

SCRIPTS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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I.

"It was indeed, said Er, a sight worth seeing, how the souls severally chose their lives--a sight to move to pity and laughter and astonishment; for the choice was mostly governed by the habits of their former life." So wrote Plato at the conclusion of *The Republic*. Er, who has died, returns to explain how he saw, in the afterlife, soul choosing their script for their next life. Previously Lachesis, maiden daughter of Necessity, had cautioned:

Souls of a day, here shall begin a new round of earthly life, to end in death. No guardian spirit will cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own destiny. Let him to whom the first lot falls choose first a life to which he will be bound of necessity. But Virtue owns no master: as a man honours or dishonours her, so shall he have more of her or less. The blame is his who chooses; Heaven is blameless.

With this warning, the souls chose the scripts of their next play, their next earthly life. There were lives of despots, of those renowned for beauty, for strength and prowess, of those distinguished by birth and ancestry; there were lives, too, of unknown men and women. Some lives were combined with wealth, others with poverty; some with health, others with sickness. But, writes Plato, "in none of these lives was there anything to determine the condition of the soul, because the soul must needs change its character according as it chooses one life or another."

II.

Two years ago at this convention, Professor Gilbert Fulmer made a very powerful plea for considering virtually insoluble the problems of theodicy, the task of justifying evil and the existence of a God. Very carefully and thoughtfully, Dr. Fulmer examined John Hick's attempt at solving the thorny problem of evil; and it was Professor Fulmer's conclusion that "when even Hick's best effort fails, I cannot help suspecting that the task is not possible." This may be true, but I do not think that it is; and it is this problem, the problem of evil, which I now wish to address.

III.

Those knowledgeable in the ancient wisdom tradition maintain, as Plato did, that people have roles which they play, scripts of a play which they chose before their incarnation into the present lifetime. Plato puts this idea in the form of a myth; but others, such as Epictetus, are more straightforward:

Remember that thou art an actor in a play of such a kind as the teacher (author) may choose; if short, of a short one; if long, of a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you

act the part naturally; if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person, (do the same). For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but not to select the part, belongs to another. (*Encheiridion*, XVII)

That at least we have a script can be known to be true by those who take the initiative to study the ancient sciences such as astrology or numerology. I myself have studied a form of esoteric numerology reputed to be "Pythagorean"; and although not an expert practitioner of the art, I have developed enough skill to be able to discern, first, that there are indeed scripts and, second, certain general and sometimes very specific features of those scripts.

In numerology, the birthdate and the name are most significant. I picked up a hitchhiker whose name added up to the number which meant airplanes: he earned his living as a cropduster. A student, majoring in computer science, came to me because she was unhappy with her major; when I told her that her name added to a number which meant "working with disadvantaged children," she was both amazed and relieved, for this is precisely what she deeply wanted to do. And when I told, one Christmas, the wife of a friend that she should have regular physical checkups because it looked possible for her to develop a tumor or malignancy, she was most grateful the following November when her doctor discovered uterine cancer in time to operate. When I first began to study numerology, I would get the Sunday paper and write out the name of the people listed in the obituary columns; and invariably the numbers for death and loss would appear in the year of their death.

That one can tell a complete stranger something very specifically accurate about his or her life, something about his general characteristics and tendencies, and something about the events, situations, and circumstances which he will encounter in his future--to me this suggests, quite obviously, that there *are* scripts. I know this and have demonstrated it numerous times with students and friends. Others too can come to know this if they would take the time and effort to find out.

What do scripts imply? Might they be arbitrary, without any connection between the actor and his character in the script? If so, the world would be utterly random and incomprehensible, morally and causally. I do not think that the world is like this. Perhaps this is simply my choice, but I do not think so. Long ago, while a sophomore in college, I gave up religious beliefs *precisely* because I could not find what to me was a satisfactory intellectual answer to the problem of evil. For years I studied the arguments against the existence of God, wrote my dissertation on the problem of religious knowledge under the well-known atheistic philosopher, Kai Nielsen, and taught critical courses in philosophy of religion. It was only many years later that I was introduced to the esoteric philosophical framework in which reincarnation and karma played a major conceptual role; and thereby understanding how the appearances of injustice and unfairness could be explained as the result of previous choices in prior lives, I made an intellectual conversion to this ancient

wisdom tradition.

No one was more adamant in his denial of a God, based on the apparent injustice and unfairness, on suffering and evil, than I. How, then, does the introduction of *scripts* help to solve the thorny dilemmas of theodicy? Let me try to explain.

IV.

Let us take the general description of Plato's myth of Er as true in its basic outline. Since I know that there are scripts, the most logical reason for their existence is that the soul chose its script before its present incarnation. As Plato explains, and as seems both logical and rational to me, the choice of script for this current life depends upon what the soul learned or failed to learn in past lives: in short, the choice is made on the basis of *habits* which had been acquired in previous experiences. The logic of this is existentially demonstrable: each of us chooses and thus acts on the basis of what we have learned prior to the time of choosing. If this is true *in* the present life, it makes sense that it be true for the choice of the very life we are currently living. This view of the world, then, extends choice over lifetimes and causality beyond the present existence. Each is responsible for his present life, its pleasures and pains, joys and sorrows, precisely because it was his choice, as soul, before incarnation into the present play.

Just as an actor may choose a part which has many difficult scenes in it just so that he can develop his skill at acting, so some souls choose the more difficult roles in order to learn more fully and more deeply of the values of life. A lazy actor may choose the same sort of roles over and over again, perfecting them but limiting himself to a role type. A wiser and more daring actor, on the other hand, may choose various parts in a variety of plays, perfecting thereby a wider expanse of his potentialities.

In the School of Life, one is not passed regardless of what he has learned or not learned, unlike our present educational system. In the School of Life, everyone must learn or fail and repeat the grade. The choice is the individual's, and no undue pressures are placed on the individual, except by his own soul. The soul evolves through its experiences in the physical body although, like the infant, it takes time for the soul to gain the required control of its vehicle. For the vehicle or body is of another evolution, not associated with the soul, until it is suitable for habitation; hence the soul finds itself attached to an "alien" vehicle, one with a life and will of its own, one which needs to be "tamed" by the soul so that it can do its bidding. Thus the body is likened to a chariot pulled by two horses, with the soul as the charioteer, a famous image from the *Phaedrus*.

V.

This view of the world fits what Professors Fulmer and Hick call a "soul-making theodicy." Fulmer explains that "at first glance, the real world does not obviously seem to be the best world it would have been logically possible for an infinitely powerful God to create; indeed, there are many sorts of evil that could, to all appearances, be reduced or eliminated even by the puny powers of human beings, if only we had the will." But of course, this is precisely the point. A God of Freedom does give to man, the most capable of rational choice among His creatures, the freedom to use his will in wise enough ways to do just what Professor Fulmer would demand. God, we might say, provides the conditions for man to come to know how to use his will in wise and loving, i.e. "philosophical," ways. This is the only programme compatible with free will.

Although the account of the world as a play and man's part in it as an actor performing his script is my predominant interest, still the "Augustinian" theodicy which Hick presents and Fulmer criticizes has a certain appeal to it, if viewed correctly. Fulmer criticizes the view that evil is the result of wrong choices by God-created sinless beings, because unqualifiedly good or sinless beings should not sin. The error here is that "sinless" means simply "before sin," not "incapable of sin" or "perfect in the sense of never going to sin." The myth of Adam and Eve depicts the human soul before its awareness of right and wrong and hence of choice. Such souls were *innocent* and *ignorant*: the words have the same root, one in Latin and the other in Greek. Innocence is ignorance: one cannot sin or miss the mark if one has never taken up the bow and aimed at the target. One would be a "perfect" archer only in the sense that one had never missed the target; of course, one never shot an arrow either! Thus it can make sense that "human beings who were created without flaw nonetheless freely elected to sin," and there is nothing incoherent in that notion.

But let us return to the "Irenaean" form of theodicy, according to which "man is seen as created not yet perfect, but rather only perfectible," to quote Professor Fulmer. The purpose of evil in such a world is to further "soulmaking." Accordingly, human beings were created with the *potential* for perfection; for to have been made *actually* perfect would have, first of all, robbed them of their initial and basic freedom and, second, deprived them of the experience of playing in the Play, journeying on the Odyssey, in other words, learning to experience the feelings, emotions, thoughts, ideas--in a word, activities--which we all so very much value and enjoy.

The schema is quite simple. The fundamental *sine qua non* of our world is *freedom*: the capacity of conscious beings to choose. The goal is to come, freely, to appreciate and embody beauty, truth, goodness, love and wisdom, hope, trust, compassion, open-mindedness, fairness, justice, and so on. How can free creatures come to learn to value such? Only by *experience*. Thus an arena of experience, a

world, must be provided. Placed in this arena will be beings with an initial Lockean *tabula rasa*, a Hobbesian capacity for desire or aversion, an Aristotelian capacity to respond to pleasure or pain, a Platonic *eros*, with an Augustinian instinct, once deeply rooted in the world, to return to the Creator.

And what will be the mechanism of learning? Only one mechanism seems necessary, one which will assure that the creature gets some feedback as to his choices. One principle will provide this condition: the law of cause and effect, or karma, or hubris/nemesis; "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). Hence the world is constructed in accordance with this one principle. We get out of something what we put into it; we get what we pay for; our equations in chemistry or math or physics must balance; there are no effects without causes, or causes without effects. In essence, it is Newton's Third Law: "to every action there is always opposed an equal reaction."

We know that this law holds true for certain phenomena in specific physical domains, and the theodicy which I am proposing holds that this law holds in every sphere, moral no less than physical. Every major world religion has recognized this; hence the Golden Rule can be found in every one of them: Do unto others as you would have done unto you, and do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself. This law is not one to be followed if one is to be good but rather, because of the nature of the world, it is to be followed if one would become *free*. For this Golden Rule, based on the principle of cause and effect, alone enables one to control the kinds of things which happen or do not happen to oneself. When one learns this, one will sow seeds the fruit of which he will desire to eat and not the seeds of fruit which he finds distasteful. Indeed, only by acting on this law can one be happy. And hence there is, as Kant insisted was the intuition of moral conscience, a connection between happiness and goodness, as well as between freedom, goodness, and happiness. By freely willing the moral law, we become both good (in accordance with our conscious development) and happy.

VI.

Why, then, is there evil in the world? Largely because those who perpetrate it are ignorant of its effect, are undeveloped in their sensitivity as to how it affects others, and are utterly unaware of the basic law of cause and effect, that what they do will be done to them. Hence, later in this life or the next or the next, when something happens to them like what they have done to others, they may feel and others may think that it is unfair. But the soul, which knows all its lives as well as its lessons and failures, understands its karma; and it is willing to suffer through lessons which will lessen its chances of making similar mistakes in its future. Those upon whom the evil falls are largely deserving of it, harsh as this may sound to some: the child cannot, in his childishness and ignorance, see the value of being punished, or wearing a raincoat, or eating spinach. Only with the wisdom of the

years of experience will it understand the wisdom of its parents' ways.

So too with those who yet do not see with wiser or more experienced eyes. This is, as Leibniz correctly said, "the best of all possible worlds." For a world in which there is *free will* and in which *consciousness develops* on its own initiative, ever assured of the goal of perfection, is a better world than a world of perfect beings, none of which is responsible for its own perfection. A world, in short, of *perfected* beings. We are commanded: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). We can be perfect because it is our potentiality to become so. But *to be perfect* we must *become* perfect. Indeed, this is the purpose of the life process of evolution which we are all undergoing.

There are, needless to say, assumptions in this account: an afterlife, reincarnation, karma, and scripts whose purpose it is to allow each incarnated soul to undergo the kinds of experiences which would lead it to greater awareness and hence greater freedom and perfection. In a short paper such as this, I cannot deal with these assumptions. In a much longer 80 page typescript on reincarnation, published in three installments last year in the *Journal of Religion and Psychological Research*, I have dealt with many of these assumptions and tried to summarize my conclusions here. Suffice it to say that I feel certain that these assumptions are capable of justification.

VII

Numerous further responses could be made to Professor Fulmer's searching paper. To him and to M.B. Ahearn who complain that there is no way of knowing whether such a theodicy as I have presented is true, I point to the Buddha, the Christ, and to Krishna, or, to get more historic examples, to Pythagoras, Socrates, and Apollonius as goals toward which human evolution is marching. Existentially, that any one human achieved such an illumined state means that it is potentially possible for all of us to do so. That we *can* is our faith; that we *will* is our goal; that we *do* is the purpose of evolution. But only if reincarnation, or some extended time beyond this present life, is permitted. That it is, I think, can be discovered.

To J. L. Mackie who argues that God could have made us so that we always freely choose the good, my response is that it is *indeed* logically possible. We *could*, logically, but we *don't*. In fact, it is precisely on this argument that we can claim that we *are* made such that we *could* always freely choose the good, and the point of moral evolution is to get us to the point where, of our own free will and volition, we do! But our goal of perfection involves just this freedom of choice of the good in situations which would draw us in other directions.

In our highest, deepest, most divine or monadic nature, we are "of one substance with the Father." This is our nature, not as humans, but as spiritual Sons

of God. It is this essential nature which assures us of the victory and the goal. We do not say to a first-grader that he doesn't have to learn his A,B,C's, or how to spell or do math or to read. He must, and he will, even if he has to skip playground or lunch, even if he has to stay after school, even if he has to repeat the grade! In the ideal school, his achievement is assured, though how long it takes him is a matter of his own choice. So too in the School of Life. We will learn, we will evolve, we will become what the Buddha and the Christ became: we will become *perfected* beings. But all in *our own time*, because in Love we were given freedom.

And so we are drawn, little by little, in accordance with *our* response, back "home" to the Father whose mansions we have left, as Prodigal Sons, so long ago. Like the Prodigal Son, the turning back to the Father's house will come when we realize that the suffering and pain which we experience is of our own doing and when we long to know that freedom from the world.

Desirelessness is a precondition for ultimate freedom. Desire breeds further desire, and the wheel of life turns round and round. We can have everything in the Store of Life we desire; and yet there comes a time for putting aside childish toys. Perhaps, with Kierkegaard, we will find the repetition of the aesthetic life boring and move to the ethical and then the religious stages. But such will be our choice, and only when we are ready.

So too with our journey to perfection. As a wise friend once said to me, we cannot give up what we have never had. We must have all the experiences we desire until we desire them no more. Only then will we freely give up our eating, fighting, and struggle for power and move on to higher pursuits of love and wisdom, beauty, truth, and goodness. Then, eventually, the burning light of the desire for perfection will emerge from our core where it has lain hidden beneath the dark layers of desire. Then we will begin our journey toward perfection in earnest, and we will choose scripts which will enable us to become living testimonies to the "soul-making" theodicy about which we are now reflecting.