

Evagrius' Account of Evil and His Speculative Account of the Origin of Rational Beings

In a world where half of all children died before the age of five and the average life expectancy was not much more than thirty, the question of why so much physical evil existed in the world was an important question.

- By a physical evil, I mean forms of harm, pain and loss suffered by the body during one's time on earth.
- *Physical evils* (such as cancer, Alzheimer's, or a tsunami wiping out a coastal town) have normally been distinguished from *moral evils* (pride, envy, malice, etc.).

One of the most difficult situations to face (then, as now) was the death of child.

- When a child dies, we have a feeling that there is an inexplicable, unspeakably awful loss of one who should have lived and whose life and capacities should have been allowed to develop (so that some of the purposes for which they were brought into the world could be realized).
- We also feel an incredible grief over one for whom we cared and had an obligation to nourish and to protect from evils.
- With the child's death, grief also suggests to us that we failed in our duty to care for and protect this child from the devastating evils that cut off and dissolved its earthly life.

Educated people worked through these issues in a variety of ways:

- (1) Consolation literature—letters/treatises offering consolation were regularly written to the person who had suffered loss and there were also manuals that offered guidance on the conventions involved in writing such treatises.
 - a. See Robert C. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975)
- (2) Stoic philosophy of the Roman period (e.g. Epictetus) dealt extensively with the question of how to respond rightly to physical evils (grief, death, etc.).
 - a. See e.g., Margaret R. Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002); *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007); and William O. Stephens, "Epictetus on the Irrationality of Fearing Death and Reasons for Suicide" (2002) available online at <http://puffin.creighton.edu/phil/Stephens/Epictetus%20on%20Death%20and%20Suicide.htm>
- (3) Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy approached physical evils in two ways.
 - a. In Plato's *Timaeus*, matter is a separate principle and is formless and characterized by disorderly motion. It resists the ordering (imposition of forms) by the demiurgic powers and disorder and dissolution therefore remain a part of our material existence.
 - b. In Platonism the goal is to see/know and be united to/in communion with the transcendent higher power, which is not something that the disorder, evils and dissolution that characterize our present existence can ever interrupt. Who we are intrinsically, our capacities, and the goals of our existence all have a transcendent

nature, so although physical evils really *are* that, they are also *only* that and cannot stop us from attaining to all that is good and true, rising above and transcending the defects, limits and losses of our current embodied existence.

- i. For an example of this, cast in the language of the traditional consolation literature, see Gregory of Nyssa *De infantibus praemature abreptis*. A critical edition of the Greek text in Hadwiga Horner, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera Dogmatica Minora*, Pars II (Leiden, 1987), 67-97; an English translation is available online at <http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/infants.html> .

One further way of explaining physical evil (including apparently gratuitous evils suffered by children who had just entered this life) was to see moral evils that occurred prior to this earthly life as the cause of physical evils that start with the beginning of this life.

This theory has power because it can claim to be comprehensive, i.e. it claims to explain every physical evil as a consequence of a preceding moral evil, with the degree of suffering being proportionate to the prior degree of departure from God. The problem of evil therefore does not require explanation; it is explained. Furthermore, it addressed a real problem, namely how one could continue to affirm the priority of the good when one experienced various evils as soon one entered the world.

The cost of this theory is that one must develop an account of the soul's pre-existence prior to coming into this world and must explain how and why a prior fall occurred that led the soul to depart from God and to enter into a new, earthly existence in which imperfection, suffering and dissolution are the norm.

The account that Evagrius gives is rooted in the earlier accounts provided by Origen and Didymus the Blind (who drew in part on ideas previously advanced by Philo). This requires one to see a double creation in Genesis. In Gen. 1:26, when the man is fashioned in the image of God, one must understand this of the mind; since God is immaterial and has no body, it is obviously not the body that bears the image of God. In Gen. 2:7, when Adam is said to be fashioned from the dust, this refers to an ethereal bodily substance that is inseparable from the soul and appropriate to its existence in paradise.

Thus, in the beginning we see that God had made minds in his own image, suitable to know and love him. Since these minds were all created by God in his image and were all oriented toward God in the same way, they differed in no way from one another and were perfectly united (the "henad" that is united to the divine "monad," i.e. the one God that is the blessed Trinity).

When the mind falls away from God, it falls downward toward the material things that it loves. If it falls a little, it will have an angelic existence; if more an earthly existence as human; if more a demonic existence (dominated by the beastly power of anger/irrationality). One will accordingly receive a different type of body, depending upon how far one has fallen away from God. If the mind falls to the earthly realm, it assumes an additional dense or thick body (the "coats of skin" mentioned in Gen. 3:21=fleshly body) that is gripped by disordered loves/longings for material things, is largely blind to spiritual matters and forgets God, and is subject to corruption, death and dissolution. The mind (now fallen, as soul) is thus condemned to enter a body of sin (Rom. 6:6), death (Rom. 7:24) and humiliation (Phil. 3:21). As Origen had previously commented in his Romans commentary:

If, however, the Apostle is instead understood to have said that this body of ours is a body of sin, it is certainly to be understood in accordance with that sense in which David also says concerning himself, “In iniquity was I conceived, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” But the Apostle himself also says elsewhere, “Who will free me from this body of death?” and again names our body a “body of humiliation”...Accordingly then, Paul through the ineffable wisdom of God which was given to him, contemplating some secret and hidden matter, calls our body a “body of sin,” a “body of death,” and a “body of humiliation.” David also, who from the same Spirit was familiar with heavenly secrets, said concerning the body, “Down into the dust you have led me” and again, “Our soul was humbled in the dust.” Jeremiah also, conscious of a similar mystery through the Spirit of God, ways in his Lamentations that all people are bound to the earth, i.e. on account of the body: “so that he might humble under his feet all who are bound to earth, because they have deprived a man of justice in the sight of the Most High and have condemned a man in judgment.”

It should be noted that all who are born into life on this earth will derive a body derived by way of descent from Adam (who was the first to fall here) and since Adam procreated only after he had fallen, it follows that the defects connected with and following from his fall would be passed on from him to the bodies of those descended from him. (These liabilities included being subject to the passions and to the power of the Devil and death.)

Therefore our body is a body of sin, since it is written that Adam did not know his wife Eve and beget Cain until after his sin. Finally, in the Law also, for the child who had been born it is commanded that a sacrifice be offered—a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons; of these, one was for sin and the other was a whole burnt-offering. For what sin is this one pigeon offered? Was a new-born child able to sin already? Nevertheless, it also has a sin for which sacrifice is commanded to be offered, from which it is denied that one is pure, even if one lived for one day. Concerning this, therefore David also must be believed to have uttered that saying which we mentioned above, “in sin did my mother conceive me.” According to the narrative, of course, no sin is declared to belong to his mother. For this [sin], the Church has also received a tradition from the Apostles to administer baptism even to children. For those to whom the secrets of the divine mysteries were entrusted knew that in everyone there were innate soilings of sin which ought to be cleansed by water and the Spirit. It is indeed on account of these that the body itself is called a “body of sin,” not (as some of those think who introduce a transmigration of souls into various bodies think) for those things which a soul did wrong when it was situated in another body, but for this very things which was brought about in a “body of sin” and a “body of death” and “humiliation.” And it is just as he [sc. David] said: “You have

humbled our soul in the dust.” Now for a time these things have been able to occur in us on account of the body of sin.

It followed, then, that every soul was bound to a body soiled by sin (cf. Job 14:4), where desire in the flesh warred against reason and provided the Devil with an opportunity to present plausible temptations. This body soiled by sin needed to be presented to Christ for purification and cleansing through baptism.

The earthly body, in spite of its problems is not inherently bad. It is rather the instrument (*organon*) appropriate to life in this world (elaborating capacities and adaptations appropriate to life at this level). Furthermore, time spent in the present body fulfills a providential purpose willed by God for creation, namely to humble the proud, errant soul and make it desire to return to communion with God.

To redeem the human race, God sent down certain souls (the Old Testament saints) to exercise and display virtue (even though their own degree of departure from God did not require them to be here). These announced and foreshadowed the coming of Christ, who besides being in his divinity the Son was also the only unfallen mind, taking on an earthly body not because he had to, but be willed to in order to complete the divine plan of redemption. So that he would not be born in subjection to sin, his body was conceived by the Holy Spirit and free from the soiling of sin to which every descendant of Adam was subject. Thus, Origen, in his commentary on Romans, writes,

But also concerning the Savior he [Paul] says in a certain place that he came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” so that “on account of sin” he might condemn “sin in the flesh.” In it he showed that our flesh is indeed sinful flesh, but the flesh of Christ is like sinful flesh. For it was not conceived from the seed of a man, but the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her, so that what was born of her was called “Son of the Most High”...

Because he [Paul] said “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” he showed that we indeed have sinful flesh; the Son of God, however, had the likeness of sinful flesh, not sinful flesh. For all we human beings who have been conceived from the seed of a man had intercourse with a woman necessarily employ that saying which David utters: “in iniquity did my mother conceive me.” But he [sc. The Son] who, from no touch of a man but by the power of the Holy Spirit alone coming upon the Virgin and by the power the Most High overshadowing her, came to her unstained body, he indeed possessed the nature of our body; nevertheless, he in no way possessed the defilement of sin which is transmitted to those conceived by the moving of desire. Therefore for that reason the Son of God is said to have come “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”

The soul that seeks to return to knowledge of God occupies an intermediate position between angels (which retain the vision of God through primary natural contemplation) and demons which have at best a thick, obscure contemplation due to the predominance of *thumos* (anger, wrath and reactive

resistance) in their nature. The redeemed human can arrive at secondary natural contemplation. In other words, though seeing in a mirror dimly, we can still arrive at an understanding of the reasons for the existence of the present order and a perception of the providence that underlies this order ("the left eye of the soul"), a knowledge that Christ always possessed and never lost. Furthermore, it is also possible to arrive at a certain degree of immediate contemplative knowledge of God and incorporeal things ("the right eye of the soul"), a knowledge arising from receiving the light of divine grace and which facilitates return to God and communion with the blessed Trinity.

Where Evagrius is a bit more heterodox is in his optimistic, speculative eschatology. Understanding the work that gives his most explicit account of this (the *Kephalia Gnostika*) is no easy matter. It is clear that the goals of creation would be fulfilled if all the minds again returned to God and directed their whole attention to him and all their activity toward him. If this occurred, they would once again be perfectly united and no longer differentiated by what they do not share (such as varying degrees of knowledge or love, which imply remaining imperfection in at least some). If all of this were realized, then the mission of Christ would be fulfilled and, having handed over all rule to God the Father, God would be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).