

The Problems of Evil and Predestination
[Quotes from F. Schuon's books]
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From the standpoint of a piety nourished by anthropomorphism, the question of predestination and the question of evil are the two great problems. But from the standpoint of metaphysical knowledge, the only problem is that of expression through language; the difficulty therefore lies in the fact that the heaviness of language requires almost endless prolixities.(1) Be that as it may: on the principal plane, there are no unsolvable questions, for all that "is" can in principle be known, the human spirit being total — not partial as is animal intelligence. The real and the knowable coincide, not for the rational faculty to be sure, but for the Intellect, whose presence — actual or purely potential — constitutes the reason for being of the human condition.

1. The extreme opposite of the inevitable complication of abstract dialectics is visual symbolism, or simply symbolism, which exhibits all the aspects of a problem at once, but without thereby furnishing the keys allowing everything to be deciphered.

If the questions of evil and predestination appear as unsolvable problems to the average believer, it is because theology, owing to its anthropomorphism, halts midway; it improperly personalizes the supreme Principle, and this shows that it has an insufficient idea of what we term the "Divine Order." Doubtless there is no impenetrable partition between reason and intelligence, but the latter cannot enter fully and decisively into a thinking that identifies with dogmatic crystallizations and their corresponding sentimentalities.

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The Absolute by definition includes the Infinite — their common content being Perfection or the Good — and the Infinite in its turn gives rise, at the degree of that "lesser Absolute" that is Being, to ontological All-Possibility. Being cannot not include efficient Possibility, because it cannot prevent the Absolute from including the Infinite. Possibility has so to speak two dimensions, one "horizontal" and one "descending," or one "qualitative" and one "quantitative," analogically or metaphorically speaking. The first contains the indefinitely diverse qualities and archetypes, whereas the second projects them in the direction of "nothingness" or impossibility. In drawing away from its source — namely pure Being — the second dimension on the one hand coagulates the qualities and archetypes, and on the other manifests their contraries; whence ultimately the phenomenon of contrastive manifestation, and consequently of evil. Being, which coincides with the personal God, cannot prevent evil because, as we have said, It cannot abolish, and could not wish to abolish, the Infinitude of the pure Absolute.

And this resolves the following difficulty: if God is both good and omnipotent, why does He not abolish evil? Does He not wish to, or can He not do so? For the reasons we have just indicated, He cannot abolish evil as such — and He does not wish to abolish it because He knows its metaphysical necessity — but He is able and wishes to abolish particular evils, and in fact, all particular evils are transient;(2) the cosmogonic unfolding itself is transient since universal Manifestation is subject to phases and becomes reabsorbed "periodically" into the Apocatasis or the "Night of Brahman."

2. Even hell: which theology, for reasons of moral opportuneness — and in this respect rightly so — could not acknowledge explicitly. We shall return to this topic further on.

In one sense, the Absolute is beyond good and evil, but in another sense It is the very essence of goodness, which is to say that It is the Good as such. It is neither good nor evil insofar as It conditions, by the radiation of Its Infinitude, the genesis of what we term evil, but It is good in the sense that every conceivable good testifies to Its essential nature; evil as such could not have its root in the pure Absolute, nor in that "lesser Absolute" that is Being, the personal God. Moreover, evil ceases to be evil when it is seen as a metaphysical necessity contributing to that "greater good" which is, on the one hand, the contrastive manifestation of the good, and on the other the

reabsorption that transforms every evil into the Good which is both origin and end; *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. As regards the root of the problem, we could also express ourselves as follows: the absolute Good has no opposite; a good that has an opposite is not the absolute good; "God alone is good." If one were to say that supra-ontological Infinitude, or ontological Possibility which projects It, is "good" in the contrastive sense normally meant by this word, then the objection that evil does exist could be raised; but precisely, in relation to this indirect causation of evil — whether of privation or excess — one has to say that Possibility is beyond that opposition; it is "amoral," so to speak. In another respect however, as regards the intrinsic and positive nature of the supreme Principle, it has to be recognized that efficient Possibility or the personal God, as well as *a fortiori* the Infinitude of the impersonal or suprapersonal Divinity, must be defined as the "Sovereign Good."

Parallel to the problem of evil — which calls into question both the Omnipotence and the Goodness of God, and which exists only in virtue of the anthropomorphist confusion between the impersonal Divinity and the personal God — there is the problem of predestination, which calls into question, on the one hand man's freedom and therefore his responsibility, and on the other hand both the Goodness and Justice of God. Here too, the solution of the difficulty lies in the distinction between Being and Beyond-Being, or between the "lesser Absolute" and the "pure Absolute": predestination could not stem from a "will" — which in that case would necessarily be arbitrary — of the personal God; it stems from pure Possibility, whose source, as we have said, lies in the Infinitude of the Absolute. From this standpoint we would say that a creature is a possibility, and a possibility is what it is; therefore, in a sense it is what it "wants to be"; destiny is one of its aspects among others. The individual "wants" to be what he "is," and it could even be said, more profoundly, that he "is" what he "wants": what his possibility, the very one he manifests, wants — or wanted initially.

Everybody agrees that man is distinguished from animals by free will; but also, no one can deny that compared to a bird in a cage, a bird who escapes is free; the relative character of this freedom takes nothing away from the reality it represents and possesses. Therefore, freedom unquestionably exists, even in the case of an animal, but it goes without saying that the existence of a thing does not mean that it is absolute; and to deny absoluteness does not amount to denying existence, as is only too obvious.

In addressing Himself to the individual and to the collectivity — which by definition is made up of individuals — the personal God makes Himself an individual: that is to say, He creates a religion which is necessarily particular and formalistic and which for that reason could not be universal as regards its form, any more than an individual as such can represent or realize universality. By contrast, the impersonal Divinity does not create religions: the Divine Self confers universal truth and the corresponding sanctity from within, by illuminating the Intellect and by penetrating into the Heart; this presupposes that the Heart be without blemish, without passions and errors, and thus that it have reintegrated primordial purity. But God is one, and there is no question of acceding to immanence while going counter to transcendence, or of approaching the impersonal Divinity against the will or requirements of the personal God; particularly outside a religious framework.

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Assuredly, theologies have the right to use simplifying and moralizing stratagems demanded by their sphere of action, but human intelligence — to the extent that it is capable of rejoining its own substance — has nonetheless the right to know, beyond moral and other interests, the simple nature of things, even within the Divine Order. The theological point of view cannot refrain, in practice, from attributing to the personal God — Who is within the domain of *Māyā* — the features of the impersonal Divinity, which alone is beyond *Māyā* or Relativity; but the pure Intellect — hence in principle, man — can go beyond *Māyā* since it is essentially capable of conceiving the pure Absolute, which is beyond *Māyā*, Relativity, Being. Therefore, man is not absolutely subject to God the Person, or to God-*Māyā*; he is subject insofar as he is an individual, but not in every other respect, and that is why the *pneumatikos* is "a Law unto himself," which evokes the whole

question of the principal immanence of the Truth and the Way; we say "principal," thereby insisting strongly upon this reservation, for not every man is a *jīvan-mukta*.

Plainly, we are here at the limits of the expressible, where there is only one choice: either to take upon oneself the task of furnishing points of reference that cannot avoid paradox, complication, ellipsis and other drawbacks of thought or language, or else abstain from satisfying certain imperious needs for causal explanations, and confine oneself to asserting that "God does what He wills," and that the "potter" need not render account to the "pots" he has fashioned in accordance with his good pleasure. However, by refusing to take into account the needs for causal explanations to which man has a right in principle — since these needs stem from the total intelligence which characterizes the human species — one opens the door to luciferian usurpations and thereby to the most pernicious errors and denials — those which affect all that constitutes man's reason for being.

Therefore, man essentially has the right to ask certain questions: "in principle," as we have said, for in fact there is the original fall, which obliges religions — and thus theologies — to treat man like a child or like an invalid; yet fallen man is not all of man, and as a result there are problems — or rights and duties — against which it would be vain to legislate according to the "letter" of the Law.

In short, metaphysical explanations have two functions, one *de jure* and the other *de facto*: to furnish information — and thereby keys — to those who are qualified to receive it, and to free from errors those who have contracted them through contact with false ideologies; in the latter case, the function of wisdom will be a priori to allow those who have lost their faith to recover the capacity to believe in God, and all the graces that result from it.

He who has the intuition of the Absolute—which does not solve the problem of evil dialectically but places it within parentheses by removing all of its poison—possesses *ipso facto* the sense of the relationship between the Substance and accidents, so that he is unable to see the accidents outside of the Substance. An accident, that is a phenomenon or a being, whatever it may be, is good insofar as it manifests the Substance, or what amounts to the same: insofar as it manifests the resorption of the accidental within the Substance.

And conversely, a phenomenon is bad —in some capacity or other—inasmuch as it manifests the separation of the accidental from the Substance, which amounts to saying that it tends to manifest the absence of the Substance, but without succeeding wholly in doing so, for existence testifies to the Substance. God and the world: the Substance and the accidents; or the Essence and the forms. The accident, or the form, manifests the Substance, or the Essence, and proclaims Its glory; evil is the ransom of accidentality inasmuch as the latter is separative and privative, not inasmuch as it is participatory and communicative. Knowledge of the immanent Substance is the victory over the accidents of the soul—hence over privative accidentality as such since there is an analogy between the microcosm and the macrocosm—and is thus the best of theodicies.

The notion of the Good which we have just evoked allows us to come back once again to the crucial problem of evil. The distant and indirect cause of what we rightly call evil — namely privation of the good — is the mystery of All-Possibility: that is to say that the latter, being infinite, necessarily embraces the possibility of its own negation, thus the "possibility of the impossible" or the "being of nothingness."

This paradoxical possibility, this "possibility of the absurd" — since it exists and since nothing can be separated from the Good, which coincides with Being — has of necessity a positive function, which is to manifest the Good — or the multiple "goods" — by means of contrast, as much in "time" or succession as in "space" or coexistence. In "space," evil is opposed to good and by that fact heightens the latter's luster and brings out its nature *a contrario*; in "time," the cessation of

evil manifests the victory of the good, in accordance with the principle that *vincit omnia Veritas*; the two modes illustrate the "unreality" of evil and at the same time its illusory character.

In other words: since the function of evil is the contrasting manifestation of good and also the latter's final victory, we may say that evil by its very nature is condemned to its own negation; representing either the "spatial" or "temporal" absence of good, evil thus returns to this absence, which is privation of being and hence nothingness. If one were to object that good is likewise perishable, we would answer that it returns to its celestial or divine prototype in which alone it is wholly "itself"; what is perishable in the good is not the good in itself, it is this or that envelope limiting it. As we have said more than once — and this brings us back to the root of the question — evil is a necessary consequence of remoteness from the Divine Sun, the "overflowing" source of the cosmogonic trajectory;(6) the mystery of mysteries being All-Possibility as such.

6. Evil — the "serpent" of Paradise — rose out of nothingness as soon as the interior world of the primordial androgyne became exteriorized; now this cosmogonic moment coincides with the creation of Eve, and thus with the scission of the still immaterial androgyne who was the "first Adam." The materialization, or fall, came after the exteriorization and under the influence of the serpent; individualism — an elementary mode of luciferianism — caused the imprisonment in matter, with all the subsequent calamities, but also with the appropriate graces.

A remark is necessary here: one might object that evil likewise, by its very nature, tends to communicate itself; that is true, but it has this tendency precisely because it is opposed to the radiation of the good and thus cannot help imitating the latter in some fashion. For evil is by definition both opposition and imitation: within the framework of opposition it is ontologically forced to imitate; "the more they curse God the more they praise Him," said Meister Eckhart.

Evil, insofar as it exists, participates in the good represented by existence. Good and evil are not, strictly speaking, existential categories as are the object, the subject, space and time; because the good is the very being of things — manifested by the categories precisely — such that they, the things, are all "modes of the good"; whereas evil indicates paradoxically the absence of this being, while annexing certain things or certain characteristics at the level at which they are accessible and by virtue of predispositions allowing it.

But despite this reservation, one may consider good and evil as existential categories for the following reasons. The good includes on the one hand all that manifests the qualities of the Divine Principle, and on the other hand all things inasmuch as they manifest this same Principle by their existence, and also inasmuch as they fulfill a necessary ontological function. Evil for its part includes all that manifests a privation from the standpoint of the qualities or from that of Being itself; it is harmful in various ways, even though this harmfulness be neutralized and compensated, in given cases, by positive factors. That is to say that there are things which are bad or harmful in principle but not in fact, just as there are others which are good and benefic in the same way; all of which contributes to the unfolding of the cosmic play with its innumerable combinations.

With the intention of resolving the problem of evil, some have maintained that evil does not exist for God, and consequently that for Him everything is a good, which is inadmissible and ill-sounding. What ought to be said is that God sees the privative manifestations only in connection with the positive manifestations that compensate for them; thus evil is a provisional factor in view of a greater good, of a "victory of the Truth"; *vincit omnia Veritas*. At the supreme degree of Reality — *Âtmâ* or *Brahman* — *Mâyâ* neither "is" or "exists"; the question of dualities, of opposition, of good and evil, consequently could not arise. At the degree of metacosmic *Mâyâ*, the complementary oppositions are affirmed — God is at once Rigor and Gentleness, Justice and Mercy, Power and Beauty — but contingency, and with it, evil, are absent; it is only at the degree of cosmic *Mâyâ* — this moving fabric of circumstances and antinomies — that the "existential vices" can be produced, at one and the same time "in God" and "outside God": "in God," in the sense that every possibility necessarily pertains to All-Possibility, and "outside God" because the

Sovereign Good can only contain the archetypal possibilities, which by definition are positive since they describe the potentialities of pure Being.

In order to resolve the thorny problem of evil, some have claimed that nothing is evil because everything that happens is "willed by God," or that evil exists only from the "standpoint of the Law." This is unacceptable, firstly because it is God who lays down the Law, and secondly because the Law exists on account of evil and not vice versa. What should be said is that evil is integrated within the universal Good, not as evil but as an ontological necessity; this necessity underlies evil, it is metaphysically inherent in it, yet without thereby transforming it into a good.

Thus one must not say that God "wills" evil — let us rather say that He "allows" it — nor that evil is a good because God is not against its existence; however, one may say that we must accept God's will when evil enters into our destiny and when it is not possible for us to avoid it, or as long as it is not possible. Moreover, let us not forget that the complement of resignation is trust, the quintessence of which is the certitude at once metaphysical and eschatological that we bear deep within us — the unconditional certitude of That which is, and the conditional certitude of that which we can be.

Evil participates in the good in various ways; first by its existence inasmuch as this existence manifests Being, hence the Sovereign Good; second, and on the contrary, by its disappearance, for victory over evil is a good and is not possible without the presence of an evil; third, evil can participate in the good as an instrument, for it can happen that an evil collaborates in the production of a good; fourth, this participation may consist in the accentuation of a good by the contrast between it and its opposite. Finally, negative or privative phenomena manifest God's "capability" to contradict Himself as it were, and this possibility is required by the very perfection of Being; but, as Meister Eckhardt said, "the more he blasphemes the more he praises God." Moreover, it can happen that good and evil are mingled, whence the possibility of a "lesser evil"; this coincides with the very notion of relativity. As for the question of knowing why a possibility is possible, that is either unanswerable, or else it is resolved in advance by the axiom of All-Possibility immanent in Being, and which by definition is without limits; quite paradoxically, it can be said that All-Possibility would not be what it is if it did not realize impossibility in a certain fashion.

Absolute Reality — Beyond Being, *Paramātmā* — has no opposite; but Being, the personal God, comprises an opposite because Being is comprised in universal Relativity, *Māyā*, of which it is the summit. This opposite, Satan, could not, however, be situated on the same level as God, so that God too can be said to "have no opposite," at least in a certain — but essential — respect; thus God is "in Heaven" (*en tois ouranois*), whereas the devil, and with him hell, pertains to the sub-celestial world. Be that as it may, the satanic possibility is given, ontologically speaking, by relativity itself, which requires not only gradations but also oppositions; relativity is basically the movement towards nothingness, which possesses a shadow of reality only because of this movement; all this, we repeat, in virtue of the infinitude of Being.

A distinction analogous to the one that we have just raised is the opposition between spirit and matter, with the difference that the latter is neutral and not malefic; nonetheless the distinction between the "spirit" and the "flesh" identifies the latter in practice with evil — for reasons of moral and mystical opportuneness — losing sight of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena in general and of sensations in particular, hence their principial ambiguity and neutrality.⁽¹⁾ In other words, and to be more precise: if matter as such is neutral — nothing is more pure than a crystal — there is however a disgrace in its combination with life, whence impurity, sickness and death; a relative disgrace that does not preclude interferences of the celestial into terrestrial life. Geometrically and analogically speaking, decay is possible in the concentric circles, but the rays originating from the center and traversing them remain incorruptible; this principle applies not only to the ambiguity of matter, but also to the excess of contingencies in which we are obliged to live, and which only our relationship with Heaven can manage to compensate and vanquish.

1. It goes without saying that theology, which admits "sensible consolations," is not strictly Manichean, that is, it does not forget the divine origin of the bodily substance; Christ and the Blessed Virgin had bodies, and these bodies rose up to Heaven; no doubt they were transfigured, but they did not lose their bodily nature.

But not only is there the grip of matter on the spirit, of outwardness on inwardness, of dispersion on concentration, there is also the predominance of psychism over the intelligence, and this flaw — which could never be corrected by a superficial rationality — even succeeds in compromising victories over matter; although Heaven may also use this infirmity for its ends and in such cases remove the moral harmfulness of it; one of the generousities of Mercy is to take men as they are, to the extent possible.(2)

2. We have in mind here not only the Semitic monotheistic religions, but also certain sectors in Hinduism and in Buddhism.

All our preceding considerations evoke the question of the "why" of universal Manifestation and, secondarily, as a result of this question, the problem of evil. To answer the question of why there is a relativity, hence a *Māyā*, and consequently a Manifestation, we may refer in the first place to an idea of Saint Augustine which we have mentioned more than once, namely that it is in the nature of the Good to want to communicate itself: to say Good is to say radiation, projection, unfolding, gift of self. But at the same time, to say radiation is to say distance, hence alienation or impoverishment; the solar rays dim and become lost in the night of space. From this arises, at the end of the trajectory, the paradoxical phenomenon of evil, which nonetheless has the positive function of highlighting the good *a contrario*, and of contributing in its fashion to equilibrium in the phenomenal order.

A remark concerning the divergence between the Aryan or Greco-Hindu idea of "universal Manifestation" and the Semitic or monotheistic idea of "Creation" is called for here. The first idea refers to the world inasmuch as it results from an ontological necessity, that of radiation or of communication of the good, precisely; in other words, *Māyā* springs from the Infinitude of the Supreme Principle; and to say *Māyā* is to say *samsāra*, the world of transmigration." As for the Semitic idea of Creation, it refers to the world, considered not in its totality, but reduced to a single cycle and conceived as the effect of a single "free" act of God. In reality, the creation to which we belong is but one cycle of universal manifestation, this manifestation being composed of an indefinite number of cycles that are "necessary" as regards their existence but "free" as regards their particularity. The Universe is a fabric woven of necessity and freedom, of mathematical rigor and musical play; every phenomenon participates in these two principles.

Now, as regards the 'problem' of the existence of 'evil' itself, the religious point of view only gives an indirect and somewhat evasive answer, declaring that the Divine Will is unfathomable, and that out of all evil good will ultimately come. This second proposition does not, however, explain evil, and as for the first, to say that God is unfathomable means that there is some appearance of contradiction in his 'ways' which we are unable to resolve.

From an esoteric point of view the 'problem of evil' resolves itself into two questions: firstly, why do things created necessarily imply imperfection? and secondly, why do they exist? To the first of these questions the answer is that if there were no imperfection in Creation nothing would distinguish it from the Creator, or in other words, it would not be effect or manifestation, but Cause or Principle; the answer to the second question is that Creation (or Manifestation) is necessarily implied in the infinity of the Principle, in the sense that it is so to speak an aspect or consequence of this infinity.

This amounts to saying that if the world did not exist the Infinite would not be the Infinite; to be what It is the Infinite must apparently and symbolically deny Itself, and this denial is achieved in universal Manifestation. The world cannot but exist, since it is a possible and therefore necessary

aspect of the absolute necessity of Being; imperfection, no less, cannot but exist, since it is an aspect of the very existence of the world. The existence of the world is strictly implied in the infinity of the Divine Principle, and the existence of evil is similarly implied in the existence of the world. God is All-Goodness, and the world is His image; but since the image cannot, by definition, be That which it represents, the world must be limited relatively to the Divine Goodness, hence the imperfection in existence. Imperfections may therefore be likened to 'fissures' in the image of the Divine All-Perfection, and their origin is clearly not to be sought in this Perfection itself, but in the necessarily relative or secondary character of the image.

Manifestation implies imperfection by definition, as the Infinite implies manifestation by definition. This triad 'Infinite, manifestation, imperfection' provides the formula which explains everything that the human mind may find 'problematical' in the vicissitudes of existence; those who with the eye of the Intellect are capable of viewing the metaphysical causes of all appearances will never find themselves brought to a standstill by insoluble contradictions, as necessarily happens to those limited to an exoteric perspective, which, by reason of its anthropomorphism, can never hope to grasp all the aspects of universal Reality.