

**BONUM EST CAUSA MALI**

**A PROBLEM AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR  
METAPHYSICS  
IN THE THOUGHT OF THOMAS AQUINAS AND HEGEL**

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**Abstract.** How to explain the existence of evil if being by its very nature is good? My paper examines an interesting and perhaps significant parallel between two exponents of the metaphysical tradition usually thought to stand widely apart, Thomas Aquinas and Hegel. I argue that Hegel's system shares certain features of Aquinas' convertibility thesis (*S.T.* I, 5, 1), that upon closer inspection will yield a set of interesting reflections not only about the problem of evil, but also about the limits and possibilities of metaphysical method. I discuss Aquinas' thesis of the convertibility of being and good and how it determines his treatment of evil. I then construct a Hegelian version of convertibility and argue that Hegel's system fails for similar reasons to provide a satisfactory account of the problem of evil. This leads to my central question: should the inadequacy of traditional approaches to evil call for a reversal or abandonment of metaphysics, or invite a deeper reflection about reality that would not subsume the world's darkness under what Hans Blumenberg once called "metaphysics of light"?

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional metaphysical attempt to harmonize our experience of the world and human nature with the existence and postulated attributes of a divine being stands or falls on the question of evil. The creation of the world from nothing; the possible predetermination of the human will by divine foreknowledge and power; the intelligibility and inner coherence of divine revelation to finite creatures; all can and have found – to various degrees – resolution through the use of the reflective categories of either

philosophy or fundamental theology. The juxtaposition, however, of our idea of an all-powerful and all-loving God with endless images of futile human suffering, especially of the innocent, constitutes, in most of us, an ineradicable and powerful moral intuition that renders talk of evil as simply “privation of the good,” or, of our world as “the best of all possible worlds,” both intellectually shallow and callous.

Kant, at the very end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, concluded that all philosophical theodicies could not but fail. Since Kant’s time, little has occurred in philosophical thought or human experience to reverse that judgment. Kant argued for this negative conclusion in his relatively late essay, “On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy.” At the beginning of the essay, though, he provides an astute and helpful definition of the aim of philosophy’s attempt to validate the goodness and wisdom of God in the face of the evils of the world:

By ‘theodicy’ we understand the defence of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive [*Zweckwidrige*] in the world.<sup>1</sup>

This is significant because Kant posits that the *prima facie* features of the world that stand opposed to divine wisdom are not moral or physical evils as such, but the existence of things that appear to be “counterpurposive,” that is, things that work against the moral ends of the world. Conceptually, at least, Kant leaves open the possibility of a positive evaluation of the world’s negativity in all its dimensions, as long as the negative can be thought to contribute to the world’s moral purpose. I will return to this point in my treatment of Aquinas below, but for the moment I want to underline that for Kant the existence of a moral order of the world can in principle justify the divine wisdom in the face of evil.

I want to examine the beginning of Kant’s essay, where he sets out in some detail the multiple tasks of theodicy’s defence of divine wisdom. In order to be successful, theodicy must prove either (a) what appears in the world to be counterpurposive is not; or (b) that there is in fact something counterpurposive, though it cannot be the intended effect of God’s creation, but an unintended and unavoidable effect of the nature of things; or (c) that the counterpurposive is the intended effect not of God but of human

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<sup>1</sup> “On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy,” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24. The German text, “Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee” (1791), can be found in *Kant Werke: VI* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964).

beings. Kant makes several points relevant to the question of what theodicy must establish in order to be successful. But, Kant asserts, theodicy could succeed in defending the divine wisdom by attaining just one of its three goals. Kant is, however, certain on epistemological grounds alone that theodicy will never succeed in its assigned task of justification. Kant says of the attempt to defend God's cause that it is "at bottom no more than that of our presumptuous reason failing to recognize its limitations."<sup>2</sup> His argument has three steps, which I briefly summarize:

1. Historically, theodicy has in fact not been able to remove our doubts about God's moral governance of the world, doubts engendered by the existence of moral and natural evils.
2. Moreover, not only has rational theology failed to remove these doubts historically, but is *in principle* unable to remove them simply because an adequate answer would require a comprehensive cognition of the relation between divine wisdom and the world it is supposed to govern.
3. But no such comprehension is possible, since the relation *as* relation is neither a phenomenon in the world, nor a fact about the natural world. Consequently, the relation clearly transcends the cognitive capacity of finite reason and therefore must remain in doubt.<sup>3</sup>

Kant thought that traditional theodicy was, in fact, an illegitimate attempt to apply our own teleological principles and moral judgments of practical reason to the purely intelligible – and thus unknowable – sphere of God's intentional action in respect to the world. We would like to think of God, modelled after ourselves, as a moral agent acting in the world to bring about His own moral ends of goodness and justice. But when experience teaches that these ends have not been realized, reason is left in a quandary of its own making. Kant concludes his inquiry with both a critique of the speculative presumptions of reason and a prod towards a deeper understanding of the limits of reason:

Hence, in order to bring this trial to an end once and for all, it must yet be proven that at least a negative wisdom is within our reach – namely, insight into the necessary limitation of what we may presume with respect to that which is too high for us – and this may very well be done.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

The co-existence of God and evil remains for Kant a paradigmatic example of the dialectical entanglement of reason that haunts metaphysics, but which metaphysics can never escape. The young Hegel recognized almost immediately the full force of Kant's criticism of speculative thought. Hegel responded in one of his first published essays that it was not just theological knowledge that was at stake, but, more significantly, the devaluation of reason itself, its displacement from its rightful "being within the Absolute" to a reduced role of subservience to positive religion and subjective feeling.<sup>5</sup> If philosophy abdicates its task to think all reality comprehensively through concepts, then partial perspectives will dominate. The intellectual situation that Hegel analyzed still persists. Philosophical reason cannot let go of the problem of evil because, unresolved, it calls into question not only the existence of God, but the very intelligibility of a moral order of the world, that is, reason's very own capacity to orient human existence towards its end in the universe.<sup>6</sup>

In the following paper, I will first argue that due to shared metaphysical premises about the convertibility of "being" and "good," both the

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<sup>5</sup> See *Glauben und Wissen* (Felix Meiner: Hamburg, 1962), where Hegel states the consequence of Kant's position on speculative knowledge of the absolute will result in "den Tod der Philosophie" ("the death of philosophy") p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Neiman has argued that the problem of evil has radically changed in the modern world after Rousseau and Kant. Evil is no longer conceived as a metaphysical or theological problem demanding a defence of divine justice. Rather, evil has now become strictly a moral problem concerning human will and action: the responsibility for the existence of evil in the world is ours, not God's. And since it is a natural phenomenon about us, we can understand how it arises. Although, she is certainly correct in finding something historically new in Rousseau and Kant's understanding of human evil, I don't think her dismissal of traditional theodicy as irrelevant to our contemporary moral concerns necessarily follows. For, if we now express our outrage at the evil of Auschwitz with the thought, "how could human beings ever freely choose such evil?", the question forces us to consider one of the traditional challenges put to theodicy: "how could an omnipotent God not have created rational beings who would never freely choose such evil?" For the theist the question seems to me unavoidable, even after Rousseau and Kant. Of course, Neiman could respond that theism is no longer an intelligible philosophical position to hold. On the other hand, without a metaphysical inquiry and a metaphysical formulation of the question will a purely historical and empirical analysis of human existence yield a satisfactory answer to our moral outrage at Auschwitz? In *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004), Neiman leaves us with an unanswerable question: "How can human beings behave in ways that so thoroughly violate both reasonable and rational norms?" And see her "Metaphysics, Philosophy: Rousseau on the Problem of Evil," in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics*, (Ed.) A. Reath, B. Herman, and C. Korsgaard. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), and "What's the Problem of Evil?" in *Rethinking Evil*. Edited by M. Pia Lara. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001).

Thomistic and the Hegelian types of theodicy make common assumptions, demonstrate structural and conceptual similarities, and reach remarkably similar, though flawed, conclusions. I will argue that Thomas Aquinas' account of evil can provide contemporary thought with metaphysical resources to re-examine the origin of evil, both moral and natural, in light of his famous thesis of the convertibility of being and good. It can do so because convertibility invites us to consider not only the identity of being and good, but also their difference within the world of becoming. The central question Aquinas' thesis poses and one which directly affects the problem of evil is, how does the temporal becoming of finite beings relate to being in general, and to God's being and goodness in particular? I believe that traditional interpretations of Aquinas's position on good and evil have left crucial dimensions of the problem unthought. While Aquinas' metaphysical perspective on being puts into relief various degrees of goodness in the finite world, his overlooked perspective on becoming calls into question the adequacy of metaphysical thinking about being as well as the legitimacy of the metaphysical perspective on being itself.

Second, I will turn my attention to Hegel's analysis of evil [*Böse*] in the chapters on morality and religion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Hegel argues that evil can appear fully only to the religious consciousness of the revealed religion. This is the case because evil belongs to the ontological structure of the world. This structure is defined by a process, by which the divine being becomes "other than itself" in the world of space and time. Evil, then, for Hegel is ontological otherness, whose negativity becomes a necessary element of spirit's self-determination in human history.

In the conclusion, I will present a critique of Aquinas and Hegel's conceptions of evil as excessively rational accounts that explain away too much of our experience of evil. There is, however, a positive aspect of their view, namely, the necessary development of the deficient finite world towards completion in human self-consciousness. I will suggest that the inclusion of a persistent negativity of the finite as necessary condition of its development might set the stage for a more satisfactory account of evil, more in tune with contemporary concerns about evil, moral agency, and the meaning of existence.

## I. AQUINAS' THEODICY

My treatment has three parts: (1) a brief analysis of the familiar convertibility thesis that being and good have the same extensional reference, though

not the same intensional reference; (2) Aquinas' interpretation of evil as deficiency of being and the causative role of free will in this deficiency; (3) and Aquinas' concept of divine Providence that stresses that the divine purpose of rationally ordering the world to an end would remain frustrated without the active participation, however contingent, of human agency.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. Aquinas' Convertibility Thesis

Convertibility is an integral element of Aquinas' analysis of evil in the context of his general metaphysics of being. The idea signifies that good and being are transcendental predicates that have the same extensional reference: whatever is, insofar as it is, is good, and whatever is good also exists because to be is in some way to be in act and to be in act manifests some kind or degree of perfection. And this is the definition of the good.<sup>8</sup> Aquinas presents the claim of convertibility repeatedly throughout his systematic treatises,<sup>9</sup> but I will focus on his discussion in *Summa Theologica* I, qq. 5 and 6.<sup>10</sup>

In Questions 5 and 6, Aquinas presents an uncomplicated, but precise argument: the good is what all beings desire because the good (following Aristotle's definition) is an end that completes or perfects a thing. And since all things desire their own perfection and completion, the good is in itself most desirable. Moreover, to be in any way perfect is to be in act and whatever is in act, regardless of its degree of completion, is "being as such," *esse simpliciter*. Significantly, however, we find a qualification of the thesis in *Summa contra Gentiles* (III, 20), a qualification that will be essential for Aquinas' formulation of the problem of evil and its eventual solution: "In every creature to be and to be good [*esse et bonum esse*] are not absolutely the same, although each one is good insofar as it is [*in quantum est*]." Aquinas calls attention to the conceptual difference between absolute being (the actuality of anything whatsoever) and absolute goodness (the

<sup>7</sup> I have made frequent use of Brian Davies' excellent *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London, Continuum, 2006) throughout this section on Aquinas.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, defined the good as that which is desirable, but Aquinas infers from this that something is desirable only to the extent that it contains and expresses some perfection of being that the will desires.

<sup>9</sup> Most succinctly in *de Veritate* 21, 2 sc. See *Truth*, vol. III, translated by Robert Schmidt (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> For the Latin text of the *Summa Theologiae*, see the online version edited by Roberto Busa, S.J.: <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth0000.html>; the English text (London, Blackfriars, 1964-67) vols. 2, 4, 5, 8.

perfection of a substance) that will frame his analysis in Question 5 of the *Summa Theologica*.<sup>11</sup>

Two questions animate Aquinas' treatment: (1) if good is a transcendental predicate of beings as being, what is the difference between divine Goodness and creaturely goodness? (2) If good is a transcendental predicate of all beings as such, why are some things seemingly lacking in goodness, or become better or worse than they previously were? Aquinas' resolution of the second problem entails the solution to the first.

Aquinas borrows Boethius' formulation of the main objection: "I perceive that in nature the fact that things are good is one thing, that they are is another" (*STI*, 5, 1, obj. 1). Obviously, there is a real, not merely conceptual, difference, between being a good and being a bad human being. How is this possible in light of convertibility? Aquinas articulates his response based on the distinction between a relative good (G1) and an absolute good (G2) in respect to the act of being (*esse simpliciter*). Here is the complete argument:

- (1) According to its concept (*ratio boni*) the good is what is desirable
- (2) Something is desirable insofar as it is perfect
- (3) All things desire their perfection
- (4) But a thing is perfect only if it is completely actualized
- (5) Therefore, if not yet perfect, a thing is still relatively good (*quodammodo bonum*) simply existing as a substance (G1)
- (6) But a substance can become perfectly good (*bonum simpliciter*) to the extent that it is able to actualize fully its nature (G2)

Aquinas concludes, "... regarded in its first actuality, a thing is a being absolutely (*ens simpliciter*) and regarded in its complete actuality, it is good absolutely" (*secundum ultimum bonum simpliciter*) [I, 5, 1 ad 2].<sup>12</sup> The distinction in intensional reference between relative (G1) and absolute goodness (G2) in the world of becoming also distinguishes divine from

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<sup>11</sup> My discussion of this passage will follow closely Jan Aertsen's interpretation in a number of articles. Cf. "Good as Transcendental and Transcendence of the Good," in *Being and Goodness*, S. MacDonald (ed.), (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991) and "The Convertibility of Being and Good in St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The New Scholasticism*, 59 (1985). I will in particular follow his useful distinction between "absolute" (B1) and "relative" (B2) being and "absolute" (G1) and "relative" (G2) good. I will, however, add a further distinction to the concept of the good (G3) crucial for my treatment of the problem.

<sup>12</sup> "quia secundum primum actum est aliquid ens simpliciter; et secundum ultimum, bonum simpliciter. Et tamen secundum primum actum est quodammodo bonum, et secundum ultimum actum est quodammodo ens."

human goodness (the predicate “good” will extend equally to all being, but an intensional difference will separate divine goodness from created goodness). For there will be only one being, for which *ens simpliciter* will be identical to *bonum simpliciter*, and that will be the being, for which perfect goodness is identical with its simple act of being, in other words, a being whose essence is to be perfectly actualized, namely God. The contrast between divine and human goodness places in relief essential aspects of finite beings, which are subject to change and development because of a structural deficiency proper to their natures. As Augustine realized, finite things must change and develop because their end is not immanent in their being; progressive development towards an end constitutes an achievement of action pointing beyond the given being of its natural substance.<sup>13</sup>

From the perspective of this real difference between relative and absolute goodness, we can glimpse the emergence of the structural possibility of evil. For if the convertibility thesis holds, then evil must be completely parasitic on the good. Since evil is absence of being, it will be as dependant upon being as a shadow is upon spatial bodies and light. Aquinas clarifies the sphere of evil by introducing another sense of good:

God alone is good essentially. For to be called good a thing must be perfect. Now there is a threefold perfection in things: first, they are established in existence; second, they possess in addition certain accidents necessary to perfect their operation; third, perfection consists in attaining to something else as an end (I, 6, 3, resp).

The argument here is a continuation of the distinction between (G1) and (G2) in Question 5: In all beings other than God, there will be degrees of goodness measured in relation to that thing’s operations and achieved ends, which complete it in light of the kind of nature (or essence) it has. But God’s goodness is not an achieved end, but his very essence. Thus Aquinas invites us to consider another kind of good (G3) exhibited uniquely by finite created beings, the goodness, namely, of moving or developing from (G1) to (G2) – what Aquinas names “attaining to something else as an end” and by which he means that some ends are not already formally immanent

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<sup>13</sup> “Ecce sunt caelum et terra clamant, quod facta sint; mutantur enim atque variantur. quidquid autem factum non est et tamen est, non est in eo quicquam, quod ante non erat: quod est mutari atque variari. Clamant etiam quod se ipsa non fecerint: ‘ideo sumus, quia facta sumus. Non ergo eramus ante quam essemus, ut fieri possemus a nobis.’ Et vox dicentium est ipsa evidentia.” Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 4. Vol. I. Introduction and text by James O’Donnell (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992). The voice, which records change and variation in temporal sequence, is itself evidence of change and variation.



in a thing's essence. They are a special achievement of becoming, as in the case of eternal beatitude.

Here is a summary of my division of the good into three kinds: (G1), the goodness of substantive being, which Aquinas qualifies in his Reply to Objection 2: "Although everything is good in that it has being, yet the essence of a creature is not being itself (*ipsum esse*), and therefore it does not follow that a creature is good essentially." And (G2), the goodness of attaining the final end beyond itself. Finally (G3), the goodness of achieving accidents, which bring essential operations of the being in question to perfection (for example, theoretical wisdom which perfects rationality; practical wisdom which perfects deliberating and choosing acts conducive to the good).<sup>14</sup> Aquinas comments: "The goodness of a created thing is not its essence but something additional (*aliquid superadditum*): either its existence, or some added perfection, or being ordered to an end" (6, 3, ad 3). On each count the created thing must move beyond itself because it is ontologically lacking in some suitable or desirable good – thus Aquinas' apparent contradiction of the convertibility thesis that for finite beings goodness is not identical to being, but superadded to *ens simpliciter*, is resolved.

What should be underscored here is that evil, understood as the privation of a necessary good, has begun to come into focus due to an ontologically basic feature of finite being, namely, its necessary distinction from the Creator.<sup>15</sup> For if goodness (G2 and G3) are developments or additions to a being, then evil is due to a prior and specific deficiency in a certain kind of goodness (i.e. perfection) of G1.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Consequently, G3 will be both extensionally and intensionally distinct from G1 and G2: it will extend only to finite beings not to God and mean the act of becoming perfect.

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides has stated this ontological feature more explicitly than Aquinas. Ascribing the nature of privation to the inability of matter to maintain form permanently, he writes, "For if he [the human being] were not liable to receive impressions, he would not have been generated, and what exists of him would have been one single individual and not a multitude of individuals belonging to one species." *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963), III, 12. The price of the existence of the human species, then, is the condition of impermanence and privation, which Maimonides, like Aquinas identifies, with evil.

<sup>16</sup> This is crucial to Aquinas' entire project because the deficiency of G1 and G3 does not indicate non-being in general, but the lack or privation of some specific good necessary for that thing's completion. See I, 48, 3, resp.

## 2. Good is the Cause of Evil

Just as the goodness of a created thing is a function of some relation it has to the Creator, either by being in act, being alike in operation, or by becoming fully actualized, likewise evil can be known and measured by the absence of these relations resulting in the creature's non-being, unlikeness to its Creator, or unactualized potentialities. The absence carries with it the privation of the creature's proper and suitable perfection and completion, as blindness in the eye is simply the absence of the eye's proper operation and end. Aquinas concludes, "Now the subject of privation and of form is one and the same [i.e. the eye is both the subject of sight and of blindness] – namely, being in potentiality . . . Hence every actual being is a good; and likewise every potential being is a good having a relation to the good. For as it has being in potentiality, so it has goodness in potentiality. Therefore, the subject of evil is good." (48, 3, resp.) Since evil does not exist in itself, it cannot act of itself and, consequently, cannot be the cause of itself. Is evil, then, a kind of potentiality to which privation belongs as an intrinsic property? This is what led Maimonides to identify evil with matter as a principle permanently opposed to form. Aquinas rejects, however, the identification of evil with potency, because potency is a relative good, in so far as it can be actualized.<sup>17</sup> Evil is not potency, but the absence of a thing's appropriate actualization.

Moreover, evil's attachment to the good is accidental. At the same time, evil must have a cause since it is the nature of things to be good and to tend naturally towards complete goodness. Aquinas begins to sketch out an answer in the following crucial passage:

But that anything fall short of its natural and due disposition can come only from some cause drawing it out of its proper disposition. For a heavy thing is not moved upwards except by some impelling force, nor does an agent fail in its action except from some impediment. But only good can be a cause, because nothing can be a cause except inasmuch as it is a being and every being, as such, is good (I, 49, 1, resp.).

As I have stressed, it belongs to finite things not just to be good merely as existing, but also as striving towards complete actualization. Thus, only a serious breach in this natural tendency could cause good things to become bad. But since to be a cause is to act in a certain way, then according to the convertibility thesis, good must be the cause of evil. An obvious difficulty

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<sup>17</sup> Potency is not the absence or privation of a good, but the condition of the becoming of G3: sight is the actualization of the eye's potency. See *ST I*, 77, 1.

suggests itself here: if good is the cause of evil, and evil is the privation of something properly suited to a thing's nature, how can the good work against itself towards its own demise, absence, and negation? Aquinas' resolution of this difficulty leads to a deepening of the metaphysical analysis of evil and perhaps to a fresh perspective on the entire problematic.

Having established evil as deficiency of the good, the next step in the argument adds a further precision to the concept. Evil is now understood as the "removal of the due end." (*remotio debiti finis*) [48, 1, ad 2] Now such a removal occurs in the case of moral evil (but also in the case of physical evil) as a result of agency. "So then the evil which is a specific difficulty in morality is some good bound up with the privation of another." In other words, some desirable goods are not mutually compatible – or compossible in Leibniz's terminology – in choosing one, the other is "removed" as a possibility. The example that Aquinas provides is this: the end of an intemperate man is not to deprive himself of the good of reason, but to obtain the good of sensual pleasures, a good, however, that displaces the due end of rational choice. Only in light of acts of willing a good does evil attain its shadowy presence.<sup>18</sup> In itself, it is indefinite, empty and void (*per se autem est infinitum*). Even though Aquinas states that the cause of evil lies either in the agent or in the instrument, it will become apparent that even instrumental deficiency is reducible to agency of one kind or another.

According to Aquinas, if the will is to be thought as causing evil, then it must not be operating according to its proper nature. It must in some way already be defective: "Hence evil never follows in the effect unless some other evil pre-exists (*præexistat*) in the agent or in the matter . . . but in voluntary beings the defect of the action comes from an actually deficient will inasmuch as it does not actually subject itself to its proper rule (*non subijcit suae regulae*).” The act of the will is defective to the extent that it does not seek counsel and follow the directives of right reason towards its proper good. As we have seen, this is unnatural since the will naturally desires the good that will perfect it according to its nature. Consequently, such a will is deficient with respect to the proper act of willing, that is, to will according to rational first principles –namely, to realize the good and avoid evil. It seems that according to my threefold division of the good, such a will would be deficient in G2. But doesn't deficiency of G2

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<sup>18</sup> Aquinas believes like Aristotle that rational beings not only desire their good, but also have a conception of the good. If, for instance, one's conception of happiness is flawed, then the choice of what concrete goods contribute to it will also be flawed.

belong to its created nature? Aquinas is faced with a dilemma: it must be the case that either something good (G1) lacking complete goodness (G2) is a natural condition, or something good lacking complete goodness is an unnatural condition. On the basis of my prior analysis of convertibility, it should be clear that the proper place to look for the causal deficiency is in the goodness, neither of *esse simpliciter* nor of *bonum simpliciter*, but of temporal becoming (G3). And as we have seen, the need to become fully actual is the result of the ontologically necessary distinction between G1 and G2 – necessary because if it were not the case, only one being would exist.<sup>19</sup>

Aquinas argues consistently on the basis of convertibility that evil is an accident of a being that does not achieve in act what is proper to it according to its essence. “Hence it is true that evil has no cause, except unless an accidental cause. And in this way good is the cause of evil.” (49, 1 resp.) Good is the cause simply because all beings are striving to become what they were meant to be – perfect and that, as I have shown, is the meaning of good. But if the good as the desirable final end of a being is the accidental cause of evil, then it is an accident that seems very much part of the process of G1 becoming G2. And although it is accidental, it still results from agency, whether divine or human. For Aquinas it is axiomatic that a deficiency of goodness can only be the result of causal agency:

But the evil which consists in the corruption of something is reducible to God as cause. And this appears as regards both natural things and voluntary things (I, 49, 2 resp.).

As I said, Aquinas is consistent, even if it entails ascribing certain evils to divine causality. This means, as we shall see in the analysis of divine Providence, that God wills not only the transient generation and passing away of nature, but also the contingency of free choice, which releases rational nature from the bonds of causal determination (83, 1, resp).

For it was said that some agent, inasmuch as it produces by its power a form which is followed by corruption and defect, causes by its power that corruption and defect . . . Now the order of the universe requires that there should be some things that can, and sometime do fail (*quadam sint quae deficere possint, et interdum deficient*). Thus God by causing in things the good order of the universe, consequently and, as it were by accident (*quasi per accidens*) causes the corruptions of things . . . (I, 49, 2, resp.).

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<sup>19</sup> *ST I*, 11, 3. This adumbrates the crucial step that Spinoza took in separating himself from scholastic metaphysics. Because of this, Spinoza concluded that only one substance could exist.

Because God's aim is to maximize the perfection and goodness of the universe as a whole, he allows the accidental corruption and defect of things – for the sake of the universal Good.<sup>20</sup> In this way, Aquinas exculpates the divine will the same way he will later exculpate human acts that in intending some good bring about unintended, although foreseeable, bad side-effects (The Doctrine Double Effect).<sup>21</sup> Hence, there are two significant claims in the above: (1) that if something can fail, it will indeed fail;<sup>22</sup> and (2) that both the divine and human will share this structural similarity of double effect — that in willing the good, evil follows as an accidental, although unavoidable, side-effect of striving for some good. Both points are essential elements of Thomistic theodicy.

### 3. Divine Providence and Theodicy

Aquinas prepares the ground for his treatment of Providence with his discussion of the divine will in q.19. As he has made clear already, the root of both moral and physical evil lies not only in the good, but ultimately in a good will. If the divine will acts in regard to the world analogously to a morally good human will in the context of double effect, what intended good of divine action can bear the burden of the unintended bad side-effects?<sup>23</sup>

Aquinas answers the objection that to will is an act of a finite being, by stating that God wills his own goodness as an end – an end not external to him, but identical with his own essence. And by willing his own goodness, the essence of which is to be self-diffusive, God wills to communicate this goodness to others.

In things willed for the sake of the end the whole reason for our being moved is the end; and this is what moves the will ... Hence, although God wills things

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<sup>20</sup> *ST I*, 48, 2, resp.

<sup>21</sup> *ST II-II*, 64, 7, where Aquinas formulates the doctrine in the context of the moral permissibility of killing in self-defence.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas uses a similar approach in the third proof of the existence of God: if everything is merely contingent *and* there is no necessary cause of being, then *at some point in time (aliquando)* there should have been nothing left in existence (*ST I*, 2, 3). On the other hand, if there is indeed a necessary cause preventing us from falling out of being, there is no such cause to prevent us from failing to achieve the good by means of human choice and action. God's causality maintains things in being; it does not directly determine the course of the human will – see below my analysis of *ST I*, 83.

<sup>23</sup> Eleonore Stump has recently argued against this sort of justification of evil. See her “The Problem of Evil and the Desires of the Heart,” in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I. Edited Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).

other than Himself only for the sake of the end, which is His own goodness, it does not follow that anything else moves His will except His Goodness (I, 19, 2, ad 2).

This means that it is not simply the case that “good is the cause of evil,” but that a willed good is the cause of evil. But Aquinas’s further qualification is important. In willing an end it is not always necessary to will all things that might lead to the end. Some things are not necessary for the attainment of the end: “such as a horse for a stroll since we can take a stroll without a horse” (19, 3, resp.), unlike a ship for sailing across the sea. The goodness of God is complete in itself without the addition of other ends, which add nothing to God’s perfection. This difference between God’s willing his own Goodness and his willing other things not intrinsic to his Goodness accounts for the “accidental” emergence of evil in the universe: God creates human free will with the capacity to choose contingent means towards final ends, namely, means not necessarily determined by the end, for example, a horse for strolling. This explains at first Aquinas’ puzzling claim that God wills, but does not will, the bad effects of human agency:

[...] that God does not necessarily will some of the things that He wills, does not result from defect in the divine will, but from a defect belonging to the nature of the thing willed, namely, *that the perfect goodness of God can be without it; any such defect accompanies every created good (qui quidem defectus consequitur omne bonum creatum)* (I, 19, 3, ad 4; my emphasis).

This is one of the crucial texts in his entire treatment. What is remarkable is not the seeming paradox that God wills (in the sense of allows) that which he does not will (because some contingent means are not conducive to the creature’s end), but the fact that the divine will is perfect and complete without the world *constitutes* a defect in the world. But what is the defect of created being – that it is not necessary to God, or that it is not self-sufficient in being? The problem arises directly from convertibility, for, as applied to God, G1 is identical to G2.<sup>24</sup> There is no question of G3, the addition of accidents to actualize power in God. On the other hand, the good of striving to become fully actual, makes up the temporal existence of the creature and provides the ground of its agency. And this “defect” belonging to the “accidental” nature of finite being will remain until the creature attains G2, completed perfection of its nature, which for Aquinas defines heavenly beatitude.

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<sup>24</sup> For Aquinas’ own formulation, see *Summa contra Gentiles* I, cc.100-101, translated by Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

Aquinas' thesis that G3 is the result of the ontologically defective structure of the world sets the stage for his important treatment of divine Providence. For how could a good God allow creation to work through its deficient nature on its own, especially a deficiency not due to itself, but to the very fact of being created? But since God's goodness is self-diffusive, it necessarily extends its influence to the realm of finite becoming: Providence, then, is simply the goodness of God made manifest and active in divine Reason's ordering all things to an end. Good is found not only in the bare substance of things, but also in their being ordered towards a final end. Importantly, Aquinas adds: "This good of order existing in created things is itself created by God . . ." (22, 1, resp.) Here the idea seems to be that divine providence is immanent in the teleological structure of creation, which in turn provides the concrete connection between G1 and G2: human development from G1 to G2 is certainly contingent, but not disordered; undetermined, but not unguided; free, but not arbitrary. Providence, so conceived, is the divine response to the deficiency that besets and propels the entire process of self-actualization of beings possessing intellect and will. It is a rational force in the world ordering and influencing human acts to pursue and attain their final end – and this is what I have been calling G3. This ordering, however, is not imposed, but is in accord with the nature of human agency. It is axiomatic for Aquinas that God moves all things according to the principles of their natures; inanimate objects are moved according to their physical properties; non-rational sentient beings by appetite and instinct; while beings whose nature is to act by means of rational deliberation and choice, will be moved accordingly, that is, freely. How does God move or direct human agency freely? Not by any means that might destroy or limit the will, such as fear or coercion, but by the only way human agency could be freely influenced, namely, by the rational persuasion of the good.

God therefore is the first cause, who moves causes both natural and voluntary. And just as by moving natural causes He does not prevent their actions from being natural, so by moving voluntary causes, He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary [...] for He operates in each thing according to its nature (I, 83, a 1, ad 3).

It follows that even as God's manifest goodness, Providence can be resisted by the contingent self-determination of secondary causes. On the other hand, if God were to prevent such actions, it would destroy the more universal good of free choice. Yet even here, Providence can still bring good from evil. This is so because as a temporal accident of the good,

evil cannot endure. In Aquinas' biblical commentary, even Job gains in humility and compassion because of his suffering.<sup>25</sup>

Since God is the universal guardian for all being, it belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular things, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered; for if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution (I, 22, 2, ad 2).

One might ask, could patience not be learned some other way, or what would be lost if lions were not carnivorous? But Aquinas' account trades on the classical rational theodicy that tolerates a little evil for the sake of the greater good. It is in fact extremely close to Hegel's account, which Hegel himself called the only "true theodicy." Consider one, albeit extremely metaphorical, version of Hegel's theodicy:

But as we contemplate history as this slaughter-bench, upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals were sacrificed, a question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made? ...This imponderable mass of wills, interests, and activities – these are the tools and means of the World Spirit for achieving its goal, to elevate it to consciousness and to actualize it. And the goal is none other than to find itself, to come to itself, and to behold itself as actuality.<sup>26</sup>

For Hegel the full actualization of the purposes of spirit (G3) is an achievement of history, not some otherworldly beatitude that Aquinas would call *bonum simpliciter*. But whether in time or out of time matters little to their shared perspective – that actualizing the Good through the mediation of temporal becoming requires the necessary involvement of negativity and evil.

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<sup>25</sup> "Whatever happens on earth, even if it is evil, turns out for the good of the whole world. Because as Augustine says... God is so good that he would never permit any evil if he were not also so powerful that from any evil he could draw out a good." (*In Rom* 8, 6) Quoted by E. Stump, *Aquinas* (London, Routledge, 2003), p. 462.

<sup>26</sup> *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, III, 2. Translated by Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), pp. 24 and 27.



## II. HEGEL'S CONCEPTION OF EVIL AND THE LOGIC OF FINITUDE

Although it plays a minor role in his mature theory of absolute spirit, Hegel's explanation of evil can be squarely placed within traditional metaphysical treatments of evil and, similar to Aquinas' theodicy, offers us a richly illuminating case study of the possibilities and the limitations of metaphysical thought in its attempt to incorporate evil into its systematic comprehension of reality. Hegel would not only fully endorse Aquinas' thesis that "good is the cause of evil," but would also agree with Aquinas that *malum* does not refer primarily to either moral or natural phenomena, but is a necessary ontological structure of the finite world.<sup>27</sup> The world and finite human existence begin to appear to religious consciousness as evil solely by being known as having been posited "outside" of the essential sphere of divine being. Consequently, evil first appears to consciousness as a species of self-knowledge. Why does the knowledge of being posited outside of the divine appear to consciousness as evil?<sup>28</sup> Hegel's point is, I believe, extremely close to Aquinas' view that the mere fact of being posited as God's other introduces the consciousness of deficiency into finite being.

According to Hegel's concept, evil is an ontologically necessary aspect of the finite, existing in and for itself that differentiates it from the pure, self-identity of the divine Being or Essence. It is posited as necessary by the divine being as a first step in its process of becoming absolute, where "absolute" means subjectivity and subjectivity means a self-relation mediated by becoming "other than oneself." Consequently, the simplest and most intuitive definition of evil that Hegel can provide is the necessary process of development that involves becoming other than oneself – *evil is becoming other than what one in truth is* as a necessary stage in the

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<sup>27</sup> As will become clear below, Hegel, like Aquinas, does not view evil as a purely natural phenomenon – the appearance of evil in the world depends on some factor other than the world itself. From a purely naturalistic vantage point, things are neither good nor evil, but useful or harmful for human purposes. The best critical account in English of Hegel's conception of evil is William Desmond's "Dialectic and Evil: On the Idiocy of the Monstrous," in his *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic* (Albany, SUNY, 1992). Desmond argues that Hegel's dialectical interpretation of evil from the perspective of the Absolute is unable to consider non-rational dimensions of the problem.

<sup>28</sup> "Being posited by the divine Idea" is Hegel's logical rendering of the biblical notion of creation. But, one might still ask, why is knowledge of being created, that is, knowledge of being other than the divine, evil?

development of absolute subjectivity.<sup>29</sup> The essence of evil, consequently, depends on one's awareness of an ontological dichotomy between how one is and how one should be – in traditional terminology, a scission between essence and existence. Evil appears in finite spirit because spirit not only has become other (the dichotomy between essence and existence), but also has become aware of this otherness as a form of alienation from its essence.

Hegel builds on the notion that evil is a necessary element in the world's being reintegrated into total identity with its divine essence. Evil is a necessary rupture in the pure self-identity of the divine being (what Aquinas would call its simplicity) that allows a previously abstract identity ( $A = A$ ) to attain a mediated content of determinate being, that is, existence. To exist requires negation: to be so and so and not otherwise. And this is precisely what the abstract divine essence lacks because of its pure simplicity.

Hence God, mediated by the concrete existence of the finite world, achieves self-identity in and through the human consciousness of being both other than, and one with, the divine substance. In this way, the otherness of the world that God posited both as a condition of the world's existence and as an element of divine subjectivity is reconciled with God in finite spirit's knowledge of itself as identical with its other. The absolute consciousness of being one with the divine heals the original rupture between the finite world and the divine and allows the negation of otherness to be negated by an all-encompassing unity. Evil has two aspects in this account: (1) it is a value-neutral ontological structure of the finite world as being other than its original source in the divine essence; and (2) it becomes explicitly bad and undesirable only in the human consciousness of itself as existing in opposition to, and alienation from, its actual essence as spirit. Thus both (1) and (2) are identical in the necessity of their being negated and overcome by the development of absolute subjectivity.

### 1. Hegel's Analysis of Evil in the Moral Consciousness

Hegel's idiosyncratic exposition of evil in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents the reader with multiple questions and difficulties: What is evil from a purely phenomenological perspective and why does Hegel examine it more fully in the chapter on revealed religion than in the chapter on

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<sup>29</sup> See R.-P. Horstmann, *Wahrheit Aus Dem Begriff* (Frankfurt, Anton Hain, 1990), esp. Chapter IV; "Subjektivität als ontologische Kategorie."

morality? Why is evil most adequately grasped as a breakdown of the religious consciousness that finds itself unable to integrate within itself the speculative content of the “manifest religion” – that is, when it is unable to acknowledge the divine essence within itself?<sup>30</sup> Is Hegel claiming that only a religious consciousness, the content of which is knowledge of its substantial being [*Wesen*] in the divine being, is able to recognize deficiency and otherness as evil?

I will begin with a brief sketch of the moral presuppositions of the appearance of evil to religious consciousness. Hegel’s chapter on morality (VI, C) is the last stage of human spirit’s development towards freedom arising out of its natural condition of self-alienation. Morality, for Hegel, is the culmination of an historical process, by which spirit takes full possession of its independence from nature by means of agency. The moral agent is no longer a being determined by impersonal forces of nature, but a self-determining subject morally responsible for his actions. What, then, is behind this understanding of morality and how does it relate to the question of evil?

Hegel presupposes Kant’s conception of morality as consciousness of acting in accordance with duty, where duty is understood as a universal principle of obligation. The moral person evaluates his actions as morally right or morally wrong in light of universal laws. But Kant was also eager to demonstrate that acting in accordance with duty constitutes the highest instance of autonomy. Likewise, Hegel believed even more radically than Kant that morality was justified only as a stage in the development of freedom, because the goal of human action was the complete actualization of spirit as spirit, that is, as a pure self-relation in which the moral good to be achieved by action did not stand over against the natural good of the agent or of the community. Hegel argued that the Kantian agent would inevitably find himself alienated from his own actions, cut off from his own good, by the single-minded fulfilment of duty. Think of Kant’s famous argument against lying even to save an innocent person from a murderer.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit* [PS], translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 496. Occasionally I alter Miller’s translation based on the German critical edition, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [PG], edited by H.-F. Wessels and H. Clairmont (Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1988). I have also consulted the draft of Terry Pinkard’s translation soon to be published by Cambridge University Press and available on-line at:

[http://web.mac.com/titpaul/Site/Phenomenology\\_of\\_Spirit\\_page.html](http://web.mac.com/titpaul/Site/Phenomenology_of_Spirit_page.html)

<sup>31</sup> See “On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy,” (1797) in *Kant: Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Thus Hegel depicts the “moral point of view” as a viewpoint claiming to be absolute, yet severed from reality:

Self-consciousness knows duty to be the absolute essence. It is bound only by duty, and the substance is its own pure consciousness, for which duty cannot receive the form of something alien. However, as thus locked up within itself, moral self-consciousness is not yet posited and considered as consciousness (PS, p. 365).

Hegel means that consciousness is always a consciousness of something other than itself. By identifying moral consciousness with duty, a false universality is constructed because the self is not identical to abstract duty. It is more: it is spirit. Hence the universal claims of Kantian duty are false simply because acting on duty will not harmonize the agent with his own nature. The unity of duty and self is a unity enclosed within a consciousness without objective content. Hegel emphasizes the opposition between morality and nature that Kant had elevated to the principal goal of his moral system and the foundation of all moral value.

But this moral consciousness is at the same time faced with the presupposed freedom of nature; in other words, it learns from experience that nature is not concerned with giving the moral consciousness a sense of the unity of its reality with that of nature, and hence that nature perhaps may let it become happy, or perhaps may not (PS, p. 366).

Moral consciousness thus faces a genuine other than itself that not only contradicts its universal claims, but also has a deeper claim to the existential individuality of the agent. More precisely, the moral agent cannot avoid knowing himself to be a particular self, who acts out of natural inclinations and desires for happiness. Thus, morality necessarily enters a stage of inner conflict because it cannot circumvent the nature of the self. Consequently, and this is Hegel’s crucial point, the moral perspective necessarily divides the Good into two, the supreme moral good of universal law and the concrete existential good of the individual, but is incapable of uniting them.

The harmony of morality and nature – or ... the harmony of morality and happiness, is thought of as something that necessarily is, i.e. it is postulated. For to say that something is demanded, means that something is thought of in the form of being that is not yet actual – a necessity ... of being (PS p. 367).

Hegel has already made fully clear in the *Phenomenology* that his understanding of the concept is fully metaphysical, that is, it is the form by which the absolute determines itself as identical with objective reality – the identity of the Idea with existence. Thus Hegel concludes:

The existence thus demanded, i.e. the unity of both [the unity of pure and individual consciousness], is therefore not a wish nor, regarded as a purpose, one whose attainment were still uncertain; it is rather a demand of reason, or an immediate certainty and presupposition of reason (PS, p. 367).

For Hegel it is an obvious consequence of Kantian morality not to be able to attain harmony between nature and duty. The actual attainment of harmony has to remain a work in progress: "But the consummation of this progress has to be projected into a future infinitely remote; for if it actually came about, this would do away with the moral consciousness."<sup>32</sup> Hegel's point is this: Duty is an obligation because of our tendency to act for the sake of personal satisfaction, but a perfectly good will would not be bound by duty.

Nonetheless, morality still presents itself as the highest expression of the freedom of spirit. For through the actions of the will in shaping the world in accordance with the universal law, spirit comes to know itself as the essence (substance) of the ethical world:

In the moral world view we see on the one hand consciousness itself produce its object with consciousness; we see that it neither encounters the object as something alien, nor does the object become [present] to consciousness in an unconscious manner, rather it proceeds every time according to a reason, out of which consciousness posits objective being; it knows this being to be itself, for it knows itself as the active principle that produces it (PS, p. 374; PG, p. 405).<sup>33</sup>

This is certainly in agreement with Hegel's formal definition of freedom: to be one with oneself in the other.<sup>34</sup> For the object brought into being by the moral action of consciousness is identical with the moral intention to shape the world according to moral principle. Hegel adds that it seems that consciousness has found "peace and satisfaction," which it can only find if it does not have to go beyond the object to be with itself.

On the other hand, consciousness posits the object outside of itself, as a beyond of itself. But this in and for itself being is also posited as being not free from

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<sup>32</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit. p. 368.

<sup>33</sup> This is totally in keeping with the idealist premise of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* that we can know only "what reason produces after a plan of its own" (B xiii). My point, however, is that Hegel is unable to stop at what for him was merely a "psychological" insight, if he in fact wants to present, in contrast to Kant, an absolute idealism capable of knowing reality itself and not just how it appears to us.

<sup>34</sup> *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, I (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970) §24 Zu. 2. Hegel further writes: "Freedom only exists where there is no other for me, which I myself am not." (my translation)

self-consciousness, rather as being in the interest of consciousness and existing through it (PS, p. 374; PG, p. 405).

Hegel borrows Kant's phrase, "a nest of thoughtless contradictions," to describe this situation of moral consciousness. Why is it in contradiction with itself? Hegel means that when we act morally, we do not simply intend, as moral agents, to produce a world of our own making, but to act in conformity to normative principles. So the action is both fully our own, yet determined by something beyond our will, namely, universal reason. When we discover that the finite self cannot be the source of this normativity, our intention and our acts seem to fall apart.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, morality alone cannot offer spirit's self-consciousness either complete satisfaction or complete freedom. Hegel expresses this as the logical contradiction between "being in itself" and "being for another." Is moral consciousness truly an independent being in and for itself, or is it in fact a being for another, namely, an instrument of universal principles?

The logical explication of the conflict foreshadows Hegel's ultimate solution to the problem. Yet moral consciousness intuitively feels the conflict as simply a failure of the will to act according to universal principle. The first appearance of evil (*Böse*) in the *Phenomenology* occurs in this consciousness divided between the particular content that the self wills for itself (i.e. satisfactions of desires) and its recognition of universal duty:

For the consciousness which holds firmly to duty, the first consciousness counts as evil, because of the disparity between its inner being and the universal [*die Ungleichheit seines In-sich-seins mit dem Allgemeinen*]; and since at the same time, this first consciousness declares its action to be in conformity with itself, to be duty and conscientiousness, it is held by the universal consciousness to be hypocrisy (PS, p. 401; PG, p. 434).

It is significant that for the universal moral consciousness the disparity between the natural consciousness and the moral law is simply a manifestation of hypocrisy, meaning consciousness presents itself as other than what it truly is. Thus, overcoming "evil" is something we can do ourselves simply by admitting the disparity and living with a renewed sense of moral resolve. "It must be made apparent that it is evil, and thus its existence made to correspond to its essence [*so sein Dasein seinem Wesen gleich*], the hypocrisy must be unmasked."<sup>36</sup> And it is unmasked

<sup>35</sup> Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008) addresses this tension and seeks to resolve it (see, especially, Part Three, "Sociality," pp. 183 ff.).

<sup>36</sup> PS, p. 401 and PG, p. 438.

by the confession of being evil.<sup>37</sup> Hence morality makes us aware of an immediate form of evil, personal hypocrisy – the state of being of two minds – in order to point us in the direction of confession and repentance. Hegel's summary of this process allows us a glimpse into the facility and ease, by which the entire movement of overcoming otherness achieves the desired reconciliation:

The breaking of the hard heart, and the raising of it to universality, is the same movement which was expressed in the consciousness that made confession of itself. The wounds of the spirit heal, and leave no scar behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality [*die Seite der Einzelheit*] present in it ... straightway vanishes (PS, p. 407; PG, p. 440).

At this point, at the end of the section on morality, Hegel enunciates his first formal definition of evil as a contrast between the pure knowledge of spirit as universal essence and the exclusivity of individuality:

[The pure knowledge of spirit] is the pure continuity of the universal, which is aware that the individuality which is conscious of itself as essence, is intrinsically a nullity, is evil [*als das an sich Nichtige, als das Böse*] (PS, p. 408; PG, p. 441).

This is a good definition of moral evil – the intention of the individual to establish his desire for satisfaction as the purpose of all human action – but as an analysis of the self's claim to be the essence of action it is unsatisfactory. Isn't consciousness simply asserting itself to be what its "essence" as a natural being demands? Morality grasps the form of evil without grasping its metaphysical ground. For instance, why is there a division between nature and morality in the first place? This question is left unasked by morality because it is neither a moral nor a psychological question, but an ontological one demanding a more comprehensive vision of reality. This vision religion supplies.

## 2. Evil in Religious Consciousness

Morality's understanding of the phenomenon of evil does not lead to a satisfactory resolution. What then does religion contribute to our understanding of evil according to Hegel? Hegel repeatedly stresses the importance of religion as a form of consciousness in coming to his goal of speculative knowledge of the Absolute as it is in itself. In this

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<sup>37</sup> "das Eingeständnis: Ich bins ..." PG, p. 438; PS, p. 405.

respect, religion is essential because as revealed [*Die offenbare Religion*] it is knowledge of the absolute. Thus revealed religion provides a deeper comprehension of evil because it offers a perspective on evil not from the finite point of view of moral consciousness, but from the perspective of the absolute itself. This revealed knowledge of the absolute heightens religious awareness of being both identical with the divine being, yet radically other. Such an opposition – the essence of evil – cannot be reduced to hypocrisy because the origin of the otherness lies not merely in an internal conflict of the will, but in the nature of the finite world as such.

The totality of spirit, the spirit of religion, is again the movement away from its immediacy towards the attainment of the knowledge of what it is in itself or immediately, the movement in which, finally, the shape in which it appears for its consciousness will be perfectly identical with its essence, and it will behold itself as it is (PS, p. 414).

Hegel makes an extraordinary claim on behalf of the shape of religious consciousness to provide complete self-knowledge of spirit. This self-knowledge implies an adequate comprehension not only of itself as other, but also of the real ground of its self-identity and the reason for its becoming other than itself. This knowledge, which Hegel describes as revealed, provides insight into the origin of spirit's impulse to be in relation to the divine being:

In this religion the divine essence is revealed. Its revelation clearly consists in this, that it becomes known, what it is . . . God is therefore revealed here, as he is; he exists so, as he is in himself; he exists as spirit. God is attainable only in pure speculative knowledge, and is only in that knowledge, for He is spirit; and this speculative knowledge is the knowledge of the revealed religion (PS, pp. 459-61; PG, pp. 495-6).

What then is the content of the speculative knowledge that Hegel ascribes to revealed religion?<sup>38</sup> In order to avoid misinterpreting Hegel's text, it is important to keep in mind that the claim of being revealed entails a theological point of view, that is, interpreting the finite world and evil from the divine perspective. From such a perspective, evil appears to religious consciousness as a necessary moment of the divine being's self-abandonment [*Entäusserung*] and self-determination as absolute spirit.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> I cannot treat in the present essay the philosophically crucial question of how we grasp this revealed content or how we come to accept its truth. This would require a detailed interpretation of both chapters VII and VIII (Absolute Knowledge) of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>39</sup> The meaning of "Entäusserung": Hegel borrowed the term from Luther's translation



This revealed knowledge has the following logical form: because spirit is represented by consciousness as existing in the divine essence in the form of “simple unity,” spirit can only achieve real existence by negating its simple unity and “becoming other” [*Anderswerden*] than itself in the external shape of nature:<sup>40</sup>

The merely eternal or abstract spirit becomes itself an other and enters immediately into existence. It creates therefore a world (PS, p. 467; PG, p. 503).

But in becoming an immediate other-being (external nature), spirit abandons its eternal substance or pure self-relation and becomes other than the eternal substance; it becomes a being-for-another. It becomes nature. But because this self-othering of the divine spirit remains both spirit and a self, it remains identical to itself even in its “being-other,” even if this identity is implicit and not yet fully known. Spirit’s thought of itself holds on to the moment of otherness in the form of two opposed aspects of the same reality: good and evil. This tension between identity and difference in finite spirit is represented by religious consciousness in the following way:

The human being is represented by means of something that really happened, but was not necessary, namely, that he lost the form of self-harmony through plucking off the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and [as a result] consciousness has been exiled from its state of innocence... (PS, p. 468; PG, p. 504).

Hegel qualifies the exiled state of consciousness as evil. But why? What does Hegel mean by evil? First, it is a thought, that is, a particular way of thinking, or representing spirit in its condition of having lost its natural simplicity and innocence. It now knows itself to be a finite, particular, and transient thing in the world. It is thus a claim to know something new about itself from the perspective of an otherness. Spirit is now aware that it has lost something essential to it, namely, its relation to the divine Other. In

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of the Pauline notion of “kenosis” – self-emptying, abandonment, and self-negation. But Hegel adds to this the notion of a reciprocal process of recognition of the self in its other: the subject becomes the object, and the object becomes the subject in a reciprocal abandonment, only because the subject (or self) was always the object (or substance) and the substance was always implicitly the subject (or the rational agency of self-conscious subject). What is “abandoned” is each side’s supposed independent being in itself. The divine being’s *Entäusserung* sets in motion a process, by which the finite self begins to recognize the divine other as an ‘other’ of itself. The recognition of *Entäusserung*, then, is the means for overcoming its partial understanding of evil.

<sup>40</sup> What biblical theology had interpreted as a free act of divine creation, is now grasped speculatively as a necessary act of self-negation and self-positing as other by the simple divine essence.

this condition of being both spirit, yet different from its divine essence, evil is simply “the going within itself of the natural consciousness of spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Thus evil is the consciousness of being a self-sufficient and independently existing instance of universal spirit.

The other side representation sees evil as an occurrence alien to the divine essence, viewing it in its very being as the wrath of God. This is the highest and hardest striving of representation wrestling with itself, which, because it is bereft of its concept, remains fruitless (PS, p. 470; PG, p. 506).

The appearance of evil is misrepresented by the religious understanding, which lacks the appropriate concepts to grasp the identity of good and evil. That is, theological representation correctly intuits that good and evil have a shared origin in God, but is unable to make sense of this thought. It lacks the conceptual framework for understanding how evil originates in a God, who is wholly good. It is tempted to think “good is the cause of evil,” but is unable to see how this could be. The result is a complete falling apart of consciousness within itself, split by two opposing and contradictory thoughts about its own thought content, about its own nature. In this way, it is forced to interpret its own human nature, separated from the divine being, as a nothingness. But in this abstract opposition, it cannot keep good and evil distinct because it knows its own nature as spirit is good. Hegel’s argument turns on the dialectical point that in order to know oneself as evil in relation to the divine essence, one must already be beyond one’s self-enclosed, evil state of being:

In so far as evil is the same as good, evil is not evil, nor is good good, but both sides are sublated, evil is in general a being for-itself that exists in itself, and the good is this same simple being. Both are the same [...] since being-for-itself is simple knowing ... (PS, p. 472; PG, p. 508).

Hegel seems to be claiming that in their formal structure, good and evil mirror each other.

Hegel explains the above identity of the two opposing representations as a holding fast to the moments of identity and non-identity, while overlooking the movement between them, which is the thinking activity of spirit. Fixated on its own identity over against what is other, human spirit withdraws further into itself. Revealed religion ironically serves to intensify the consciousness of guilt and evil because of its heightened awareness of its temporal separation from the divine: “That the spiritual essence is still burdened with an unreconciled division between the here

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<sup>41</sup> PS, p.469-70; PG, p. 505.

and now and the beyond.”<sup>42</sup> It cannot recognize itself in the divine because of its persistent knowledge of itself a naturally transitory being, coming into and going out of existence. Without being able to solve the space/time puzzle of ontological difference, it remains in a gap between the nullity of nature and the eternal substance of the divine. At the same time, as spirit, it is also in movement of self-transcendence in the form of knowledge:

The movement of the two sides of spirit is natural; the self has to withdraw itself out of this naturalness and to go into itself, that means, to become evil. But it is already in itself evil; the going into itself consists in convincing itself that natural existence is evil... For the self is what is negative; that is, it is a knowing – a knowing that is a pure act of consciousness in itself ... This knowing is therefore a becoming-evil, but only as a becoming of the thought of evil, and is acknowledged, consequently, as the first moment of reconciliation (PS, p. 474; PG, p. 510).

But how is this reconciliation possible for religious consciousness since it lacks conceptual understanding of the absolute and an act of moral confession will not bridge the abyss between it and the divine? The problem is that its knowing is still “revealed,” that is, constructed out of past religious representations of gods becoming human. Consequently, it must continue to rely on representation and feeling, most prominently love, until its knowing becomes fully speculative. It imagines itself having a divine origin (father), but it is human love (mother) that will provide it hope to endure temporal otherness and separation from the divine essence. Here is the key text from the last paragraph of the chapter on religion:

So as the single divine human being has an implicit father and only a real mother, so also the universal divine human being, the community, has its own act and knowing [*Wissen*] as its father, as its mother, however, the eternal love, which it can only feel, but not intuit in its consciousness as an actual immediate object. Its reconciliation is, accordingly, in its heart, but still separated from its consciousness, and its reality is still broken (PS, p. 478; PG, p. 514).

This leads to Hegel’s claim that religious consciousness is necessarily a divided consciousness: “The spirit of the community is in its immediate consciousness divided from its religious consciousness, which indeed proclaims that implicitly they are not divided, but it is an implicit unity that is not actualized, it has not yet become absolute for-itself being.” (515) It knows itself reconciled with the divine being by love, but it cannot comprehend its own otherness as an essential moment of the divine being’s self-mediation.

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<sup>42</sup> PS, p. 463; PG, p. 498.

### III. CONCLUSION: PARTIAL RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS OF CONVERTIBILITY AND EVIL

That being can be fully cognized by mind is a premise common to both Aquinas and Hegel and leads to some form of transcendental predication: being as being is actual, desirable, true, and good. The attempt to understand evil in the context of convertibility leads to unsatisfying results for Aquinas. Moreover, Hegel pushes beyond Aquinas to his radical explanation of evil. Not only are being and good convertible, but good and evil are as well. Seen from the speculative point of view of the divine absolute becoming other than itself while negating this otherness in the form of human self-consciousness, good and evil are just two sides of the same idealized development. Evil is merely an historical side effect of spirit coming to know itself as freely self-determining in the sphere of finite nature and spirit. As such, it is justified as a transient moment of a teleological process leading to absolute self-knowledge. At the end of his logical analysis of the conceptual mediation of the absolute, Hegel makes explicit his logical conception of evil: it is a game, in which the absolute assumes a temporal mask only to remove it in a final act of self-revelation:

The movement of the concept is to be considered, as it were, only a game; the other, what has been posited by the concept, is in fact not an other.<sup>43</sup>

The “game” allows the divine absolute an existential view of its being in itself. But this divine perspective cannot capture deep human intuitions about evil, suffering, and pain. Evil appears neither as the privation of good nor as the becoming absolute of God, but as a destructive force in the world that discloses other dimensions of reality not fully accessible to the rational categories of mind. This leads to a final question: should the inadequacy of traditional approaches to evil call for a reversal or abandonment of metaphysics, or invite a deeper reflection about reality that would not subsume the world’s darkness under what Hans Blumenberg once called “metaphysics of light”?<sup>44</sup> If a rational metaphysics of Being cannot do justice to the otherness of becoming, what kind of metaphysics could?

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<sup>43</sup> *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, I, op.cit. §161 (my translation).

<sup>44</sup> See Hans Blumenberg, “Licht als Metapher der Wahrheit. Im Vorfeld der philosophischen Begriffsbildung,” in *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*, selected and edited by Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).