



How Pantheism Resolves the Enigma of Evil

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How Pantheism Resolves the Enigma of Evil

1. Let us now consider a theory that is completely in opposition to the one that we have just analyzed. * If the theory of Dualism errs by excess (in raising Evil to the dignity of an absolute Being) that of which we are going to speak sins by defect, for it simply denies the existence of Evil in this world.

It is really a shock to common sense to hear the existence of Evil on this planet denied. But the "logic" of some philosophies is so strict that their followers feel obliged to be consistent and to affirm that Evil does not exist. Those philosophers are the Pantheists. Indeed, when we say the word "Evil," we bring to mind Contrariety. Now is a Contrariety conceivable in perfect unity, in a sphere from which all essential multiplicity has been banished? Can the Same ever be contrary to the Same? Moreover, Evil is that which opposes desire, as we have already explained in *The Philosophy of Evil*. But what idea can we form of desire in a Being who, by hypothesis, would be existing all alone? Towards what could his desire tend? Towards nonentity? But a desire for nonentity is an obvious contradiction.

Then there is this to be considered: Evil is a privation. How could this exist in a Being who, by hypothesis, exists all alone? Since he alone possesses existence, he exists only by his own strength: it is quite clear that in this case he owes absolutely nothing to others. Now, how could such a being lack any reality or perfection, which is due to him? Limitation, Spinoza affirms, can only come from outside, that is to say, through the action of another being. But, also according to Spinoza, outside of God nothing exists. Moreover, the Being who exists by virtue of his own essence, must possess being in all its fullness, and is therefore necessarily infinite. How then could such a being ever find itself affected by a privation of any kind?

Let us also note that the only reality that so exists, God, is confused by the Pantheists with universal being. Now, by principle, universal being does not admit in itself any limitation, any restriction, consequently it admits no imperfection. How then could Evil be introduced into the world?

And lastly, Evil, being a privation, involves the existence of its antithesis, the "ideal," as we have explained in the above mentioned book. Now supposing the existence of but one, single being, all

* See the article entitled *The Problem of Evil in the Theory of Dualism in Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol.XI, 1955, n°1.

“plenitude,” all ideals are inconceivable ; or rather, they blend so perfectly with this being that they are one and the same thing with it. How could this unique being lack *anything* whatever? All reality compared to it, conceived under the form of its plenitude and its ideal, is absolutely perfect.

Whatever aspect of the problem we look at, we always arrive at the same conclusion : there is no room for Evil in pantheistic monism. That which we call “ Evil ” would be an illusion, a fantasy created by our imperfect faculties.

2. In order to reach the exact sense of this assertion it is good to consider the system of Spinoza, the most brilliant of the defenders of Pantheism. Whatever exists in this world comes from God, he says. It comes from God with the same necessity with which the properties of a triangle come from a triangle. That is to say, everything comes from God with mathematical, absolute necessity. It is for this reason that nothing in the world is left to chance, or to free will ; everything is rigorously determined. “ Things could not be produced by God in another manner or in another order than they have been produced.”¹ To pretend the contrary is to admit that God’s nature can be changed ! Indeed, the things which exist in this world are but God’s “ modes ” (*modi*). Now God’s modes are still God, but God inasmuch as He manifests Himself under a particular and limited form (“ Deus, quatenus ”). Therefore all our actions are, in a strict sense, “ participations in the Divine nature,” His “ commandment.”² It is always God “ who is the first and unique cause of whatever we accomplish and execute.”³ The sayings : “ God is an immediate cause,” “ God is a mediate cause ” express only a very restricted truth ; they only signify the order in which particular things come from God⁴ : certain things come from God considered in His own nature, and others, on the contrary, come from God inasmuch as He subsists under this or that determined mode.⁵

We need only recall these ideas of spinozist metaphysics to see clearly that Evil loses any intelligible meaning in Spinoza’s doctrine, that it is metaphysically impossible.

3. But the pure and simple negation of Evil is not yet the solution of the problem of Evil. We must still explain how the idea of Evil came into this world and precisely what Evil consists of.

1. *Eth.* I, 33, Cf. *Eth.* II, 49, Schol. ; *Eth.* I, 16, 29.

2. *Eth.* II, 49, Schol.

3. *Tract. Brevis.* II, c.XVIII ; *Cog. Met.* P.II, c.9, p.268.

4. *Eth.* I, 28, *Tract. Brevis*, dial.2.

5. *Eth.* I, 28 ; II, 9, Cf. P. SIWEK, S.J., *L’âme et le corps d’après Spinoza*, Paris, Alcan, 1930, pp.115-119.

Replying to this question, Spinoza notes that the origin of the idea of Evil is attached to the idea of *finality*. Men, obeying their instincts, everywhere and always seek to satisfy their desires. In order to reach their goal more easily they construct different instruments. Now when they find afterwards, in nature, certain things which permit them to satisfy their desires, they are invincibly inclined to see in them also instruments fabricated by Nature itself to help men out : their senses were made in order to permit them to see, to hear and so on ! Animals and plants have no other destiny than to nourish them, to clothe them, etc. !

Later, generalizing this idea too hurriedly, they arrive at the conclusion that all natural things are but means destined to serve them.¹ This is the origin of the notion of "Good." On the contrary, the things which far from favoring their good state, are harmful to them, receive the name of "Bad." There are, finally, things which are neither useful nor harmful to them. They are called "indifferent."² In practical life, men are little interested in these.

Good, Bad, Indifferent — are all essentially relative notions (*respective dicuntur*).³ They are the fruit of a comparison which our intelligence makes between the things which surround us and ourselves.⁴ It is for this reason that the same thing can be at the same time "good," "bad," or "indifferent." Music is good for a melancholy person, bad for one who is desolate, finally indifferent for a man who is afflicted with deafness.⁵ In the same way "the good which prohibits us from enjoying a greater good is truly an evil" ; on the contrary, "evil in relation to the Creator is a real good."⁶ All depends upon relation, upon comparison.

Things considered in themselves are neither "good" nor "bad." This is true even for God. If He is called "eminently good" (*summe bonus*), it is only because He is "useful to all" (*omnibus conducit*) insofar as He preserves them in existence.⁷ If we consider Him in His duration logically anterior to creation, He cannot be said to be "good."⁸

Those who speak of "the metaphysical Good" are just using words. For what is a metaphysical good in reality? It is a good — they reply — in respect to "one's effort to conserve one's existence (*conatus ad suum esse conservandum*). But is this effort — objects

1. *Eth.* I, Append. (*ed. cit.*, T.II, p.78).

2. *Eth.* IV, Praef.

3. *De Intell. Emend.* (*ed. cit.* p.8) ; *Cog. Met.* P.I, c.6 (*ed. cit.* p.247).

4. *Eth.* IV, Praef.

5. *Eth.* IV, Praef.

6. *Eth.* IV, 65.

7. *Cog. Met.* P.I, c.6 (p.247) ; P.II, c.7.

8. *Cog. Met.* P.I, c.6 (p.248).

Spinoza — distinct from the being itself? No one pretends that. It is for this reason that the relation mentioned is purely logical. It is a being of reason (*ens rationis*). But the notion of Good, founded on a being of reason, is itself a being of reason. In order to prove the contrary, the partisan of the metaphysical good would be obliged to admit that the effort to conserve existence is really distinct from the being itself. But admitting this, he leaves himself open to an infinite process. It is easy to see why. Indeed, the effort mentioned, being in this hypothesis, a real being, must be also a good, a metaphysical good. Is it good again in relation to another "effort"? This question — evidently — can be repeated *ad infinitum*.

As to metaphysical or absolute Evil, it is but too evident (*per se manifestum*) that it is a mere fiction.¹

What we have said just now — concludes Spinoza — shows us that the notions of Good and Evil represent nothing real. They are only beings of reason, or better, "beings of imagination," which means that one takes these words as if they were names of things which exist outside the imagination.² As they formally exist in the human mind which compares things one with the other, God himself cannot see them elsewhere.³

Whatever causes a good or evil to us must always have something in common with us.⁴ Because only thus can it be useful or harmful to us. A thing which is entirely different from us remains without any effect upon us.

To speak more especially of Evil let us note that it always comes to us from outside, from exterior causes.⁵ Indeed, we suffer from Evil insofar as we are a part of Nature, to the laws of which we are inexorably committed.⁶ According to these laws everyone cannot possess at the same time all the different things which he desires. And this necessarily creates envy, fear, hatred, and so forth.⁷ These are all so many evils from which humanity suffers.

What we have stated just now shows us that Evil attaches itself essentially to the first degree of knowledge, to sensitive cognition. Indeed, Evil implies the existence of multiplicity. Now multiplicity is, according to Spinoza, the fruit of our senses. In fact, it is the senses that, incapable of attaining to reality as it exists in itself, but only under the form in which it affects our material senses, cut reality into pieces, into fragments, and so make it appear multiple.

1. *Cog. Met.* P.I, c.6, p.248.

2. *Eth.* I, Append. (*ed. cit.* p.81).

3. *Cog. Met.* P.II, c.7 (p.262).

4. *Eth.* IV, 29.

5. *Eth.* IV, Append. c.VI.

6. *Eth.* Append. c.VI.

7. *De Intell. Emend.* (*ed. cit.*, p.7).

If we rise to the second degree of knowledge — intellectual knowledge — we see that Being has no limits and that it is not multiple ; it is unique, infinite, indivisible. Nothing is lacking to this being, no Evil affects it ; it is infinitely perfect.

This is a very convenient way to finish once and for all with the problem of Evil. One corrects the notion of knowledge : one regards the Real “ sub specie aeternitatis,” that is, as an “ absolute Being.” Evil is no longer in the order of things but exists only in thought. Evil is no more than an “ inadequate idea.”

In the sixty-fourth proposition of the IV part of the Ethics we find a succinct résumé of the spinozist doctrine on Evil. The knowledge of Evil — we read there¹ — is a sadness of which we are conscious. Now sadness is a passage to a lesser perfection.² As this passage cannot be understood through the essence of being alone,³ it is, in a strict sense, a passion.⁴ But every passion depends on inadequate ideas.⁵ It is for this reason that the knowledge of Evil is inadequate knowledge.⁶ In a corollary to this proposition Spinoza adds as a conclusion : “ It follows from this that if the human spirit had only adequate ideas, it would have no notion of Evil at all.”

This theory is, if we are to believe Spinoza, the best reconciliation of Evil with the existence of God.⁷ Indeed, the objection which “ many ” draw from Evil against the existence of God is resumed substantially in the following words : “ If everything necessarily comes from the sovereign perfect nature of God, how are we to explain the many imperfections in Nature : the corruption of things, the repugnant odors, the deformity which provokes our nausea, confusion, evil, sin, etc. ? ”⁸

In order to solve this classical objection, certain people (an evident allusion to the Cartesians !) pretend that the qualifications of “ perfect ” and “ imperfect,” of “ good ” and “ evil ” depend uniquely upon the will of God, to such a point that if God had willed it so, what we call “ perfect ” would be “ imperfect,” and vice versa.⁹ This assertion — remarks Spinoza — could not be more absurd (*magnum est absurdum*). For it means that God could, according to His will, change His absolutely necessary knowledge.¹⁰

1. *Eth.* IV, 8.

2. *Eth.* III, II, Schol ; *Eth.* III, *Affect. definit.* III.

3. Cf. *Eth.* III, 6, 7.

4. Cf. *Eth.* III, def.2.

5. *Eth.* III, def.3.

6. *Eth.* III, 29.

7. *Eth.* I, Append. (*ed. cit.* p.81).

8. *Eth.* I, Append. (*ed. cit.* p.81).

9. *Eth.* I, 33, Schol.II.

10. *Eth.* I, 33, Schol.II.

This is how the objection mentioned is solved, according to Spinoza : " The perfection of things must be measured only according to their own nature and their own potency. Things are not more perfect or less perfect because they flatter the senses of men or are contrary to them ; because they are useful to human nature or are repugnant to it." ¹ Moreover the notion of " perfection " itself is equivocal. Indeed, when do we say that a work is " perfect " ? Is it not when it is finished in such a manner as to correspond exactly to the intention of its maker ? In other cases, it will be said to be " imperfect." Thus, for example, a home half-built is commonly considered as " imperfect." But let us change the hypothesis : we meet a thing whose like we have never seen before. Shall we say it is " perfect " or " imperfect " ? How answer this question ? Would we not first need to know the intention of its maker ?

This primitive idea of " perfection " — continues Spinoza — has undergone with time a remarkable evolution. When men began to form universal ideas, they began to invent the exemplary causes of things to be built (houses, towers and so on). The things that they saw approached most nearly to these models, they called " perfect " ; the things that fell short of them, " imperfect," and this without any preoccupation with the true intention of the artisan. Later they extended this manner of thinking to all things in Nature.²

We understand at the same time in what sense Evil is " a privation of good." ³ It is said of Evil in respect to the " model " to the abstract " definition " of a thing.⁴

We now see clearly — concludes Spinoza — what we must think about the objection against God, drawn from the existence of " imperfection," of " Evil." Evil is the illegitimate fruit of the knowledge of the " first degree " : sense knowledge and knowledge of universals. It is a partial idea of reality, an " inadequate idea." If anything in Nature appears to us to be ridiculous, absurd or bad, it is only because we know it only partially (*ex parte*) ; and because we ignore the order of Nature and its fundamental unity almost entirely ; we want everything to follow the order of our reason." ⁵ In respect to universal Nature, by its Laws nothing is imperfect, nothing is bad,⁶ since all is the natural consequence of the universal order which eternally

1. *Eth.* I, Append. (*ed. cit.* p.81).

2. *Eth.* IV, Praef.

3. *Princ. Phil. Cartes.* P.I. prop.13 (*ed. cit.* p. 171) ; *Epist.* XIX (*ed. cit.* p.88) ; *Epist.* XXIII (*ed. cit.* p.147) ; *Eth.* IV, Praef.

4. *Epist.* XIX (*ed. cit.* p.91).

5. *Tract. Polit.* c.II, 18 (*ed. cit.* p.282).

6. *Ibid.* See *Epist.* XIX (*ed. cit.* p.88) : For God Evil does not exist at all because " He does not know things abstractively . . ." See also *Cog. Met.* P.II, c.VII (*ed. cit.* pp.262-263).

emanates from God. Whoever has grasped this great truth will enjoy an imperturbable peace (*animum omnimode quietum reddit*).¹

This solution was severely judged by Leibniz. "Spinoza imagines," he said, "that at the moment man learns that events are the product of necessity, his spirit will be wonderfully fortified. Does he think then that by this constraint he will make the heart of the sufferer happier? Will man feel his evils less?"²

Leibniz exaggerates a little. In our opinion, it is undeniable that it is some consolation for an afflicted person to be able to say, "the sorrow that has come to me was necessary; it was inevitable." This very often cuts short the overflowing regret and remorse, so apt to preserve and to increase that pain. Today psychiatrists state this principle: "better a definite evil than a perpetual fear." A consolation, let us notice, that does not ignore the theistic doctrine, except by adaptations and extenuations. Indeed, except in very rare cases, in which God works immediately upon the course of events to cause a miracle ("extraordinary Providence"), He only governs the world through the medium of natural laws. Now these laws follow a physical necessity; only a miracle can alter their effects. The greater force must of necessity prevail over the lesser. And one might say with regard to this (but without any suggestion of disrespect) that in purely earthly events, God is usually on the side of the strongest.

Of course, if God acts thus, it could not be from love of force, but for the sake of His rational creatures. The order of nature must be such that man is constantly urged towards his eternal destiny: this order itself should help him on the way, as we have shown in our book mentioned before.

If we believed Spinoza, God would act thus for the simple reason that He could not do otherwise. God Himself would be subjected to necessity and, as it were, enveloped in an atmosphere of fatalism. Man also submits without knowing exactly why he should suffer.

This theory of Spinoza about Evil is, it is clearly evident, an a priori construction. It is obviously impregnated with the spirit of a pantheistic system of which it is merely a conclusion. To show the inanity of this, it is sufficient to criticize Pantheism itself. That we have done in our previous works on Spinoza.

We will make only one observation on this subject. According to Spinoza, Evil only works on the surface of being; it is no more than a product of our mind's inadequate ideas. However, Spinoza recognizes that these inadequate ideas "flow (from God) with the same necessity as the adequate"; they force themselves on us because of our nature; and even when we think of reality in terms of adequate

1. *Eth.* II, 49, Schol.

2. *Réfutation inédite de Spinoza.*

ideas, the inadequate ones remain in us.¹ We can never be entirely free of them. The necessity that causes us suffering does not exist only on the surface of our being, it is much more profound. It comes from Being as such, which for Spinoza, is God. It is then definitely God who causes Evil. There is only one more step to take to sink into the blackest pessimism: Being itself lacks harmony, plenitude and perfection.

Nothing is more instructive than the correspondence between Spinoza and Henry Oldenburg, the secretary of "the Royal Society." The latter wrote to Spinoza: If all is determined for us in our actions, even the least details, we should not be punished for them; because we are then entirely inculpable.² Spinoza replies in substance: Men are not inculpable in their actions. And this precisely because they are in God's hands as clay is in the potter's hands, who makes from it either vases of honor or of dishonor. Yet one cannot say to the potter: why do you make me so?³

Oldenburg, far from being satisfied with this reply, was profoundly scandalized by it, and energetically maintained his first point of view.⁴ In his counter-reply Spinoza was obliged to modify his expressions somewhat, but he persisted in maintaining the fundamental point of his doctrine. The circle — he says — should not complain because God refused it the properties of the sphere, nor should the horse complain of being born a horse rather than a man! It is the same with man. Nobody must ever complain of having received from God a feeble body or an indolent spirit, and of being thus deprived forever of happiness, of true knowledge of God and his love. He who, bitten by a mad dog himself becomes mad, commits no moral fault by this. Nevertheless he is justly killed.⁵

These terrible words show how superficial and illusory was the solution of the problem of evil in Spinoza's philosophy. Wishing to deny purely and simply the reality of Evil, he only turned it into tragedy and despair.

Spinoza was quite right in saying that the notion of Good is "relative." Indeed, the Good bears an essential relation to "desire,"⁶

1. *Eth.* II, 36 (*ed. cit.* p.117).

2. *Epist.*LXXXIX.

3. *Epist.*LXXV (*ed. cit.* p.312) — See also *Epist.*XIX, XXI, XLIII (*ed. cit.* pp.86-94; 126-133; 219-226; 325-330); *Eth.* II, 49, Schol. (*ed. cit.* II, pp.131-136).

4. *Epist.* LXXVII (*ed. cit.* p.325).

5. *Epist.*LXXVIII (*ed. cit.* pp.326-327).

6. *The Philosophy of Evil.* New York: Ronald, 1951, Part I.

This book was designed not only "for students who pursue the study of philosophy" but also for "pastors, educators" and all those who are "tortured by the ever-recurring problem of Evil." For this reason the author has "exerted every effort to write as clearly as possible and to avoid technical terminology" (*Ibid.* Pref. p.VI).

In the manuscript of *The Philosophy of Evil*, there was a long treatise on "God and Evil." But my publisher suggested to me to omit for the time being this treatise, because

either "elicited" or "natural." This is so true that if it so happened that all "desire" (will) disappeared from the world, the notion of Good would lose any intelligible meaning. But this hypothesis is absurd. Because God would always remain. And in respect to His Will — which is also a kind of "desire" — His Being would be "good."

Spinoza supposes that Good always bears a relation to the desire of another being to whom it could serve as a "means." We have explained in another book⁴⁴ that this is not true. Good is principally with regard to the immanent "desire" of the being himself. The integrity of its organs, for example, would be a real "good" for the organism, even if we suppose that this organism exists completely alone in the world.

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— he said — it could hardly be read by those for whom the book was destined. So I left it with the express intention of publishing it as a separate book. It will be destined for scholars only.

Notwithstanding this important omission *The Philosophy of Evil* was received exceedingly well by many competent scholars. Many of them (Rev. Charles A. Hart, Rev. John Jolin, and so on) have written extremely kind letters to the author. Others have published fattery reviews in different periodicals: *Xaverian Review* (Sept. 1951), *The School of Philosophy* (*The Catholic University of America, Philosophical Abstracts* [Fall 1952]), *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 38/1954, *Rivista Portuguesa de Filosofia* (Aug. 1952), *Antonianum* (Rome) (XXVI, 1951), *Modern Schoolman* (Nov. 1951), *Broteria* (Oct. 1951), *Journal of Philosophy* (April 15, 1954), *Thought* (March 1952) and many others.

There appeared only one criticism seriously opposed to the above mentioned book, but personal animosity of the author (W.N. CLARKE in *Theol. Studies*) was so obvious that I considered it useless to take into consideration his observations.