



# THE NATURE OF GOOD AND EVIL

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In a world in which the action of choosing is exalted above all else, it is not surprising to hear that “evil is necessary in order to have the good.” I have seen this conversation, cast in a number of ways. It is stock-in-trade for some quasi-religious systems. I have seen it in spades in Jungian and Depth Psychology circles. No doubt, some bring this set of ideas along with them into the Orthodox faith. It is, however, a profound error.

Before looking at the nature of good and evil, it is worth seeing the problem involved when choice is inserted into the conversation. What happens in that approach is that we are no longer speaking about the nature of good and evil, indeed, both are relativized in importance. Everything quickly revolves back to the nature of choosing, and makes the actions of our will the center of the good. Thus, there is no true good or evil, only good choices and evil choices. It is a narcissistic ontology – a system of thought in which we ourselves become the center of attention.

This is where, for me, some very fundamental matters of Orthodox thought are helpful. The “Good” is a term that ultimately applies to God. God is good and the source of all goodness. Indeed, goodness has a place in the “philosophical trinity.” That trinity is truth, goodness, and beauty. These are the three properties of being. God alone has true being. Everything that exists does so because God gives it being. Creation thus has relative being. The purpose (telos) of all created things is to move from relative being towards greater likeness and union with God in the truth of His being. In theological terms, we speak of this as “eternal life.”

It is in the context of these understandings that the Fathers speak of evil. Evil is not a “thing,” nor something that has any existence or being at all. To think about evil, it is necessary to understand that all of creation (ourselves included) is in motion (kenesis). Everything moves and changes (in terms of being). The proper movement for all things is towards its end in God (its telos). This is a movement towards greater truth, beauty, and goodness. Evil, on the other hand, is a movement away from proper being, a movement away from truth, beauty, and goodness. However, it is crucial to note that this is a movement, and not a thing.

Our movement towards God (which is what is described as doing good or being good) does not in any way require a movement away from God. Indeed, it would be absurd to suggest that non-being is required in order for being to exist.

In systems such as Depth Psychology, "wholeness" is often used to describe the proper goal of life. Its notion of wholeness is a reconciliation of good and evil. Carl Jung, in his language of mythic archetypes, dubbed this figure, "Abraxas." It puts me in mind of a Star Trek episode (original series). Captain Kirk suffers from an accident in the transporter system where his "good" side has been separated from his "evil" side. The two caricatures (we cannot call them characters) fight it out for control of the Enterprise with rather predictable results. The goal of the episode is to put him back together. The subtext of the program is that we cannot function without our evil selves, even if they must be tempered. This is a far cry from Orthodox theosis.

It is entirely understandable that people cast about for answers in the problem of good and evil. We wonder, "Does evil serve a purpose?" The mistakes we have made, or even the terrible tragedies and catastrophes across our history would seem somehow more acceptable if we could see them playing a role in some later, greater good. Our faith does not reconcile evil with good. Rather, it tells us that good overcomes evil and moves towards its end in a manner that, while not abolishing evil from the story of things, makes the story to be what evil sought to prevent.

The story of Joseph in Egypt is a primary example. His brothers' evil action in selling him as a slave to the Egyptians is "undone" or "overcome" after a fashion. He says to them, "You meant it to me for evil, but the Lord meant it to me for good." Of course, the Cross is the greatest of such examples. The powers of this world meant it for one thing, but the Lord meant it for His own great goodness – the redemption of all things.

As we tend to center our world (and ourselves) in the question of our choices, we are constantly tempted to justify those we feel were wrong. By the same token, we bring an anxiety about the choices that are yet to come. The power of goodness is not within our choice. We do not create the good – it is given to us. The impossible reality that surrounds our choices is seen when we examine the limits of our existence. We cannot see the consequences of our actions (beyond the most immediate circumstances) nor can we control the myriad of other events that will interact with any choice we might make. We are simply insufficient of ourselves to create good through our choices.

This does not negate the place that choice has in our lives. However, like everything about a contingent being, it is relativized. God alone is the source of the good, and whatever participation our lives have in goodness is His gift to us. We cannot weigh or consider the good in a manner apart from God. There is no such thing as a "secular" good.

The course of our existence is a movement. That movement is impelled towards the good through our desire for God (sometimes manifest simply as a longing for beauty, truth, and goodness). We make choices within the course of that movement, but only God can direct and make of our choices the good He intends. What we know of our choices are limited, often complex, and filled with uncertainty. It is God, to whom we commend ourselves, one another, and all our lives, who gathers our choices into His own goodness, truth, and beauty, making of them what we could never do of our own selves.

In none of this, however, is evil necessary. It has no being. It is only misdirection. It is a parasite. The Scriptures say this: "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have communion with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have communion with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:5-7)

The communion we have with one another is rooted in our communion in Christ. He is the Good, and it is our participation (communion) in Him that is our good as well. It is this communion that "cleanses" all of our choices – the relative good and the relative evil – and sets them on the path of union with God.

Learning to live as contingent creatures, someone whose existence is always only relative, is best described and encompassed as the life of thanksgiving. The Scriptures say that, "In Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). In this, we give thanks, and commend the whole of our life to Him.

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*The [featured image](#) shows, "St Michael Vanquishing the Devil," by PBonifazio Veronese, painted circa 1530.*

