

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Rationality of Evil

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Introduction

The question we aim to clarify in this chapter is as follows: what are the sources of evil for rational, finite beings who are perfect in this respect: that they seek the true and the good. What are the reasons, if any, that cause our will to turn away from the good? Following Augustine's and Hegel's remarks on the subject, we will delineate two distinct conceptions of the good and the logical function ascribed to evil in relation to each of these positions. Specifically, we will examine the idea of evil as a form of privation, and thereof a lack of good (Augustine), and evil as a form of particularity, having a positive ontological existence in the individual (Hegel). In addition, we will elaborate on the idea of two evil individuals relating to each other in the act of forgiveness, as presented in the final subsection of the Morality chapter in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Evil as Privation

In *The Science of Logic*, in the section on the Idea of the good, Hegel equates evil with the form of "external contingency" (GW 11, 241/Hegel 2010a, 337)

in relation to the good. Thus, evil is that what is present in the form of external circumstances that lie outside the principle of the good and accidentally relate to it, preventing the good from its proper realization. For example, I wanted to help my brother, but I fell off the bike, so I did not manage to do it – if I did not fall, I would do it. My intention was all pure and good, it's just that in a milieu in which my act was carried out, an unpredictable circumstance came on my way and impeded my action. However, if evil is defined by way of negation and subtraction of the good,¹ then it makes no sense to speak of evil in terms of a separate logical principle on its own. In fact, if my action only imperfectly corresponds with the principle of the good – namely only in terms of what I (theoretically) ought to do, but have failed to do, then I cannot speak about evil at all – in the best case I can say is that my action was bad. So, badness is the imperfection of the good, good that did not turn out well on the way to its actualization (*Verwirklichung*). As Hegel puts it:

The good is for the subjective concept the objective; actuality confronts it in existence as an insuperable restriction only in so far as it still has the determination of immediate existence, not of something objective in the sense that it is being in and for itself; it is rather either the evil or the indifferent, the merely determinable, whose worth does not lie within it. (2010a, 239)

As we can clearly infer from the previous paragraph, evil has no positive ontological existence on its own. Rather it is explained by the same principle that explains the good, and thus cannot be anything else but a mere form of its logical privation,² i.e. 'badness' – nothing but the principle of the good itself. And if this is so, if evil is, indeed, an inner logical division (*Entzweiung*) of the principle of the good itself, by committing an evil deed, we only conform to the universality of the principle of the good – by deviation from the good, we come to know good itself.

With this conception, the conception of the good as an all-encompassing universal principle (as a form of totality, to use Hegel's words) with nothing to oppose to it, there is no such thing as evil, there is no logical space for it. All

1 Aristotle similarly defines evil action as the destruction of the good: "also in the case of evils the end or actuality must be worse than the potentiality; for that which is capable is capable alike of both contraries. Clearly, then, evil does not exist apart from things; for evil is by nature posterior to potentiality [20] Nor is there in things which are original and eternal any evil or error, or anything which has been destroyed—for destruction is an evil" (Met. 9, 27).

2 *Malum est privatio boni* reads the famous formula of Augustine; In his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, Augustine asks: "for what is all that we call evil if not the absence of good?" (NPNE, 13)

we can point our finger at is only a relative difference in relation to the good; each and every being is good according to its tautology – if it were not good, it would cease to be.³ Evil is conceptually impossible, and yet, precisely as far as it is the privation of the good – all there is always already bears the mark of its lack and therefore testifies to its subsistence. Good is so total that it pervades everything and yet it cannot be actualized anywhere and evil is so null that it actualizes itself everywhere; good is all the time on the verge of becoming evil, as Hegel puts it, the principle, good itself, is completely corrupted; evil brings out the reasons that good does not want to know, to paraphrase Pascal, good's own wickedness, residing in its particularity.

Evil as Particularity

If evil is not to be explained simply in terms of privation of the good, since as we have already demonstrated, such a conception of the good itself is utterly perverted (not even in accordance with its own logical principle) – in its claim and pretension to universality and its actualization, it remains something particular – so, how are we to proceed, to step behind the back of this corrupted idea of the good and its relation to evil as being pure nothingness, in the form of an empty lack? Moreover, how are we to do this within the order of reasons, if all the reasons are the reasons of the good and for the good itself, and precisely in its particularity impose to ourselves as something universal?

In order to solve the problem, let us turn to Augustine and to his famous anecdote on stealing pears in the *Confessions* (2006, 31). As Augustine puts it:

A group of young black-guards, and I among them, went out to knock down the pears and carry them off late one night, for it was our bad habit to carry on our games in the streets till very late. We carried off an immense load of pears, not to eat—for we barely tasted them before throwing them to the hogs. Our only pleasure in doing it was that it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart: yet in the depth of the abyss. You had pity on it. Let that heart now tell You what it sought when I was thus evil for no object, having no cause for wrongdoing save my wrongness. The malice of the act was base and I loved it—that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me—not the thing for which I

3 If principle and goodness are the same, if any lack at the level of the principle is explained outside the principle and therefore cannot be ascribed to the functioning of the principle itself, then there is no such thing as badness at the level of principle, and in this sense, we can speak about the good in terms of natural goodness. A being that has a malfunction or is in any way distorted, as long as it remains a natural thing, is perfectly fine, good.

did the evil, simply the evil: my soul was depraved, and hurled itself down from security in You into utter destruction, seeking no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked. (2006, 29)

Of course, stealing pears from neighbour can be dismissed as a relatively innocent teenage prank, but what interests us here are the reasons Augustine gives why he did it. He says, in a subtle gradation of reasoning, that he did not do it out of necessity or hunger, that neighbour's pears neither looked well nor tasted good, and that he in fact had his own pears in the garden, but that he did it nevertheless – purely out of enjoyment and pleasure of the theft and sin itself.⁴ So, what makes this anecdote so interesting, from the logical point of view, is that Augustine does not evaluate (reflect) his own action in a manner of badness, privation that belongs to the good itself.

He does not say, well, you know I did it because at first, I thought it was a good thing to do, but then I did it and I found out retroactively that it was a bad thing to do, so now I know what is a good thing to do, I should not steal, so I am good, fully good. On the contrary, Augustine does not refer to any such theory of the good in his explanation. He simply says, well, I did it for myself, even more, out of the sheer enjoyment of the sin for the sake of the sin itself – so I did not seek the true and the good and so this wickedness of mine cannot be explained in terms of any kind of external obstacles that crossed my way, but is to be verified solely and exclusively in terms of my own principle – that I sought the sin, that I am evil.

What we are trying to point out is that the idea of sin cannot be explained in terms of any external reference to the good, but only through the verification of its own principle that transcends this very opposition in the first place. Sin, in this context, logically speaking, functions as the opening up of the new logical space of what good and evil are from the perspective of us as particular, finite subjects. In other words, sin is not to be understood solely in terms of some kind of negative ignorance that I should recognize in my condition humaine, as that what defines me as rational, finite being (in relation to religious

4 Others were with me and they saw it and approved it, it was like our small common good, there is an inherently intersubjective dimension of the sin, which we will leave aside at this point – the sin does not have any real causality within the world of natural objects, but gains one through intersubjectivity. As Augustine explicitly puts it: “if I had liked the pears that I stole and wanted to enjoy eating them, I might have committed the offence alone, if that had been sufficient, to get me the pleasure I wanted; I should not have needed to inflame the itch of my desires by rubbing against accomplices. But since the pleasure I got was not in the pears, it must have been in the crime itself, and put there by the companionship of others sinning with me” (2006, 33).

discourse on Adam's fall, original guilt etc.), but, on the contrary, as the positive affirmation of my own subjectivity. If I had external reasons for committing a sin that could be reduced to some higher principle of the good, then I would be a mere human creature, an empirical animal. However, precisely because these reasons are solely mine – the expression of my own *Eigensinn*⁵ – we could say that we are subjects. Sin is merely a logical mean by which I express my own freedom to reject any principle of universality of the good that could be something other than myself, my own principle of the good. In other words, it is the subject's way of saying “no” to nature with her own reasoning, throughout the ideas she produces about it.

Basically, it is through the theory of the sin that ‘human being’ becomes the subject and not merely an anthropological, psychic or confessional individual. This is why Hegel keeps on repeating the parable of the original sin. Not because he has a particular interest in the questions of religion, among other things, but, more importantly, because he wants to make a certain logical point – namely, that it is neither Adam nor Eve nor the serpent who are to blame for the fall of man, but rather subjectivity (*Subjektivität*) as such.

In fact, it is only through recognition of my own subjectivity, by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, that I break with the conception of myself as a natural being (*natürliches Wesen*) and that I become the spirit (*der Geist*). To paraphrase the figure of the snake in Hegel's interpretation of the Parable: by rejecting the principle of goodness that lies outside myself, I am similar to God. Not only that I can attain the knowledge of God, but I become God. The subject here functions as the secondary *causa sui*, possessing the absolute spontaneity of something that would parry God. Furthermore, it is only through the “sinful deed”, through the opening up of the artificial space for evil – sin because of the sin itself, that God and the idea of the good can be reflected in the first place. Namely, if God is all there is and everything is immersed in God, then the only point of reflection of God is the subject herself. So, the subject and God are in a relationship of mutual determination.

5 For a more detailed account of Hegel's theory of *Eigensinn*: “the term *Eigensinn* to describe one of the two extremes into which the free will can degenerate; extremes between which the actualization of free will must find precarious balance. On one side we have the danger of freedom remaining too abstract, when a subject holds the openness of possibilities too dear, when she refuses to make the sacrifice of self-limitation, and thereby remains undetermined and unactualised. The opposing counterpart to this internal pathology of freedom is, however, *eigensinniger* subject. This is a subject who has no qualms about determination, in fact he is prepared to take firm hold of arbitrary determination, as long as it is *his own*” (Hergouth 2024, 162).

Let us sum up the argument we have developed so far. When the idea of the good is conceptualized as a self-enclosed principle in relation to which any form of particularity is and must be external to it, then there is no logical space for evil. Evil is, at best, the form of badness. Badness functions as some kind of distortion of the good itself, but since it lies outside of it, it can be easily reintegrated back onto the level of the principle of the good. In the end, there is only good, pure good, the good itself: naturalized the good. But if this is so, if the good is, indeed, an all-encompassing form of totality, then by either rejecting or accepting such a principle, one is cut off from the possibility of reflecting upon it.

From this it follows, that there needs to be a logical element throughout which the subject can intervene, separate herself from the natural goodness by reflecting upon it. Sin functions as precisely this element, which allows the subject to affirm her own subjectivity, and thus break away with the idea of natural goodness.

Of course, this does not mean that we should take the Bible and go through the list of sins and do all of them – just because we can, but rather that there is a ‘logical lesson’ to be learned here: a subject does something without a sufficient reason for the sake of her own reasons, which necessarily clash with the idea of natural goodness. However, subject’s necessity to assert her particularity does not mean that it hinders the principle of universality of the good, but, rather, according to Hegel, it is the only way in which the principle of good can be completed in the first place.

Evil as Reflection

By separating herself through reflection from the idea of natural goodness, by “becoming evil”, the subject makes possible the idea of the good as the overcoming of this separation. In short, if there was not for a subject who has not always already subordinated the good to herself by making it object of her own reflection, no idea of the good would ever arise. This is the crux of Hegel’s argument on the “necessity of evil”. He writes:

Abstractly, being evil means particularizing myself (*mich vereinzeln*) in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational, the laws, the determinations of spirit). But along with this separation there arises being-for-itself and for the first time the universally spiritual, laws – what ought to be. (Hegel 1996, 206)

It is clear how within this structure Hegel allows for good acts, while insisting on the primordial separation of the subject from good. The subject is evil, but is inclined to good acts, that are, however, “not yet in accordance” with the good. The good consists in subject’s drive of good⁶, in her will to attain the good, so that in this context it is something that is opposed to her particularity. However, in asserting herself as “being evil”, she sets up the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) with this opposition as well. As Hegel puts it: “Evil is the standpoint of the consciousness. Reflection, the division is necessary and must be abandoned at the same time” (Hegel 1996, 123).

The subject can be characterized as evil in so far as she acts according to her own particular will, i.e., with her inclinations, desires and impulses that lurk in her heart: “the selfish is the evil that we call the heart” (Hegel 1996, 134). The content of the good, in this context, must be devoid of the subject’s self-interests, since the good she is driven towards is inherently opposed to her own nature. If the subject were inherently good, there would be no need for her to strive to attain it in the first place. Yet, conceptually, the ground of the good must align with what appears within the causality of the subject’s own will and thus include her own desires and inclinations.

In short, the content of such good is of various representations of what the good is, while, its principle remains a form of drive. That what is subtracted from different contents attributed to the concept of the good by various subjects, each claiming to have a drive towards it. In other words, the good is that what people appeal to and practice as the good within a particular form of sociality, it is “the common good.”

The problem is that her will might be liable to errors. At any point in her pursuit of the drive towards the good, she may discover that the representations of what it means to act well are, in fact, false. This is because whatever she holds to be true, and thus considers good, is gradually coming into her possession. In other words, since her pursuit of the good is posited in the form of an infinite process towards which she strives to, she cannot know exactly what the good is in advance. If she did, the drive towards the good would cease to be a process and, consequently, a drive. In fact, once she reached accordance with the good,

6 As Vranešević says in this very volume, there is a “structural link between the universal end and the particular will of the subject who decides to strive for the good [...] It is only by making a decision, by drawing determinations and purposes out of the indeterminacy of the will that the subject sets in motion the drive of “free will” as self-determination, the drive that animates or brings the universality of thought to the surface” (Vranešević 2024, 76).

she would dissolve as the subject, as the creature of spirit, Geist. As Hegel puts it: “the incongruity (*Unangemessenheit*) cannot disappear. If it disappeared, the spirit’s judgement, its vital activity (*Lebendigkeit*) would disappear as well. Spirit would cease to be spirit” (Hegel 1996, 275).

However, if she did not already act as if she knew what the good is, it would be impossible to discern a process of acquiring the good from its sheer indeterminacy. So, in this context, good is something she freely chooses based on her current disposition, a habit, or some other inclination, until she changes her decision in light of some new vantage point that she has acquired. The problem is that she has no solid ground upon which she can evaluate such a decision beyond further contexts, which are, again, brought under by subjective representations and thus something relative. Good and evil are conceptually absorbed into the nexus of subjective representations and the endless processes of their becoming.

But there is one aspect in which the subject may scrutinize her judgment on the good, escaping the nexus of her representations. It may be that the content of her particular will does not give rise to her judgement, but rather the order of reason, for she is the being of reason. Reason does not exclude her particularity; rather, it is this particularity itself. This is what Hegel wanted to convey with the parable of the original sin. The formation of her own particularity, ‘the life of the spirit’ (*Entstehung des Lebens des Geistes*), does not consist only in the freedom of her own will to choose between good and evil. Rather it lies in her own reasoning, which, structurally, includes the moment of separation, of operating at a distance from any immediate unity and, in this sense, is ‘evil’. As Hegel writes:

it is the consideration or the cognition (*Betrachten selbst*) that makes people evil, so that consideration and cognition [themselves] are what is evil, and that [therefore] such cognition is what ought not to exist [because it] is the source of evil (Hegel 1996, 205).

So, it is important to reiterate, as in Hegel’s interpretation of the Parable, that this order of reason is not something external to her, informing and constituting her acts. Instead, it works the other way round. Since reason is what is most peculiar to her as an individual, it functions as a whole and serves as the measure of truth and the good, providing her with an adequate criterion for what is considered good. Therefore, if it turns out that what she believes is good is, in fact, false, she will sooner or later realize it, as no two true beliefs on what is good can contradict each other. By subjecting them to the ‘tribunal of

reason,' she will be compelled to declare one of them as inadequate. Moreover, she will recognize that this error does not stem from her reasoning, but, as we have previously outlined, from a habit, a disposition, or some other inclination.

With such an understanding of evil as the reflective capacity of the human subject, the good itself ceases to have a merely representational character; instead, it becomes that which we all can reach through the nexus of our reasoning. Moreover, since the laws of reasoning are binding for all of us—the form of reasoning is what makes the particularity of each and every one of us—the good towards which we have a drive transcends the idea of the “common good”; it becomes universal. Not to will the good, in this sense, means to ignore following the order of reasoning. It cannot simply be that it may or may not be transparent to her, absorbed in her subjective representations, for she is a being of reason and can elevate herself above them. There must always be a present ground that conclusively establishes that her quest for good is right. This means, strictly logically speaking, that the knowledge of the good, confined within “my [own] grounding in me from my own reasons” (Hegel 1996, 123), and the universal good itself, cannot be separated from the first-person view.

Let us try to demonstrate the conceptual consequences of such a view in the case of two different subjects, both claiming to know what the good is. Both form their knowledge of good by exercising the same power of reasoning, and according to the laws of reason, which are binding and universal, they both must be right. However, they each arrive at different conclusions about what good is. So, it must be that one of them encountered an unfavorable set of circumstances, or both did, but each set was different. If they both claim that their knowledge of good is true, yet the contents of what good is are conflicting, then they cannot simply refer to the same ‘good’. This leads us to the idea of practical solipsism, where no two subjects can share a common thought.

Evil and its Forgiveness

We concluded our previous paragraph not by answering the question of what good and evil are, but by articulating a certain dilemma in our approach to finding the answer. The dilemma arises from the fact that two subjects, each claiming to possess goodness for its own valid reasons, are in conflict with each other. This implies that we either have to abandon the idea of the subject being the measure of the good, or one of them must be wrong. There is no way

in which two subjects striving for the same universal good can, by the same exercise of reasoning, to arrive at two radically different, even contradictory conclusions.

However, this dilemma is false. The question is not about weighing reasons for or against one of them; it does not require an additional judgement upon their knowledge and a decision on 'who was right.' Instead, it reveals a distorted conception of the subject's relation to good, according to which, as Hegel points out, the subject herself acts as the bearer "of the law and the thing" (Hegel 1996, 193), and evil falls under the domain of her internal set of judgements as well.

Let us expound this point by briefly sketching the example that Hegel presents in the Spirit chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* under the name of Evil and its forgiveness. The initial conceptual situation that Hegel describes is the confrontation of two thought figures, known as the acting and the judging consciousness. He does so from a twofold perspective: from the viewpoint of the one who is pursuing a deed, 'acting good,' while the other is simply reconstructing her deed in rational terms. In short, one is acting, and the other is accounting for the rational conditions that made her act possible, i.e., judging. The conflict arises while both subjects claim to be convinced of themselves as having the knowledge of good, and thus acting as moral subjects, but they do so for different reasons. The acting consciousness does so on the grounds of the practical knowledge she has gained through the act she has committed. With the judging consciousness the opposite is the case: she claims to know what good is on the ground of herself, who, independently of her acts, knows what good and evil are, for she is the tribunal of reason herself. Neither of them wants to give up their convictions and bear upon criticism from the other, for they both claim to have absolute sovereignty over good and evil. Hegel characterizes them both as evil, for neither of them wants to renounce her own particularity and recognize the moment of "objective good, ethical good (das sittliche Gute)" as a crucial, constitutive element of her judgement on good. Eventually, they both break down and admit they are evil. Why? The acting consciousness realizes that once her reasoning on the good is mediated through the act, it too becomes depend on the judgement of the other subjects. The judging consciousness, in a similar vein, realizes that it is only through acting that her knowledge of good can be completed in the first place. This is not to say that she suddenly repents herself by retroactively giving up reasoning in favor of 'just acting.' She is not transformed through a good act in such a way that she gives away her knowledge of good; if she were, she would not be able to

discern what kind of transformation has taken place in the first place. Nor does she seek to diminish herself as the bearer of knowledge of good and evil by recognizing that the limits of such knowledge are intersubjectively posed. As we have said, no such externality is powerful enough to delimit her rational activity from without. In the end, the judging consciousness has managed to turn this externality into her own internal rational process, thus proving her power over it. So, where does her evil come from then? And what do these two individuals, have to forgive themselves for? To put it with Hegel: “It in fact confesses to being evil through its assertion that it acts according to its own inner law and conscience in opposition to what is recognized as universal. If this law and conscience were not the law of its singular individuality and its own arbitrary free choice, then it would not be something inward, not be something its own, but instead be what is universally recognized” (2018, 382-383).

The nexus of forgiveness between one evil individual and another consists in the recognition of letting go of the assumption of one’s own particularity as something universal, as the ultimate and final ground of what good and evil are. In other words, the source of evil stems from the idea that the individual is the ultimate and final verification point of the objective validity of the good, with nothing to oppose her reflective activity from without. If this were so, the individual herself would act as the natural force, as the embodiment of natural goodness, with no way to either deny or affirm her judgement, and thus to truly verify it.

Conclusion

In this chapter we sought to identify the sources of evil for finite, rational beings who are perfect in this respect: that they seek truth and good. According to Hegel, no man is evil if he wills evil for the sake of evil itself. This means that in order to will evil, one must first have an implicit idea of the good; that good and evil are mutually determined. In line with this reasoning, the question can be reformulated as follows: what are the reasons that cause our will to turn away from the good? What does it mean not to will the good?

Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of Hegel and Augustine, we have examined some of the possible answers to this question. Firstly, we have described the idea of natural goodness, according to which evil has no positive ontological function. It exists only as a privation of the good. To will evil in this case is simply to will nothing, since evil has no ontological consistency

of its own outside the principle of good. However, as we have shown, such an idea of evil renders the idea of the good itself completely unintelligible – for without evil there is no reflective point through which good itself can be reflected. Secondly, we have delved into the idea of evil having a positive ontological existence through the idea of the particular subject, by virtue of which sin acts as the mediating locus of her subjectivation. Moreover, we have tried to understand how such an evil subject nevertheless realises her drive towards the good. If such a drive is articulated through the content of the representations that subjects possess of the idea of the good, then the good itself cannot ultimately be verified. The problem is that her representations are evolving and constantly changing, since she has no conclusive ground on which to justify her idea of the good. In fact, the good to which she aspires to may be completely deluded. Not wanting the good, in this context, has its source in the lack of stable criteria for what the good itself is; it articulates itself as the opacity within the process of attaining knowledge of the good.

Finally, using the example from the section on Evil and its Forgiveness in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, we have examined the idea of two evil individuals who both claim to possess the knowledge of the good – based on the criteria of reason itself, of evil as being something rational. Not to will good means for the subject to present herself as the ultimate bearer of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, to will evil is to will her own particularity and impose it as something universal. However, in this context, the subject herself becomes the natural force embodying the natural good, whose principles cannot be rejected or verified since there is no external point of verification.

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Abbreviations

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