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The Question of Theodicies

Frithjof Schuon

"God does what He wills": this affirmation in the Koran all too readily evokes the unfortunate image of a more or less arbitrary Divine Will, when in fact it simply means that man is in general ignorant of the motives of that Will, particularly with regard to the multiple contradictions the world displays. According to theologians, God does not "will" sin since He forbids it, but He does "will" it since sin is possible and nothing happens without God "willing" it or even "creating" it; otherwise one would have to admit, it appears, that God is unable to prevent what He does not will, *quod absit*. The core of the problem here is to be found in the confusion between Being and Beyond-Being, or between the ontological and existentiating Principle and the supra-ontological Essence,[1] a confusion resulting from the fact that on the one hand theology envisages God in an anthropomorphic manner, thus as if He were a human subject, and on the other aims to give account of the whole of the Divine Nature, even though this is incompatible with the preceding point of view.

What the Essence "wills" in virtue of its infinitude—and since "the good tends essentially to communicate itself", according to the Augustinian formulation—is its own radiance and, consequently, the world as such and in its totality; now this manifestation implies by definition remoteness from its Source, so that in "willing" Manifestation the Essence implicitly and indirectly wills the penalty one calls evil, at the risk, precisely, of not wanting to shine or to "diffuse Itself". However, the Divine Will that wants the moral good, and for this reason forbids sin, is not the same that wills the world: the Will of Beyond-Being, or the Essence, wills the world in itself, whereas the Will of Being—already more relative, even though it prolongs

[1] The *Ungrund* (the "ground without a ground") of Boehme or the Brahma *nirguna* ("without attributes") of the Vedantins, whereas Being as such, hence existentiating, is *saguna* ("with attributes"). The scholastic distinction between an *Infinitum absolutum* and an *Infinitum secundum quid* can apply to this initial metaphysical difference, the creative Principle corresponding to the second term of the alternative.

Beyond-Being—presupposes the world and exerts itself only within the world. In other words, Beyond-Being desires the good as radiance, manifestation, or world, whereas Being desires the good as participation of things in the Divine Good; in the first respect, the world is a good since it manifests the Supreme Good, whereas in the second, obedience to the Divine Law—or to any norm or natural quality—is a good because it enables participation in the Supreme Good. In the first case, the Divine Will is affirmed through ontological Radiance, or *Mâyâ*; and in the second, it is affirmed through the Norm, the Law, or Revelation; we thus find ourselves in the presence of two Divine Subjectivities, one pertaining to the Absolute and the other already determined by Relativity; while they are intrinsically identical, they apply extrinsically to two different planes, whence the possible appearance of contradiction. This being so, there is absolutely no reason for wondering why God "wills" this or that, and why, in the case in point, He "wills" sin while forbidding it.

Taken as a whole, the world is good inasmuch as it manifests God, but it contains a partial and contingent aspect of perverseness, since in not being God while nonetheless existing, it opposes itself to God or tends to be the equal of God; since this is impossible, all phenomena—and finally the world itself—are marked by impermanence: they always fall back, as it were, into the void, like arrows shot toward the sun in the mad hope of reaching it.

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According to Epicurus, and those who have followed him, no theodicy is possible for the following reasons: either God wants to eliminate evil but cannot, in which case He is not powerful while being good; or God can eliminate evil but does not want to, in which case He is not good while being powerful; or He neither can nor wants to eliminate evil, in which case He is neither mighty nor good; or He can and wants to, in which case evil does not exist. And yet evil does exist.

Epicurean reasoning is based on ambiguities regarding the very notions of "evil", "willing", and "power". First of all: will and power are inherent in the Divine Nature, which is Absoluteness and Infinitude; this means that God can neither go against His nature nor will anything that is contrary to it on pain of contradiction, hence of absurdity. It is impossible, because absurd, that God would have the power to be other than God, to be neither absolute nor infinite, or not to be at all; and He cannot will what lies outside His power in that it is contrary to Being. God is all-powerful in relation to the world, His creation or His manifestation; but

Omnipotence can in no way act on the Divine Being Itself, given that this Being is the source of Omnipotence and not conversely.

Now Infinitude, which is an aspect of the Divine Nature, implies unlimited Possibility and consequently Relativity, Manifestation, the world. To speak of the world is to speak of separation from the Principle, and to speak of separation is to speak of the possibility—and necessity—of evil; seen from this angle, what we term evil is thus indirectly a result of Infinitude, hence of the Divine Nature; in this respect, God cannot wish to suppress it; likewise, in this respect—and only in this respect—evil ceases to be evil, being no more than an indirect and distant manifestation of a mysterious aspect of the Divine Nature, precisely that of Infinitude or of All-Possibility.

One could also say that Infinitude engenders Possibility, and Possibility engenders Relativity; now Relativity contains by definition what we could term the principle of contrast. Insofar as a quality is relative—or is reflected in Relativity—it has ontological need of a contrast, not intrinsically or in virtue of its content, but extrinsically and in virtue of its mode, thus because of its contingency. Indeed, it is the relative or contingent character of a quality that requires or brings about the existence of the corresponding privative manifestation, with all its possible gradations and as a result, its defect, vice, evil. Evil is the possibility of the impossible, since relative good is the Possible approaching impossibility; for it is from this paradoxical combination of Possibility with impossibility—impossibility becoming real only in and through Possibility—that Contingency or Relativity originates, if one may be allowed an ellipsis that is complex and daring, but difficult to avoid at this point.

If God cannot eliminate evil as a possibility, it is because in this respect evil is a function of His Nature and, being so, it ceases as a result to be evil; and what God cannot do, on pain of contradiction or absurdity, He could never will. However, the Divine Will opposes evil inasmuch as it is contrary to the Divine Nature, which is Goodness or Perfection; in this relationship of opposition—and in this alone—evil is intrinsically evil. God fights this evil perfectly since, on all planes, it is the good that is finally victorious; evil is never more than a fragment or a transition, whether we are in a position to see this or not.

The foundation of any theodicy should thus essentially be: first, that Divine Omnipotence does not extend to the Divine Nature, which could never be the object of the former; second, that the Divine Will accords with Power and could never, as a result, oppose the Divine Nature, which is the source of its faculties or functions; third, that evil is evil only insofar as it opposes the Divine Nature, but not insofar as it results indirectly from It as an instrument of separativity or

diversity, both of which issue from Divine All-Possibility and thus, ultimately, from Infinity itself.

The reasoning of Epicurus has been eagerly adopted, not just by those who deem it in their interest not to believe in God, but also by those who have succumbed to the hypnosis of the world termed "real" and "concrete"; from the point of view of metaphysical intellection, the world contains far less evidence and intelligibility than the transcendent Invisible. Epicurean reasoning is the classic example, as it were, of a logical operation that works impeccably in the absence of information required by its content: one speaks of "evil", but fails to realize that evil is by definition evil only in one respect and not in another, which is proven at the outset by the fact that there is no absolute evil and that evil is never a substance; one speaks of "God", but fails to realize that God, being infinite, carries in His Nature the cause of an unfolding that necessarily contains an element of contradiction by reason of His very Infinitude; and one speaks of "power" and "willing", but fails to realize that the Divine Nature is the Subject of these and not the Object, which amounts to saying that these two faculties, while being unlimited by virtue of Divine Unlimitedness and in the direction of contingency, are limited at their "peak" by Divine Absoluteness, which no will and no power could ever act upon.

Every theologian will acknowledge that God is free to create the world; none will admit that God is free not to possess Freedom, or not to be God, or not to be at all. Thus the whole problem of theodicy, so rashly and crudely taken up by Epicurus, is concerned mainly with the question of the Divine Nature, that is, with the characteristics of the Substance which is both absolute and infinite.

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For the Stoics, evil is a necessary concomitant of the good; and likewise for Leibnitz: the world is perfect in its totality, but things are imperfect; God has allowed moral evil because without it there would be no virtue.[2] This is in fact the common opinion of theologians: the role of evil is to cooperate with the created good; as a result, evil is no more than an indirect aspect of the good. This argument is based on the principle of contrast we alluded to earlier: in order to be

[2] As for the "best of all possible worlds" of Leibnitz, the "principle of the best" is not even conceivable since it evaporates into the indefinite. The existent world as a whole is "the best" by the fact of its very existence, and only because of it, which is to say that such an evaluation is meaningless, or that it amounts to no more than the axiomatic conclusion that Being is the Good.

actualized, the good requires a contrary element to the very degree that the level of actualization is relative; what is thus at issue here is an internal law of relativity.

For Plato, the terminal point of the cosmogonic fall is matter, which makes concrete the principle of centrifugal coagulation; for Christians, this "matter" becomes "flesh" and, with it, pleasure,[3] whereas for Islam, as for Judaism, evil is polytheism, idolatry, and disobedience, and thus finally duality, which at its ontological root has no connection—to say the least—with what we call sin. The same is true of Plato's "matter" and the "flesh" of the Christians when we trace them back to their respective roots, which are Substance and Beatitude.

For Plotinus, absolute Being is the source of what *a posteriori* we call evil, in the sense that emanated Being, which will create the world, mixes with possibility due to this very emanation—or this issuance—and thus becomes predisposed to all the falls which make up the descending diversity of the world; emanated Being—the creative or demiurgic Principle—produces privation indirectly, not insofar as it is Being, but on the contrary insofar as emerging from Absolute Being or Beyond-Being, it limits itself and thus takes on an aspect of lesser reality.

Origen envisages above all moral evil, of which natural ills in every order are in fact the consequences; for man has drawn along with him in his fall all the realms of nature. Thus Origen perceives the source of evil in the misuse of free will; free will has been given to man because, without freedom, man would have been immutable like God. One can object that God possesses freedom before man and better than man, but does not misuse it; if man abuses this gift, this is because his nature is not fully suited to it, and because the cause of evil is not freedom but corruptibility. Origen's argument nonetheless has the merit of showing, though by way of a detour, that creation implies imperfection, by metaphysical necessity; the possibility of a choice between the Substance and the accident, or between the Real and the illusory, operates as the motive force of the cosmogonic descent.

According to St Thomas, evil results from the diversity of creatures and the gradation of their qualities, the compensation for evil being the total Order in view of which it is tolerated; physical ills are the privation of Being in relation to the substance of creatures; moral evil is this same privation with respect to their activity. In order to escape from Manichean dualism, which ruins the notion of the Supreme Good, St Thomas concludes that evil does not have its cause in Being—it does not in fact have its direct cause there—and that it simply attaches itself to the

[3] Contrary to a too widely held opinion, the moral doctrine of Aristotle, who advocated the golden mean inasmuch as this is situated between two excesses, is not an invitation to mediocrity, nor is it responsible for the tendency toward the bourgeois secularism that it may have occasioned. However, this moral doctrine is to be distinguished from Christian morality, which sees in morals a spiritual means—whence its sacrificial character—whereas for the Greeks, as for most Orientals, moral equilibrium is spiritually a basis and not a means.

good by depriving it of a particular quality; evil "is" not, but it "exists" or, in other words, it is an evil, whereas its existence is a good with respect to—and because of—universal totality. In referring to an Augustinian formula previously mentioned, we might add that the cause of evil—but not inasmuch as it is evil—is the innate need of the Good to impart itself, for it is this need that produces the world, and it is this production—or this unfolding of Being—that requires differentiation, vertical as well as horizontal; now differentiation entails modes of privation of Being, hence what we are entitled to call evil.

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Whether one speaks of "matter", of the "flesh", or of misused "freedom", it is always, from the point of view of the ultimate cause, a question of Possibility, which is the *Shakti* or the Power of *Âtmâ*, and which coincides with Relativity and thereby with the process that is both cosmogonic and individualizing. "Sin is the ego", some Hinduizing idealists preach, which, incidentally, exempts them from any objective discernment and from any uncomfortable option; now the ego as such derives from the Divine Self, not only directly and by participation and analogy, but also in an indirect way and by separation and inversion; it is in this last respect that it manifests sin or evil, or, if one prefers, Luciferianism. This aspect notwithstanding, the ego is as innocent as matter, or flesh, or pleasure in their existential and virtually spiritual purity, as is proven by the fact that holiness does not necessarily exclude these elements.

If man is the handiwork of a Principle that is sovereignly good, then why, more than one philosopher has asked, is he exposed to evil? But precisely: he is the handiwork, not the Principle; not being the Principle, which alone is good, he can neither be the good nor be subjected to the good alone; he is a good when manifesting the Principle, but he is not a good when separating himself from It. Eve is an aspect of Adam, and the fall brought about by Eve is equally so. In a certain sense, the role of evil in the world is to recall that "that God alone is good"; otherwise the world would be God, which is to say that it would not be; this, however, is contrary to the nature of the Principle which, being the Infinite, tends to manifest Itself in inexhaustible diversity, or which, being the Good, tends to impart Itself to one "other than Itself". It would moreover be naïve to believe that all would be perfect if man no longer suffered and if he no longer committed crimes, for the average man of the "dark age", even when his moral behavior is correct, is far from representing a pure good, and his manner of envisaging both evil and good is on a level with his degeneration: that is, it has nothing to do with man's ultimate interests.

One point that seems to have been overlooked in most theodicies is the extreme limitation of evil itself in space and time when these are considered in their full extension, and all the more so when taken in the context of total Existence; it is true that the authors of these doctrines do not ask whether evil is big or small, but merely note its existence; however, this is precisely the reason why they give too much the impression of establishing a kind of symmetry between good and evil, when in fact there is no common measure between them in the cosmic cycles any more than in the total universe. It must be acknowledged that Aryan as well as Semitic eschatologies share some responsibility in creating this impression of symmetry, but this is because they are disposed in view of the actual state of earthly man, and not because they are meant to do justice to the overall proportion of things.

Some have sought to see an "optimism" in theodicy, which is entirely to misunderstand its point of view, which is essentially objective. For optimism, according to the current use of this term, is a matter of subjectivity and not of objectivity; its error is to deny an evil that really exists, just as pessimism is wrong, not in recognizing an evil, but in denying a real good.

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The Power of cosmogonic propulsion, upon contact with certain cosmic planes which it itself unfolds, gives rise to the privative and subversive principle that we call evil; it is this ultimate consequence which, as the Gnostics see it, redounds upon the creative Power itself, and which leads them to attribute to Plato's demiurge a negative and quasi-malefic significance, similar to that assumed by Ahriman in Zoroastrianism. If Christianity for its part sees in Lucifer a fallen angel, this is because it is referring to the Power of a propulsion become tenebrous upon its entry into the animistic state; and if Islam, on the contrary, specifies that the devil, Iblis, is a jinn and not an angel, hence a being created out of fire and not light—the Koran insists on this—it is because the propulsive Power becomes negative and subversive only upon its entry into the animistic and subtle substance, so that in defining the *Princeps hujus mundis*, there is no need to take into account superior cosmic antecedents.

If the Power of divine attraction is personified upon contact with man, the perverted propulsive Power is no less so; the fact that it is *a priori* impersonal in no wise prevents it from becoming personal in its relations with the human world. This personification of the malefic power has induced some, in Islam as well as in Christianity, not only to see in the devil a quasi-human individual, but even to envisage his ultimate reintegration into Divine Mercy; if such an

opinion is inadmissible in this anthropomorphist form, it nonetheless holds some metaphysical import to the extent that it refers finally to the *apocatastasis*: evil will be resorbed into its original and neutral substance; fire and darkness will be transmuted into light.

To summarize: Divine Freedom means that God is free not to create a particular world, but not that He is free not to create at all. This is to say that Divine Freedom—that of Being (*Brahma saguna*, "with attributes")—acts on the modes and forms of universal Manifestation and not on its immutable principles; God is free—and He has the power—to eliminate a specific evil, but not evil as such,[4] given that evil as such is a necessary penalty for the full unfolding of Manifestation, and that this unfolding—like Manifestation itself—results necessarily from the Infinitude of the Divine Essence. Now for the Essence, the question of Manifestation, and all the more so that of evil, does not arise; from the perspective of the eternal Wakefulness of the Absolute, the universal Dream has never been,[5] for the accident, whatever its quality, can never add anything to the Substance. But one could also contend that the accident is nothing other than the Substance, or that it partakes of the latter's reality; or yet, that it possesses all the reality corresponding to its nature or possibility.

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It goes without saying that even the best possible metaphysical argument could never convince us if there were not within us some trace of what this argument is meant to communicate, or if the certitude that it aims to awaken in us were not already contained in the very substance of our spirit; this certitude is virtual in some, while for others it is merely potential and inoperative. It is in any case impossible for an argument concerning the Invisible and the Transcendent to convince anyone in the manner of a demonstration whose particulars are all sensorially or mathematically verifiable.

The classic error rationalists make with respect to metaphysical demonstrations is to believe that a metaphysician assumes his thesis as a result of the arguments he propounds, and that this thesis is therefore no more than a mere conclusion, and that it falls apart as soon as one denounces the weak points that some excel in discovering—which is not difficult to do since the facts of the demonstration elude ordinary experience; in reality, as we have said more than once,

[4] Christ cured the sick, but he did not abolish sickness, and he thus demonstrated or illustrated the doctrine of which we have just given a brief survey.

[5] And this is why the Dream not only unfolds but is resorbed; its unfolding manifests its participation in the Essence, whereas its resorption on the contrary manifests its illusory nature in relation to the Absolute.

metaphysical arguments are not the causes of certitude, but its effects; in other words, the certitude at issue, while being a subjective phenomenon, is made of objectivity since it pertains entirely to a Reality that is independent of our mind.

As for theodicy, it is necessary to know that the Intellect perceives the Universal or Divine Good *a priori*; that is, it may perceive It before understanding—or wanting to understand—the nature of evil; and if a contemplative metaphysician may be able to overlook the doctrine of evil, it is precisely because he is certain from the outset, in an unconditional and in some fashion primordial way, of the infinite primacy of the Good under the three aspects of "pure Being", "pure Spirit", "pure Beatitude".[6] For him a theodicy can serve the secondary function of an "appeasing of the heart", as the Sufis would say, but it will never play the role of a proof *sine qua non*.

St Anselm's *credo ut intelligam* means that faith is an anticipation, by our whole being and not by reason alone, of the quintessential certitude we have just mentioned; by anticipating this intellection, faith partakes of it already without it always being possible to ascertain where faith, in the basic sense of the term, ends and where direct knowledge begins. This is also one of the meanings of the blessing pronounced upon those "that have not seen, and yet have believed"; but in virtue of its sacred character, this saying applies to all levels and therefore encompasses the level of gnosis, for, indeed, "to believe" is not only to admit volitively and emotively; it is also to draw, on the very plane of plenary and intellective certitude, the consequences of what one knows; it is thus to know "as if one saw" and with the awareness of being seen by Him whom we see not;[7] in this sense, faith is more than mere comprehension; or, if one prefers, faith is the dimension of amplitude or of unfolding in understanding, the dimension that allows a consciousness that is *a priori* only speculative—though sufficient, certainly, on the plane of concepts—to become operative, together with its concomitants of detachment and generosity. And this allows us to note that many doctrinal explanations—in the category of theodicies—lose much of their importance, practically and subjectively, in relation to the intuition of the Essence, for this intuition enables us to place within parentheses questions for which we have only a virtual answer, questions, in other words, for which we possess the solution not in detail, but in principle; for those who know that God is sovereignly good—though obviously they are not unaware of evil—know as a result that evil cannot have the last word and that it must have a cause that is

[6] To speak of "Being" is to speak of "Spirit" and "Beatitude"; and one will recall that "Beatitude" coincides with "Goodness", "Beauty", and "Mercy".

[7] Mutilated intelligence, deprived of its volitive and moral complement, is a consequence of the Fall. Objectively speaking, intellection suffices unto itself; but we are subjects or microcosms and must therefore adapt integrally to our objective knowledge on pain of perdition, for a "house divided against itself shall not stand".

compatible with Divine Goodness,[8] even if they do not know what this cause is. Whatever our degree of doctrinal knowledge or of ignorance may be, the best way to grasp the metaphysical limits of evil is to conquer evil in ourselves, and this is possible, precisely, only on the basis of an intuition of the Divine Essence, which coincides with the Infinite Good.

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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 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 of whatever kind, 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 respect 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,[9] 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 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 it is for that reason the best of theodicies.

[8] According to the meaning of the Sanskrit term *Ânanda*, "consisting of Beatitude"; the effect of Beatitude, on the plane of creatures, is what we call in human terms goodness. When Buddhists say that there is in the center of each grain of sand a Buddha, they mean that the world, the *Samsâra*, is in some fashion woven out of Beatitude, of *Nirvâna*, which allows them moreover to affirm that the *Samsâra* is none other than *Nirvâna*; and the latter appears then as the Substance of the *dharma*s, of the accidents.

[9] In the relationship between the "accidents" and the "Substance", one can discern a kind of continuity, whereas the relationship between "form" and "Essence" is conceived rather in a discontinuous mode; the first relationship refers more particularly, though not exclusively, to the Infinite and to the Feminine, whereas the second evokes the Absolute and the Masculine. According to the first relationship, there is resorption, and according to the second extinction; or again, according to the first relationship, the soul meets the Substance by crossing, without concupiscence, through the accident-symbol, whereas in the second relationship, the soul renounces, but without bitterness, the accident-illusion. All this is a question of emphasis, for the notions of "Essence" and "Substance", or of "form" and "accident", are in fact broadly interchangeable.

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