiful City in the *Republic*, the problem of evil is not easily solved.

In contrast, in Augustine's *Confessions*, one sees the problem of evil within the context of the goodness of Creation. Evil as pure evil literally does not exist because evil is a void, a lack, a lesser, a swerving of the original path of the good. To quote Milton, "Man is free to fall," and thus the source of evil is within man's will freely choosing a lesser good over a greater good, and, ultimately, God, the greatest good. Unlike Plato, Augustine states that no amount of knowing the good will change a man who is disposed to evil, freely choosing the lesser good over God. It is not a matter of reason but, as mentioned earlier, *eros*, i.e., the orientation of one's love. Creation is good, but if one loves Creation while forgetting about God, then one has made Creation evil. Augustine makes this clear, when he speaks of why he must be celibate when he becomes a Christian. While other Christians can be continent in their marriage (i.e., sex, as intended is good), Augustine, aware that his *eros* is disordered in regards to sex such that he cannot see it as a gift for life but as a temptation to sin, becomes celibate.

Dante dramatizes and gives numerous examples of this swerving of the original path of the good in his *Divina Commedia*. Dante the Pilgrim is in the dark woods of evil because he has forgotten the sacred *telos* of his poetry, of remembering Beatrice and her beauty and virtue as a way to God. In his sweet, new style, he has become enthralled in his power as a poet without thanking the one who gave him the gift of that power in the first place. Thus, it is apt that a pre-Christian, Virgil the Poet, becomes his guide as teacher in the examples of vice, similar to Plato and Aristotle, for he has forgotten what vice and the results of sin looks like. In Hell, there is no hope because there is no repentance – the sinners cannot see themselves as the reason for their

damnation but blame God or other people. For example, Francesca faults “love” for her unrepentant lust, not herself. Moreover, in Hell, the ugly, spiritual state of the damned is externalized like a Technicolor, multimedia pop-up book primer. Dante sees Francesca and Paolo’s lust externalized in eternal winds, blowing them about, even though Dante’s first reaction to Francesca’s story was sympathy. He sees Ugolino gnawing the head of Ruggio, damned for eating his children. He sees sowers of discord split in two, suicides turned into trees, and other unrepentant sinners in muck, with sores, in flames, or in ice. Only when he can become harsh to the sinners – in one instance he kicks the head of a sinner incased in ice in righteous indignation – does Dante come back from the sweet seduction of sin, as seen in his original sympathy with Francesca’s story.

Finally, one sees the problem of evil as the suffering of the innocent in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Again, the problem of evil is couched in the Judeo-Christian tradition: If God is so good and powerful, then why does he allow the suffering of good, innocent people? This is the same cry of Job, which Dostoevsky dramatizes in his novel. But one sees, in the three brothers Alyosha, Ivan, and Dmitri, that fallen Man must acknowledge his fallen nature, that suffering is an intricate part of humanity that cannot be avoided or taken away with easy, quick fixes, but serves as an invitation for a community of shared suffering and thus shared love. For Alyosha, the youngest brother, his quick fix was his desire that Fr. Zosima be a saint creating miracles, and thus the corruption of Fr. Zosima’s body smashes Alyosha’s hope to avoid sin and suffering. Although Alyosha could have chosen to remain angry and isolated in his suffering -- akin to Judas Iscariot – he opens himself to his suffering, becoming open to others who suffer, and, with that shared suffering, is able to become a teacher and a healer, as seen in his treatment of Grushenka in her rooms and his role as teacher and mentor for Kolya and the

other young boys. Similarly, Dmitri, the oldest brother, saw his quick fix with eloping with Grushenka, but his insatiable *eros* constantly makes unaware of those who suffer around him – including the suffering of Grushenka and Kolya’s father – until he becomes a suffering innocent himself – a man unjustly accused and then convicted of his father’s murder. It is only after his dream of the Babe – a poor, hungry, frost-bitten baby whose family cannot take care of it – does Dmitri realize his connection with the suffering, with his complicity with evil in the world. Unfortunately, Ivan, the middle brother, damns God for the suffering of innocent children while remaining unable to enact any change in the alleviation of that suffering. In his story of the Grand Inquisitor, the Grand Inquisitor also faults Christ for giving a religion that is impossible to enact, is ineffectual in helping the poor and the weak, and is irrelevant. But Ivan’s devil makes it clear that the source of evil is mediocrity, in people remaining lukewarm to suffering such that they know it is a problem but do nothing about it. It is notable that the words that the devil speaks in his aphorisms are Ivan’s very own words; the source of evil is in man’s will to choose, and Ivan has chosen not to participate in the world, the world of the suffering, thereby denying the goodness of the world and his place in it.

Thus, one sees evil as acted out by man in Plato’s *Republic*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. While these writers approach the problem of evil differently, all agree that the actor of evil upon the human sphere is Man himself. As long as Man remains caught up in solipsism, whether in pursuit of satisfying one’s tyrannical appetites, in not seeing God behind Creation, in never blaming oneself for one’s sins, or in denying one’s participation in the community of suffering, then the problem of evil will always occupy thinkers, now and in the future.

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