

Existential sources for the Devil

Clearly the existence of demonic forces is something which occurs independently to people of every culture as a religious response to the way the world is, like the belief in a good creator. Human beings want to know reasons for what happens; they want to ascribe their experiences to some comprehensible order or intention.

Evil is a most ticklish and mysterious area of our experience. In our religious search for meaning, it sits like an impenetrable wall blocking our path. We are used to the everyday experience of things being contrary, what we call Sod's Law: we miss the bus, we forget to do things, or run across other people who have done the same; it rains on our washing, the central heating breaks down, and we can't arrange things conveniently. Every now and again we experience something much more disturbing: the illness of our friends, our own sudden diagnosis with serious illness, or the discovery of betrayal of trust. These experiences can comprehensively desolate us, perhaps for a very long time, and can change the way we subsequently look out on the world. Finally, there is the monumental experience of iniquity that comes from globally significant acts or programmes of evil which we can hardly bear to contemplate: the Holocaust, Pol Pot in Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, great acts of terrorism. These things give us a shuddering awareness that takes possession of us, challenging our faith in the goodness of God. It is moments like this that provide, as it were, the religious "fuel" for believing in a personal devil.

Narrative sources for the Devil

In the story-tradition, which relates to a cultural expression of popular thought or conjecture, there is a whole world of beings called spiritual: creatures of God as we are, but different from us in kind. They are created to be messengers or envoys of God, and the sources in Scripture and in Church teaching take their existence for granted. If God is to be considered as a king, he must have a court; if God is spirit, then a spiritual court. If God is to communicate with human beings, he must do so in a way that protects his transcendent greatness: as Scripture develops, the stories speak less of God addressing human beings, more of an angel of God addressing them. But in order to protect such stories from banalisation, the angelic beings themselves are represented as terrible and awe-inspiring.

It was here that the story tradition developed an etiology for demons. They are angels, spiritual beings, who have gone bush, rebelled against their divine calling,

and wander through the world as free agents, with their mind set on opposition to good. Remember the existential experience of evil, and the narrative sources immediately receive their frame.

Philosophical reflections on the above

In Christian philosophy existence is goodness, truth, and beauty. Insofar as something exists, therefore, it is good and true and beautiful. Insofar as something is evil, it has no existence, since evil is the negation of being. In order for us to apprehend evil, therefore, it must in some way subvert goodness, and in some way hi-jack the vehicle that can give it reality. So a human being – made in the image and likeness of God, with life, strength, health, sensitivity, skill, intelligence, artistry (etc, etc) becomes a mass-murderer; at that point the bodily strength becomes an evil (for the victims), the intelligence an evil (for the police), and so forth. Within the personality, the good gifts may be formally renounced in favour of the evil that is to be committed: for instance, a mass-murderer may be forced to renounce sensitivity before the deeds become possible. But many of the gifts will be recruited to the cause of evil, giving us a perfect example of the way evil subverts good in order to exist.

Seen in this light, the philosophical possibility of a spiritual being given over to evil appears credible: that the angel should be *fallen* is actually necessary, if there is to be anything there to subvert: without a pre-existing goodness the evil would have no ground for being.

The Church's position

The Church gleefully adopted the Scriptural presentation of the fallen angels, and the common mention of the devil as father of lies, prince of darkness, voice of temptation etc., as evidence of the separate personal existence of the devil. The sources of the dogmatic working-out of this element of tradition are mostly far in the past, in Scripture itself, and in the medieval councils like Lateran IV in 1215, or the Church Fathers in the first 500 years. Subsequent teaching has not significantly developed this line of thought, and the silence of the Church is eloquent in this regard. The Second Vatican Council hardly mentions devils in the scheme of things.

I suspect that the depiction, the imaginative presentation, of a devil is iconographically impossible in our culture: Bart Simpson's cartoon demons, or

Valentine Dyall in red tights, do no justice to the grandeur of evil, the imagery of the fallen angel. So perhaps a steady contemplation of evil in all its forms, even on a larger scale than we can comprehend, is the best way forward for the Church In our present circumstances.