

RIGHT AND WRONG?

Our Western culture has come to insist that the highest human value is not goodness, but freedom; and in the process many other values – e.g., truth, beauty, goodness, moral significance – have been *relativised*: we speak of “my” truth, or “true for me”; we canonise the idea that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, we speak of the goodness or evil of an action, object, or situation as *relative* to the individual, at one particular moment; tomorrow it may all change; and the intransitive verb points to the question: *by what force or right would it change?*

Christian Doctrine

This very phrase introduces the contrary idea that there may be such a thing as an *absolute* value, not dependent on personal opinion or taste; and, to put it plainly at the beginning, the Church says this absolute value is to be equated with God. Western culture has, in a way familiar to readers of the story of Eve in Genesis*, related all things to the selves who enjoy or endure them. This is an essentially divisive thing to do, allowing each person to choose his or her own universe (a “Changing Rooms” approach to experience) *centred on themselves*. One of the consequences is that we keep meeting people who show signs of living on a different planet. They have exercised their freedom to “edit” the world according to their taste (and it may not have a place in it for you).

The Church thinks that people who do this cut themselves off, not just from many other human beings, but from the heart of reality. God is not a member of his Universe, but its Maker. He actually has the *right* to edit it (“judgment”) and to declare its purpose and destination. Those who see the world as a theatre for their own unfettered self-expression risk mistaking the purpose of the Universe, of living, therefore, at odds with reality. This exemplifies apparent freedom resulting in its opposite: most teachers would agree that “the Truth will set you free”.

Good and Evil

Christians call *good* everything related positively to the Creator’s will. *Evil* must be all that subverts or opposes it. *Beauty* is whatever reflects God and makes him present; *ugliness* what proclaims his absence or insignificance. The perception of these things is no longer a personal version, but a relationship to the Truth; and the Truth is not a principle or a set of principles, but a Person. Western culture is therefore right to make truth personal: but wrong when it abandons it to the multiplicity of private perception. One of the most serious needs we have is for morality to be shared; it can only be shared if the whole community acknowledges its source. It doesn’t take many dissenters to plunge the human community into disarray. One unprincipled member can destroy the peace of an entire community, particularly one made vulnerable by humane principles.

Who Will Decide What’s Good Or Evil?

Clearly these are risky thoughts. The claim to *know* absolute truth might be a usurpation of power by one human being against many. “Absolute power corrupts absolutely”; the ultimate assault on humanity is a human claim to possess the Truth. If the truth so offered is a set of human facts or a human being, it is self-evidently improper. But suppose it rests upon an encounter with God. For this we must have

* Eve is tempted to take the fruit by considering it as good for food (sensual), delightful to look at (aesthetic), and desirable for the knowledge it could give (spiritual); all of these good reasons, were it not for the countermanding will of God. This she deliberately excludes from consideration, relating her choice exclusively to her own internal dialogue.

the concept of *revelation* – a desire of God to make himself known to his creatures. The debate about absolute value requires, therefore, a debate about the possibility of our knowing God. Without God we are on our own.

Have We Reason To Think That God Wants To Communicate With Us?

For the self-centred/irreligious mind, it is necessary for each of us to quarry out some purpose of his or her own, given the (limited) range of choices open to us as individuals*. Only some consensus of a common good, shared by all, can ground any sort of community between such individuals.

So, for instance, we may agree that it's a good idea if we don't lie to each other, because deception naturally leads to dangerous mistakes, and we need truth in order to think straight. There is good reason to agree not to steal from each other, since it saps one's willingness to work if one's wages are stolen by some drone. Such natural pieces of common-sense are the kind of fragments of morality that are saleable in a culture whose only source of morality is the individual. But there are reasons to suspect that this is not the only alternative. Given the human instinct to understand, to read the purpose of what surrounds us, to draw conclusions and build up a synthesis of knowledge about the world, it's reasonable to conclude that there is something more to be understood than a disparate series of facts. We deeply want to unite all our experience in one coherent view. We want to know an ultimate rationale for the whole Universe.

If we want to believe that the Universe is a cosmos – a world that has a purpose - then we need a Mind in which such a purpose could have been conceived.

This Mind has to be great enough to contain all contingencies, all possibilities within the Universe: a task we (rightly) consider to be superhuman.

It is not, therefore, possible for a limited human being to claim to "know" the mind of God in the ordinary sense of the word; but it is possible that God wants to make himself known, in ways and to degrees of his choosing, always within the bounds of his intention to respect human freedom, which is his gift to us as our Creator. It's in the name of this belief that the Church exists.

The Christian Church therefore builds its notion of right and wrong from the idea of a divine ambition for the cosmos. This mysterious intentionality includes every scrap of human history, every incident of every creature's life. The wiser we become in our seeking of this mysterious plan, the less danger there is of *hubris* – the usurpation by a human being of the prerogatives of God. The discovery of right and wrong becomes the living-out of a relationship between earthlings and their maker, a story unfolded in the light of revelation, culminating in the incarnation of the Son of God, and its Spirit-filled continuum, the Church.

* In these circumstances we can expect an enhanced rôle for policemen, since an individual consulting his own preferences in an unfettered way can be highly dangerous.