

Plotinus and Spinoza: A Comparative Analysis of Their Notion of Evil

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Abstract:

The problem of evil has always haunted theologians and philosophers. Throughout the course of this paper I will peruse the concepts of evil put forth by Spinoza and Plotinus. These two notions of evil have many similarities, yet there are some vital distinctions between the two. Plotinus and Spinoza both had rather unique views on the concept of evil that seemed to be ahead of their time in many ways. These two philosophers' outlook on the notion of evil departs from the classical theological perspective on evil. This departure from this classical line of reasoning is extremely significant for our modern-day outlook on the concept of evil. Therefore, perusing their ideas of evil will prove worthwhile. The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast these notions of evil and highlight their similarities and differences. Ultimately, by examining and connecting Spinoza's and Plotinus' way of dealing with the problem of evil, I hope to present the reader with a sound alternative route to the problem of evil.

Keywords:

Evil, Ethics, Metaphysics, Reason, Ontology

Introduction

Throughout various epochs there have been a variety of ideas surrounding the concept of evil. These ideas have manifested themselves in various theologies and philosophies. All of these diverse metaphysical viewpoints share one common problem, namely the problem of evil. This problem has always haunted theologians and philosophers. In a theological context, the problem of evil can be seen as follows: if God is perfect and the cause of all things then why would a perfect God create something like evil? This age-old question is truly an enigmatic puzzle that has given rise to a plethora of possible solutions. The two possible solutions that we will peruse throughout the course of this paper is that of Plotinus and Spinoza. Each of these thinkers had their own unique way of trying to solve this riddle. When attempting to solve this problem these two thinkers put forth their own solution that fit well into their ontological and metaphysical framework. Nonetheless, these separate conceptions of evil seem to share a line of reasoning. Throughout the course of this paper I will investigate Spinoza's and Plotinus' view on evil. More specifically, I will compare and contrast the propositions they put forth on the topic of evil and highlight the significant similarities and differences between these two notions of evil.

This will be done by examining various texts by these two authors. I will begin by investigating Spinoza's concept of evil as seen in his letters to Blyenbergh and Oldenburg; namely, *Letters: 18-24, 27 (Blyenbergh)*, and *77-79 (Oldenburg)*. After the perusal of Spinoza's relevant texts, I will continue by investigating Plotinus' idea of evil. In order to grasp Plotinus' ideas surrounding this subject I will consult the following texts throughout the *Enneads: EN.I.1, EN.I.8, EN.II.9, EN.VI.8, EN.VI.9*. Once we have gained a clear understanding of both of these Philosopher's notion of evil, I will proceed by comparing and contrasting both of their views on this topic.

Spinoza's Notion of Evil

“Privation is not an act of depriving it is nothing more than simply a state of want, which in itself is nothing. It is only a construct of the mind (ens rationis) or a mode of thinking which we form from comparing things with one another” (Letter 21, CW p. 824). In order for us to understand Spinoza's view of evil we must thoroughly understand the abovementioned notion of privation. A key feature of privation that will be at the center of attention throughout this discourse is the idea that privation is always relative. In *Letter 21* Spinoza gives us an example of a blind man that clarifies his thoughts on privation. He states that we believe that a blind man is deprived of seeing, because relative to our imagination we can only compare him to those who do in fact have sight. Therefore, we make the assertion that he is deprived of sight. Now this assertion is justified only when it is taken relatively. In other words: relative to those who can see the blind man seems to be deprived of something that should be within his natural state. However, if we try to imagine this from a perspective that encompasses that totality of nature, namely that of God's decree and nature, the blind man's absence of sight is a part of his natural state and his deprivation of sight only arises when we begin to make comparisons of the blind man to those who are seeing. Here we must try to do the impossible and truly try to think in terms of Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*. However, before we can do this, we must firstly understand that Spinoza's God is equal to nature and vice versa. For Spinoza God has no religious meaning it simply is nature and nature is God.¹ Therefore, if we attempt to consider the blind man's deprivation from this absolute perspective, we can quickly see that this deprivation is completely relative, and the man is no more deprived of sight than a stone is deprived of sight. More specifically, the absence of sight pertains to both the man's and the

¹ Spinoza goes into detail about this notion in the preface of the fourth *Ethics* where he speaks about perfections and imperfections as modes of thinking.

stone's nature, the deprivation of sight only exists when we compare it to those with sight. Spinoza states the following on the matter: "For to say that sight belongs to that man at that time is quite as illogical as to say that it belongs to a stone, since nothing more pertains to that man, and is his, than that which God's intellect and will has assigned to him" (Letter 21, CW p. 824).

Spinoza continues this line of thought by applying it to Adam's 'evil' act in the garden. In *Letter 19* Spinoza begins to analyze Adam's desire to eat the forbidden fruit. Throughout, this letter Spinoza explains why and how Adam's act of 'defiance' was actually a moment of perfect expression. Spinoza states it as follows: "I take as an example Adam's resolve or determinate will to eat of the forbidden fruit. This resolve or determinate will, considered solely in itself, contains in itself perfection to the degree that it expresses reality" (Letter 19, CW p. 808). The imperfection we see in his decision to eat the fruit only arises when we begin to compare it to more perfect things. In other words, our judgment is what creates the imperfection and eventually the declaration of evil. If we truly take his action in itself, it represents a perfect expression of reality that is ingrained in the nature of his being. All imperfections come about via various comparisons.

Throughout Spinoza's work he makes it clear that his version of God does not judge and act contrary to his will or intellect. For Spinoza Adam's act was not at all against God's decree and was not evil. If it was against God's will then that would imply a great contradiction. One that would ultimately make any metaphysical conception crumble via the problem of evil. This is where Spinoza is able to remedy the problem of evil that haunts most metaphysical theories. For Spinoza God determines everything. It is an eternal first cause that emanates itself throughout and within everything. Therefore, all expressions are expressions of a reality that hold within it God itself; in reality (nature) good and evil do not exist. These concepts only arise when we communicate. We, humans, have goals, desires, social constructs, judgment, etc. These human attributes result in the creation of good and evil. Even though we as humans are a part of nature/God and possess attributes such as good and evil that does not make nature itself evil. In other words, a piece of nature cannot determine the whole. The whole of nature is determined by the absolute reality of nature (God), which for Spinoza is beyond good and evil. Hence, there are no contradictions in Spinoza's God, there are only expressions of reality that are all perfect within themselves. The levels of perfection only arise when we impose our judgements on them. In our eyes Adam's desire caused him to go from a greater level of perfection to a lesser. For Adam it was a fall, because he

possesses the human attribute of judgement and comparison. He was taken from a more perfect state to a lesser state, but all of these states in themselves are perfect expressions of reality and God's infinite nature. From God or nature's perspective there are no levels, only expressions of reality that are perfect in themselves and necessary for God's infinite nature. Spinoza gives a great example of how Adam's act could not have gone against God's will or intellect. Spinoza states that if Adam's act was against God's decree then it would be the same as a round square. In other words, there are no oppositions in God's will or intellect such as the contradiction of a round square. Evil is an expression and reality that is necessary for God to have an infinite and eternal nature. There are levels of perfection and evil, yet when these levels are taken in themselves, they are all perfect and honest expressions of reality. In *Letter 19* Spinoza states the following on the matter:

Furthermore, neither can we say that Adam's will was at variance with God's law, and was evil because it was displeasing to God. It would argue imperfection in God if anything happened against his will, or if he wanted something he could not possess, or if his nature were determined in such a manner that, just like his creatures, he felt sympathy with somethings and antipathy to others. Furthermore, this would be in complete contradiction to the nature of God's will; for since his will is identical with his intellect, it would be just as impossible for anything to take place in opposition to his will as in opposition to his intellect. That is to say anything that would take place against his will would have to be such a nature as likewise to be in opposition to his intellect, as, for example a round square. Therefore, since Adam's will or decision, regarded in itself, was neither evil nor yet, properly speaking, against God's will, it follows that God can be – or rather the reasoning you refer to, must be – the cause of it. But not insofar as it was evil, for the evil that was in it was simply the privation of a more perfect state which Adam was bound to lose because of his action. (Letter 19, CW p. 809)

At this point Spinoza begins to make it clear that this privation seen in Adam's decline in state of being is not something positive. Nonetheless, he emphasizes that this sort of judgement is done within our intellect, not that of God's. Once again, we posit such degrees by comparing an imperfect state to a state, we judge to be more perfect. We believe that the imperfect case is one that is deprived and has deviated from its own nature. For Spinoza these types of abstractions and definitions are only done within our intellect. Therefore, we can clearly see that Adam's actions were pure and perfect expressions of reality that are only deemed a fall when we postulate our own conceptions and definitions onto reality.

In *Letter 23* Spinoza goes on to answer some vital questions on ideas surrounding God and evil. As I have previously mentioned, Spinoza does not see the privation in Adam's knowledge as something positive. With regards to this Spinoza answers three questions in *Letter 23* that will help

us understand why he does not view this as something positive. The first question is: “Is murder as pleasing to God as almsgiving?” (Letter 23, CW p. 833). Once again Spinoza makes it clear that his idea of God is enigmatic and exceeds our determinations and definitions. Therefore, the pleasing of God is just not possible since ‘pleasing’ is a human term. However, if we pose the question: is a killer as righteous as say a monk, then Spinoza will quickly say no. It is important to note that neither of these men ‘please’ God. Adam didn’t please or displease God. He just carried out his reality. Nonetheless, if Adam did not eat the apple, he would have carried out a more perfect reality for himself. Either way God’s reaction to eating or not eating the apple would be indifferent for Spinoza. Simply put, for Adam it might have been better for him not to eat the apple, but either way God does not care or judge it as good or evil. Evil is a fiction of the mind that only arises when we begin to compare and define certain actions. As De Dijn (1996) puts it “nothing is good or evil in itself; things just are necessarily what they are. Notions of good or bad arise in the mind because it experiences pleasure and pain and desires what gives pleasure and flees what gives pain” (p.246). With that being said there is a question that still seems to remain open; namely, why instill our species with capabilities of judgement that can lead to such horrible realities? This question might seem to pose some threat to the validity of any theological or philosophical system. Nevertheless, if we analyze the possible threat this question poses it will quickly begin to dissipate if we apply a system such as that of Spinoza. The answer to this question lies in Spinoza’s enigmatic notion of God, along with his ethical conceptions of reason and freedom from passions. Firstly, Spinoza’s God is infinite and eternal; therefore, it must necessarily carry out every possible reality no matter how horrifying it is. Secondly, it is our own responsibility to determine what we deem to be evil and repulsive to our species, since God or nature is beyond our idea of judgment.

The claim that Spinoza’s God is responsible for the most horrendous evils insofar as he is the direct agent of these evils seems to me an objection of much lesser weight. In fact, I would venture to say that Spinoza could not care less about ascribing evil to God. For Spinoza, good and evil are merely mutilated human constructs. (Melamed, 2015, p. 36)

This sort of conception of God and evil has extremely important ethical implications, which I will only very briefly touch upon in this discourse.

Spinoza’s ethical system is one of ‘transcendence’² in the sense that in order to be a truly ethical and ‘free’ person one must transcend their individual passions and become liberated via

² Although, there is no real transcendence in Spinoza’s pantheism (Spinoza clearly states in *Letter 73 to Oldenburg* that ‘God is the immanent cause of all things), his ethical system seems to go beyond the individual and create a collective mindset that is

reason. This idea of liberation via reason will ultimately solve the problem posed by the above question. The horrible evils that are seen in this world are conducted by individuals that are swayed by their passions. These evils can be mitigated by liberating oneself, as much as possible, from their passions. This liberation is ultimately guided by reason, which is completely harmonious to nature. De Dijn (1996) states the following on this matter: “ethics is centered on the theme of freedom versus slavery vis-à-vis one’s passions and on the means to escape slavery and reach real freedom through following the dictates of reason or finding the remedies against passions” (p.246). Therefore, the immanent evil we experience in this world is one of necessity due to the infinite and eternal nature of God; nonetheless, one can liberate oneself from these evils derived from passion by turning to reason. It is our society’s responsibility to decide what is evil. Therefore, our ethical duty is to free ourselves from the passions that society deems irrational.

Plotinus on Evil

Plotinus’ view of evil is quite similar to that of Spinoza’s. Nonetheless, there are of course some vital differences between the two views. Plotinus’ notion of evil is derived from his much more mystical view of pantheism. Very briefly put, his pantheism begins with emanation from a perfect self-contemplating and self-causing first cause, which Plotinus refers to as the One. The One ultimately emanates its perfect contemplation into various hierarchical realms; namely, the One, the Intelligence, the Soul, and Matter. As the One emanates itself through these realms it slowly begins to lose its perfection since each realm is going further away from its perfect source. Now since the source is perfect and infinite these lower realms are simply excess of its contemplation. Imagine a pot full of water boiling over. The lower realms which the One emanates are the excess water that is boiling over from an infinite source. What is important for the time being is that matter is the furthest thing that we can find from the One. This is where evil comes into play for Plotinus. Therefore, Plotinus’ notion of matter will be the center of attention for this current discourse.

In *The Enneads* (EN.I.8.7) Plotinus offers us his variation of the problem of evil and poses the following questions: “But why does the existence of the Principle of Good necessarily comport the existence of the Principle of Evil? Is it because the All necessarily comports the existence of matter?” Plotinus’ short and direct answer is: yes. Plotinus adopts Plato’s idea of the cosmos as a

guided by reason rather than individual passions. Therefore, by transcendence I mean going beyond the individual passions to create an ethical community guided by reason.

blend between the realm of the intellect and necessity.³ Therefore, Plotinus (as a Platonist) will go on to say that evil is a necessary part of the cosmos that will never perish. Now this seems to go completely against Spinoza's view on evil. For Spinoza evil was completely relative and not ingrained in the primordial cosmos. Nonetheless, if we dig deeper into Plotinus' formulation of evil, we can begin to see that the two concepts are more similar than not. Plotinus states that the existence of evil is inevitable since the Good exists. We can clearly see that the Good is not the only thing that exists. Consequently, since not only the Good exists there must be something that is furthest away from the Good. Given this type of reasoning by gradation there must be an endpoint or something that is completely contrary to the Good. This of course is evil and evil for Plotinus resides in matter. This idea is clarified by Fuller in the example he highlights of perfume departing from its source. Fuller (2011) writes, "The perfume is fainter the farther it gets from the sweet-smelling object, the light fades in proportion as it proceeds farther from its source. In fine, departure from an absolute standard means diminution with respect to that standard" (p. 306). Therefore, as we get further from the source of the Good the less amount of Good is emanated. This is the case until we reach matter. Matter, as Plotinus sees it, has no residue of the Good. As a result, matter becomes a necessary evil for Plotinus.

"Matter is understood to be a certain base, a recipient of Form-Ideas" (EN. II.4.1). For Plotinus matter is completely impassive (Moore, "Plotinus 204—207 C.E."). The impassivity possessed by matter allows it to receive all sorts of varieties of being. This impassivity also implies that matter lacks quality. This is precisely why matter is evil. It is not evil, because it has the quality of evil. Rather, it is evil, because it has no quality. It is a part of the cosmos that is necessary, yet contrary to the Good, because it lacks all quality. It is pure potentiality; therefore, it lacks the actualization of the Good. Nonetheless, just as Spinoza made clear, Plotinus does the same by stating that in order for the One to truly be infinite it must emanate itself into every possible form of being and non-being. Therefore, since matter lacks all quality it is completely contrary to the Good since the Good is completely full of quality; nonetheless, matter is absolutely necessary and is implied by the One's infinite nature.

³ Plotinus uses a quote from Timaeus 47e5-48a1, which states that the cosmos is "blended from the Intellectual-Principle and Necessity."

The various types of evil we see in the world arise when derivations of the Good begin to mix with matter. The levels of evil we see in this world depend on how much deprivation is received from the matter. In other words, the evil experienced in this world is completely due to a lack of the Good. Nonetheless, since it is still mixed with the Good there is a level of Good within the evil. Example: An evil dictator still has a trace amount of the Good, in the sense that these types of dictators are often good at leading, organizing, conspiring, etc. However, these leaders lack a rational good and are still much further away from the Good compared to a monk. Therefore, once matter receives any type of determination from a higher hierarchical realm it receives some good. For Plotinus, there are levels of good and evil. These levels are self-evident and are derived from either a lack or abundance of the Good. Straying away from this lack is ultimately the goal of Plotinus' ethics, which shares a vast amount of similarities to that of Spinoza. Very crudely put, Plotinus' ethics focuses on aligning oneself with the Good via rational contemplation. An individual can stray away from evil by endorsing a rational lifestyle that does not obsess on the material world, but rather attempts to create a parallel line of thought with the higher, more perfect realms. Again, here we see many similarities to Spinoza. Both of their ethics focuses on liberation via a greater level of reasoning.

Comparison

At first glance Plotinus' and Spinoza's concepts of evil might not have a striking resemblance. However, if we take a deeper look at their notions of evil, we can find some strong similarities. These similarities begin within their notions of ontology and metaphysics. Both of these philosophers endorse a metaphysical system that views the creator of the universe as an infinite and eternal first cause. Therefore, both of their creators are the cause and source of evil. However, their formulation of the idea of evil is not contrary to their creator. Both of these philosophers view evil as a privation or a lack. That is to say, evil is caused by a lack of proper development of rational thinking. Correct reasoning via philosophical contemplation ultimately leads to an ethical society for both these philosophers. The difference between the two philosopher's conception of evil rests solely in their metaphysical outlook. Both of their notions of evil revolve around the idea that there is a lack of actualization when it comes to rational capabilities. For Spinoza this lack of rationality results in a person that is governed by passions rather than reason. Nonetheless, even a person that is fully governed by passions is not fundamentally evil, or contrary to nature for Spinoza. That person is just relatively less reasonable than another person that is liberated from

the passions. However, both of these people taken on their own are perfect expressions of reality. This is where the difference arises in Spinoza and Plotinus. For Plotinus, evil is completely contrary to the Good, it is not only an *ens rationis*. Evil primordially exists in the cosmos in the form of matter. It is a complete opposite of the Good in the sense that it is a complete lack of quality. It is pure potentiality, which for Plotinus is necessary because without pure potentiality you cannot have all forms of actuality. This can be made clear by the idea that you cannot have music without silence, you need these contraries in order for either to exist. In Spinoza's philosophy evil is a fable of the mind that only arises when we begin to compare things to one another. On the other hand, Plotinus gives evil a primordial existence in the cosmos. This is where the fundamental difference lies in the two philosophies.

Conclusion

Plotinus and Spinoza put forth rather unique notions of evil that seemed to be ahead of their time in many ways. Spinoza cleared up his thoughts on evil by presenting us with a rather peculiar view on Adam's experience in the Garden of Eden. This view held Adam's act of betrayal and the idea of evil as an *ens rationis*. If Adam's act is taken in itself without comparison and judgement it is a perfect expression of reality that is not evil. Plotinus gave us a view of evil that is derived from his Platonic conception of the cosmos. For Plotinus evil resides in matter as complete privation. The innate evil that is within the primordial cosmos is not evil, because it possesses an attribute of evil. The evil that is within matter is evil, because it is complete lack of quality. Therefore, it does not possess any value, good or evil. For Plotinus evil can be seen as follows: the complete lack of quality. The evil we see in the world is a privation of proper rationality and knowledge. Although these views of evil might seem to be vastly contrasting at first sight, they are quite alike in many ways and ultimately lead to a very similar ethical system that revolves around the idea of liberation via rationality.

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