An Analysis of the Problem of Evil

Part One: The Reality of Evil

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The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change.
In all my years, one thing does not change:
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.[1]

THE poet reminds us that the problem of evil has been on the lips of man from the point in time when man became a self-conscious being. In one form or another, the struggle of good and evil infuses the writings of man from ancient generations to the present moment. Would it be inaccurate to say that the mire of evil is the stimulus for man's taking pen in hand? The problem of evil has been plumbed by philosophers from the pre-socratics to Heidegger and Jaspers. It is a dominant color in the fabric of literary and dramatic tragedy from Aeschuylus to Eliot. It has been scored into the works of man's musical genius. And it is one of the central dilemmas Christian theology has grappled with from the very moment theologizing become a function of the Christian Church. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:35, 37).

Our primary concern is with the problem of evil in the context of Christian faith. Most of us will admit readily that evil is a problem in greater or lesser degrees. But you and I will probably want a view of the problem which drives to deeper levels of concern than simple fatalism on the one hand, or "positive thinking" on the other. And being more deeply concerned, we are also drawn into an acute awareness of the evil in the world and challenged to engagement with it. So St. Paul, sensitive to the powers of Sin and Death—the structures of destruction, as Tillich puts it—could confidently affirm that "nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Our perspective, then, grows out of some such fundamental affirmation. Christian faith views the human situation against the backdrop of larger structures of meaning; Christian faith provides courage in the presence of the destructive realities; Christian faith binds the fragments of existence into a degree of wholeness; Christian faith bears witness to the redemptive power of God and brings this power into saving relationships with human life and history.

Of course, evil is a "human" problem before it is a "Christian" problem. But unless we are able to treat the human problem from the deeper levels of religious concern, then we are only discussing interesting theoretical puzzles. Our concern with the problem of evil here is centered in a religious view which, we trust, is never unrelated to philosophical or literary views of the problem. The fact is that man is confronted with evils of various intensities and kinds. In response he has devised many handles by which he grasps the problem and tries to make sense of it. Our purpose is to analyze the problem in its religious dimensions.

[1]T. S. Eliot, *"The Rock."*

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II

As we look at the problem of evil here and in subsequent articles, the book of Job will be used to illustrate some of the religious facets of this human problem. In Job we find the picture of a suffering man viewing his suffering in religious terms. In the beginning, he doubts God's justice; in the end he resigns his creaturehood to God's overpowering majesty. Through the dialogues between Job and his friends we see the religious community coming to terms with human problems. Like Job, we too are members of a religious community. We live, we suffer, we think, and, in one way or another, we view life in the light of some scheme of existence which lends comfort in the face of suffering and courage in the presence of impending evils. In a religious context, the experience and reality of evil are brought into some relation with divine reality. Man's taste of life is savored by his beliefs about the cosmos. And so in Job.

Job's problem is seen against the background of the Deuteronomic formula: sin equals suffering; piety equals prosperity. This formula is eptomized in Psalm 1, which asserts that God favors the righteous and damns the wicked. This formula provides the religious framework within which the author of Job wrestles with the problem of evil. One point of the narrative is that the formula doesn't always hold true, hence, the suffering man cannot take consolation in God's equity seen in these terms.

Therefore, we have in Job the aspects of the problem of evil which make it a religious problem. First of all, Job is living "under the conditions of existence" like all the rest of us. He sustains personal loss and experiences grief; he suffers agonizing physical disease; he encounters intellectual contradictions which seem to underscore his plight. In the second place, Job seeks a rationale for his situation. He knows the old formula isn't working out, at least, he argues that it isn't, although his friends insist that it is. Thirdly, Job comes to a personal solution which enables him to accept the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" with some degree of courage and hope and with a sure sense of trust in the controlling divine reality.

Through the book of Job we see a pattern which helps us examine the problem of evil religiously. It is doubtful that those enmeshed in the immediate experience of some evil will examine the problem in this way, but it has always been a task of theology to systematize problems and clarify concepts. This does not minimize the pain of experienced evil. Indeed, the systematic-analytical function of theology underscores the concern of the religious community at this point because it takes these experiences with ultimate seriousness.

We see, then, that the problem of evil arises on three levels. **First,** there is the reality of evil itself—Job suffers loss of family, possessions, reputation, and is afflicted with illness. **Secondly,** evil is seen in the light of a system of ideas, that is, a philosophical or theological framework. On this level, evil is related to other concepts like value, goodness, God, sin, death, eternal life, and so on; some correlation is drawn between these concepts and evil. Thus, Job argues his case with his friends. **Thirdly,** the experience of evil must be resolved or accepted. On this level a man is likely to call for the support of religious faith through which the techniques and symbols, the beliefs and rituals and practices of the religious life are brought into focus.

In subsequent articles we shall look at the second and third aspects of the problem of evil as we have outlined them; here we are concerned with the first level, namely, the reality of evil.

III

In order to speak about the problem of evil on any level, it is necessary to have some idea of what evil means. It has been suggested that a single pang

of toothache or an isolated, unkind thought would be enough to prove the existence of evil. But we know that evil does not always come in such small quantities. The word **evil** carries a broader meaning than simple pain or unkind thoughts. It includes those occasions where ugliness, frustration, pain, death, and suffering extend beyond man's immediate and personal control. Josiah Royce suggested that evil means "whatever we regard as something to be gotten rid of, shrunken from, put out of sight, of hearing, or of memory, eschewed, expelled, assailed, or otherwise directly or indirectly resisted."[2]

With this cluster of meanings, we are able to offer a definition of evil: **Evil refers to any object, event, influence, occurrence, act, experience, or combination of these, be the source human or extra-human, which thwarts, disrupts, threatens, frustrates, or destroys the life of a human being or group of human beings, or jeopardizes that which is valued or cherished by human beings.** The definition is intentionally man centered rather than extending into the animate and inanimate worlds.

From the definition it is evident that there are varieties of evil. There are evils which are man made; there are those which man bears simply because he lives in a universe which puts an end to man. For our purposes, then, it is necessary to outline the various kinds of evil which are manifest in our personal, social, and cultural lives.

Traditionally, evil has been divided into two major categories, namely, moral and natural evils. Our definition reflects this distinction in pointing to the human and extra-human sources of evil. Keeping this basic distinction in mind, it will help us to delineate the various kinds of evil. William Ernest Hocking has suggested a six-fold classification: evils related to physical life (defects of the body, breakdown, collapse, age); evils of finitude (ignorance, limited foresight, limited power and time); evils of mischance (pain, suffering, failure, defeat, disappointment, futility, loss of health, position, reputation, friends, loss of sanity, bereavement); evils of social history (injustice, hatred, the ravages of prejudice, cruelty, war, loss of hope, indifference, venality, material ambition, historical force, greed, cunning); evils of our cosmic situation (muteness of the universe, silence of God, the increase of suffering with increase in sensitivity, tedium and commonplaceness); and moral evil (vice, crime, personal immorality, defect of duty). [3]

Hocking's classification of evils suggests the many-faceted reality of evil in human experience. Such classification is helpful for our purposes because it shows us how extensive and complex a problem is laid upon theology in the form of what is rather quickly referred to as "the problem of evil."

If we keep in mind the broad general distinction between moral and natural evil, and then follow Hocking's lead in delineating types of evil, we may speak about five kinds of evil in human experience; natural evil; physical evil; moral evil; social and cultural evil; the evils of finitude. No attempt is made to draw sharp lines between these five types of evil, but for the purpose of analysis it is necessary to make approximate distinctions. We may briefly examine each of these five types.

Natural evil. Natural evil stems from the world (universe) of sensible reality and sweeps into the life of man. We think at once of the more obvious examples of floods, earthquakes, tornados, fires, droughts, famines, epidemics, and so on. The mystic is inclined to stand in awe before the excellence of the created world: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy Name in all the earth; Thou

[2]Josiah Royce, *Studies of Good and Evil* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898), p. 18.

[3]William Ernest Hocking, Brand Blanshard, et al., *Preface to Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), pp. 487-88.

whose Name above the heavens is chanted!" Such emotion, generated by pounding surf and granite peaks and clear galaxies, is tempered by the cruelties of nature so harshly catalogued by John Stuart Mill:

> Nature impales men, breaks them as if on the wheel, casts them to be devoured by wild beasts, burns them to death, crushes them with stones like the first Christian martyr, starves them with hunger, freezes them with cold, poisons them by the quick or slow venom of her exhalations . . . All this, Nature does with the most supercilious disregard both of mercy and of justice, emptying her shafts upon the best and noblest indifferently with the meanest and worst; upon those who are engaged in the highest and worthiest enterprise, and often as the direct consequence of the noblest acts . . . She mows down those on whose existence hangs the well-being of a whole people, perhaps the prospects of the human race for generations to come, with as little compunction as those whose death is a relief to themselves, or a blessing to those under their noxious influence.[4]

Such are nature's dealings with human life, says Mill, and his description could be little improved.

Physical evil. Here we are confronted with numerous examples: unproductive pain; the onslought of a virulent disease; the gradual deterioration of personality in old age; birth defects and malformities which deprive one of a normal mental or physical existence. Physical evil may be thought of as any destructive occurrence which comes to a man because of his somatic nature. Christian thought has consistently recognized the reality of both natural and physical evils as accompaniments of the corporeal nature of the created world.

Moral evil. Simply stated, moral evil is a consequence of moral freedom, which is to say, human freedom. If one denies an element of moral self-determination to man, then moral evil is a myth. Moral evil as a religious concept pervades both Old and New Testaments and is woven into the larger fabric of Christian thought. And in spite of Mill's lucid description of natural evil, nature can hardly assume the attributes of freedom in her wrongdoing. We do not impugn nature for murder, nor does she suffer remorse for her cruelties. We are able to accept natural and physical evil with more philosophical detachment than moral evil, for there is an element of common anguish in moral evil. Moral evil implicates all of us. C. S. Lewis reminds us that men—not God or nature—have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; that human avarice is the source of poverty and overwork.[5]

The idea of moral wrongdoing, of course, implies a conscious recognition of right and wrong. Therefore, we need to distinguish between conscious and unconscious moral evil. Some acts are consciously done in spite of the better choice, or with conscious knowledge of the better path; some are done without such awareness. The criminal psychologist must often judge (for the courts) whether the offender 'knew" he was doing wrongly, or whether he was "sane" at the time of the act. Many of us have counseled or worked with those who seem to have very little moral sensitivity, who, in fact, appear uncomfortable when they are not being antisocial.

This distinction between volitional and pathological wrongdoing is not so important for us as it is for those who devise laws and methods for dealing with this problem. The religious and ethical concept of moral evil is intended to include the many forms of personal human behavior, conscious or unconscious, willful or unintentional, which harm human life or what is of value to human life (above definition). The point is that evil is done by man; the evidence is as fresh as the morning paper. Moral

[4]Daniel J. Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis, *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954), pp. 227-28.

[5]C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944), p. 77.

evil is not necessarily equated with the rational knowledge of good and evil; moral evil includes irrational and **rationalized** anti-human behavior. Eichmann, for example, rationalized his acts against the Jews in terms of the ultimate objectives of the Third Reich.

Sin is the religious term referring to moral evil. It may refer to specific acts of wrongdoing (sins); it also points to the more extensive nature of human error, whether the error be of ignorance, choice, or pathology. St. Paul seems to have used the term in both ways. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (1 Cor. 15. 17). "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies . . . Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, . . . For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." (Romans 6:12-14).

If "sin" is to be a meaningful theological term, it may be used as a basic concept pointing to the human share in the reality of evil. It is as important a concept to theology and religious thought as those phychological and philosophical terms which point to incorrigible elements in mental or metaphysical reality. The power of sin is as real and extensive today as it has ever been. Christian theology does not modernize itself by abandoning the term even though the dynamics of human behavior have been more deeply explored and more thoroughly catalogued than in the days of the early church.

Social and cultural evil. Evil is evident in collective as well as individual organisms. Social and cultural evil is an extension of moral evil into the larger nexus of human groups. There are social maladies and institutionalized evils which become part of the cultural milieu. The twentieth century has borne witness to evil on this level in unbelievable proportions. A film compiled from captured German film tells the story of **Mein Kampf** in vivid, ghastly pictures:

> Frame after frame full of German men and women radiant with uncritical adoration of the men who, by 1945, had caused the deaths of 5 million people.
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> Some footage on the Warsaw ghetto, excerpted from SS training films, that is just about a gruesome as any ever put through a projector. Reduced to less than 200 calories a day, Warsaw's Jews shrivel up to skin and bone, huddle 13 to a room, lie covered with flies till the corpse crews find them, fling them on carts, dump them down a chute into a mass grave.
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> A sequence, shot while the starvation was at its post-war worst, that shows a well-dressed, obviously cultivated man, his coat laid neatly aside and his sleeves rolled tidily to his elbows, squatting on a main thoroughfare in Berlin and hacking, savagely with a butcher's knife at the bloated corpse of a horse.[6]

Nazi war "criminals" in **Judgment at Nuremberg** who commented sardonically after having viewed a similar film presented in evidence against his clients: "I can show you some films taken at Hiroshima."

The extensive horrors and terror of World War II are evidence enough of social and cultural evil. Technology, which supposedly represents one of man's highest achievements, may in fact be the means of his own destruction. This is evident when we look at the dominant course of international conduct. The scope of world conflict and unrest seems to widen every day. The existence of nuclear arsenals is only symptomatic of a deeper illness — an illness whose cause and cure are of religious concern.

Social and cultural evil is often the result of cumulative conditions traceable to no particular source of moral corruption, e.g., social decay and blight in the transition areas of large cities, unemployment during periods of economic adjustment, the anticipated prob-

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[6]Reported in *Time*, April 28, 1961, p. 86. It was the attorney defending the

lems arising from the global population explosion. C. Wright Mills observed that man often feels trapped by conditions of modern life—conditions resulting from impersonal changes in the structure of "continent-wide societies." His comments are worth noting:

> In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming "merely history." The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of impersonalism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. . . Everywhere in the . . . world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form.[7]

Evil manifest in the structures of societies is perhaps the most difficult kind of evil to deal with by those wrapped snuggly in the parochialism of the local parish. But on encounter with evil on this level is imperative for those, at least, who are sensitive to these conditions and who know that the church cannot serve its mission isolated from the world in which it exists like leaven in the loaf. The judgments and correctives of Christian faith must be brought into creative tension with the legion sicknesses of the world.

The evils of finitude. Friedrich Schleiermacher traced man's capacity for religious behavior to the "feeling" of **absolute dependence.** This awareness of finitude which helps account for attitudes of devotion toward deity also bring a sense of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and despair. The sense of dependence may also account for the feeling of grief: sudden catastrophy erases cherished life; forces out of control snatch someone or some value from the immediacy of known and loved relationships. These and other experiences are internalized mentally.

The evil of finitude is one way of speaking about the psychological dimension of evil. If we could not contemplate our condition, whether it be simple pain or the isolation from loved ones, or the feeling of guilt or frustration, then evil would not be a thing to have occupied so much of man's attention. The evils of finitude are experienced by all of us, whether we wish to admit it or not. To be sure, some experience mental pain more often and to a greater extent than others. Some would deny the anxious moment, or would be unable or unwilling to recall moments of sudden or irrational fear. But if any form of evil finds universal expression, it is that form of evil expressed in fears, anxieties, guilts, hostilities, loneliness, meaninglessness, and despair which come to all men. What pastor has not quoted these words? "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing." (Eccles. 7.15). The psalms give eloquence to what we call the evils of finitude.

> Save me, O God!
> For the waters have come up to my neck.
> I sink in deep mire,
> where there is no foothold;
> I have come into deep waters,
> and the flood sweeps over me.
> (Psalm 69.1)

Unknowingly James Baldwin gives current expression to this psalm in his vivid description of Rufus Scott's suicide leap from the George Washington Bridge:

> Then he stood on the bridge, looking over, looking down. . . He raised his

[7]C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1959,) p. 4.

eyes to heaven. . . He began to cry. Something in Rufus which could not break shook him like a rag doll and splashed salt water all over his face and filled his throat and his nostrils with anguish. He knew the pain would never stop. He could never go down into the city again. He dropped his head as though someone had struck him and looked down at the water. It was cold and the water would be cold. He was black and the water was black.[8]

The focus of modern intellectual attention has been brought to bear on the inner life of man. Existentialism has developed a "new ontology" which discards the old quarrel between the objectivists and subjectivists, recalling us from philosophical pursuits for "essences" and "sources" to the world of man's mental existence. Existentialism articulates the conditional evil which man has always lived with, but it speaks with penetrating reality of the present experiences of finitude. Anxiety, guilt, and despair are the key words in the contemporary analysis of man's existence. And although we have good reason to give serious consideration to the existentialist perspective on its own merit, its value as a significant movement will be given durability by the fact that it articulates in modern terms, that is, in the context of a scientific, technological culture, what has always been true of human life, namely, its finitude. If man's guilt has been underscored by his alienation from others and from himself in a technological society where his most intimate relations are with machines, then our ability to recognize and deal with this fact will be furthered by remembering that man was "guilty"in much earlier times. Listen to Lady Macbeth:

Out, damed spot! out I say!—One, two; why, then
'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord,
fie! a soldier and afeard? What need we fear
who knows it, when none can call our power to
account? Yet who would have thought the old man
to have had so much blood in him?[9]

But if man is today no more **anxious,** let us say, than in former times, the modern era seems, at least, to have confirmed the fact beyond any shadow of imagining. Shakespeare allowed us to penetrate the facade of royalty and observe their tragic personal and emotional conflicts. Dostoyevsky did the same thing with the peasants and in this sense became the father of the modern novel. Indeed, Raskolnikov in **Crime and Punishment** is the personification of contemporary man, to the extent that, for every one of us, the universe is silent, God is dead, and every man is a law unto himself. If these are not facts, then they are feelings and thus facts. And if someone suggests that we have not wandered into a wasteland of personal and social estrangement, then how explain the calculated sacrifice of a hundred million human beings to the lofty cause of human dignity and freedom? a sacrifice which most of us serve with much more consistency and devotion than that of bread and wine.

Man's finitude, then, and the evils which stem from it, are added to the variety of evils to which we are heirs. "To live is to die." This says in a candid way what must be seen and recognized in many and various ways if we come to terms with the problem of evil. Conscious of the power of evil in the world, man is driven to relate himself to a power which is able to hold him up in the bogs of his real world. "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God" and it is in this river that we all long to be immersed. "If you drink of this water, you shall never thirst." It is more a genuine religious longing than an empty, pious vanity which makes a man cry out "Lord, give us this water that we may not thirst!"

[8]James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963), p. 78.

[9]*Macbeth,* V, I, 28ff.