

"All that is necessary  
for the triumph of  
evil is that good  
men do nothing . . ."  
— EDMUND BURKE.



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## WRESTLING WITH GOOD AND EVIL – PART ONE by Peter Brüning

The last three years of COVID hysteria and COVID tyranny have provided all of us with a particularly poignant experience of the age-old battle between good and evil, the battle between the truth and the lie. While some see it as dress rehearsal for worse things to come, a preliminary exercise on the part of the globalist forces who oppress us, we must point out that it was also a training exercise for those of us who would wish to resist, in the most effective ways available to us, the imposition of policies and of an underlying philosophy which we do not sanction, have not approved of, and must overcome for the sake of all that is noble and decent in human life and civilisation.

So what are we to do? How are we to respond in the face of such organised evil? What is the best way of positioning ourselves existentially in the face of the mysteries of iniquity?

### I. Zoroaster and the Origin of Morality

Before I attempt some sort of answer to those questions, I think it crucial to recall to mind and to examine the very nature of the phenomena in question: what is good? What is evil? And how does their mutual enmity involve us as human beings?

It was the German philosopher Nietzsche who pointed out, quite correctly I think, that the general narrative concerning good and evil that has left such an indelible mark on our Western civilisation can be traced back some 3,500 years (at least) to the Iranian prophet, Zarathustra (or Zoroaster in Greek). On the basis of a theophany, of a personal encounter that he had had with the one true God, whom he referred to as '*Ahura Mazda*' or '*Wise Lord*', Zoroaster was gifted with a true understanding as to how the universe is set up and how it all works. He saw it as his mission to share this message, this truth, with all of humanity.

According to Zoroaster, *Ahura Mazda* is the single, uncreated and eternal God who is all-good, all-loving, and all-wise. He is the creator of the world and of all of the good things in it. Opposed to him is the vector of activity that was later referred to as *Angra Mainyu*, the destructive or constrained spirit/mentality, sometimes personalized in Zoroastrianism as *Ahriman*, or the devil. *Angra Mainyu* is the complete opposite to the spirit or mentality which is aligned with *Ahura Mazda*, known as *Spenta Mainyu* (or the progressive/creative spirit or mentality). While *Ahura Mazda* is the source of all good, *Angra Mainyu* is responsible for all darkness, destruction, deceit, death, and decay, or everything that is negative in the world.

This dualism sets up an environment, a stage, on to which all human beings have been placed. Everything in this world is a contest between the two mentalities, but we, human beings, are special because we are gifted with reason and free will. We therefore have the ability and the responsibility to act on our own initiative, i.e., the power to choose whether we will side with *Ahura Mazda* and become a vehicle for *Spenta Mainyu*, or whether we will further the destructive work of *Angra Mainyu*. The choice-making is not so easy at times because, besides the forces of greed and fear which can cloud our minds and derail our judgement in attempting to discern the correct path, *Angra Mainyu* wields the weapon of deceit: *druj*, or 'the Lie'. We can be tricked into doing the evil under the guise of 'the good'. Over and against 'the Lie', however, *Spenta Mainyu* is there and he urges us to respect, to follow, and to promote *asha*, or God's truth.

*Asha*, in turn, is more than merely propositional truth, but is rather the truth of God's vision for creation, i.e., a world in which the potential for goodness is fulfilled by all creatures in perfect harmony, and nothing prospers at the illegitimate expense of another. It is a world of functional order and fulfillment without friction or abrasion of any kind. In sum, *asha* is the perfect creator's perfect thought of and for His creation, the original blueprint for a blessed reality.

If we discern carefully between truth and falsity and consistently choose to further *asha* in the world by means of our good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, we can then expect, when our lives come to an end and we are judged on how we have lived by *Ahura Mazda*, that our immortal souls will walk successfully over the *chivnat* bridge of judgement and pass forever into heaven, known as the ‘House of Song’, where we will enjoy the state of best consciousness. If, however, we fall prey to ‘the Lie’ and become an agent of *Angra Mainyu* we can expect to fall off the bridge of judgement and be consigned to hell, or to the state of worst consciousness. Eventually, *Ahura Mazda* will, with the help of a Saoshyant or saviour figure who will be born of a virgin, defeat *Angra Mainyu* and the world will be restored to its original state as a paradise in the *Frashokereti* (sometimes translated as ‘the making wonderful’).<sup>[1]</sup>

## II. The Nietzschean Rejection of Traditional (Zoroastrian) Morality

Now, how much Nietzsche was aware of these and other details concerning the nature of Zoroaster’s religious vision, I do not know and cannot say with any degree of certainty. It seems likely, however, that since the world was just reawakening to Zoroaster in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after his Gathas (or hymns) had been translated into European languages for the first time from the Avestan, Nietzsche would only have been exposed to the barebones of Zoroastrianism and would have undoubtedly interpreted it through the filter of his own cultural and religious experience. For Nietzsche, the gist of Zoroaster’s teaching appears to have been reducible to this: “the world is rigidly divided into good and evil and we ought, or rather we must (understood here with the strongest sense of obligation that might be attached to the verb ‘must’) pick the right side by doing the good and avoiding the evil ... or else ...”

What is clear is that Nietzsche was not at all at ease with Zoroaster’s take on the world. Nietzsche actually blamed Zoroaster for, in essence, poisoning Western minds with what he regarded as an incredibly destructive set of beliefs. The belief in good and evil is something so terrible, so fundamentally mistaken, that we moderns would have to regard it as something akin to computer malware (except that it is operative in the minds of human beings) in order to get a true understanding of the magnitude of the existential shipwreck to which, on Nietzsche’s view, the human race had been subjected by Zoroaster’s teachings.

What was the problem with traditional morality, the traditional conceptions of good and evil, according to Nietzsche? Well, to begin with, it must be understood that Nietzsche was an atheist, whether on the basis of the new Darwinian thesis of evolution, the evils of the world as vividly illustrated by the German philosopher

Schopenhauer, and/or his own life experiences. “God is dead” was one of his famous aphorisms, meaning that either God did not exist at all, or that since even the people who claimed to believe in Him acted as if He did not exist or did not matter, what difference did it make whether He existed or not? If God is dead, then human life has no transcendental, divinely-ordained meaning or purpose. For Nietzsche, the traditional morality could only make some sense if there was a God who would enforce justice, if there was a life after death, and if our actions in this life somehow affected the quality of the life hereafter.

In the meantime, Nietzsche observed that taking the traditional morality and view of the world seriously all too often seemed to poison the lives of those who followed the moral path. To draw a crude analogy, traditional morality, the obsession with good and evil in one’s behaviour, seemed to be akin to putting a watermelon into a square box so that as the watermelon grew it would take on, not the shape to which it naturally tended given its inherent proclivities, but the shape of the box, thereby becoming a distorted version of itself, a distortion that was arbitrary and imposed from the outside. The watermelon here represents the human being, while the box represents the strictures of traditional morality. And just as the box limited and directed the watermelon’s growth, so too do traditional societal notions of good and evil limit and distort human potential. To extend the metaphor, we might imagine that ‘Mr. Watermelon’ willingly submits to the box because he has been told that only square watermelons are accepted for sale in the supermarket. He also knows that if he doesn’t ‘get square’ like everyone else, he will not only stand out from the crowd but be condemned as ‘evil’. In other words, people submit to traditional morality for the sake of a transcendent purpose on the one hand and social pressure on the other. They are therefore not only hurting themselves by following the path of traditional morality, they are enslaved to it out of fear. When, at some length of time, the purpose begins to fail (because ‘God is dead’ according to Nietzsche) and the correspondent social pressure is released, there is then a vacuum that is created and, with it, a new danger can arise: the threat of nihilism.

In place of this nihilism, Nietzsche says that we should jettison not just God, but traditional morality itself and replace it with a passionate embrace of free-flowing nature, unhindered and unimpeded by moral shackles. If we do that we will see that our passion and creativity, that which arises spontaneously in our inner essence, will provide us with new goals and values to which we will naturally gravitate. This is in line with Nietzsche’s view that Western civilisation had gone wrong when it had decreed that rationality was good, whereas passion or desire were evil based on both religious and philosophical influences (both

streams of thought can be traced back to Zoroaster)<sup>[2]</sup>. On the contrary, for Nietzsche, passion and desire are unqualified goods because they allow us to grow, to take risks, and to overcome obstacles, while, at the same time, providing us with raw material for our creative expansion.

To return to the watermelon analogy, once the box has been removed, the watermelon will be free to grow into whatever it is by nature, typically a round or oblong shape. The difference between watermelons and man, however, is that man's creativity and free will have some role to play in conceptualizing, choosing, and thereby fashioning the shape that is most congenial to him. While different people may create different values to live by, what they all have in common is this: they all need power to achieve their objectives. And thus, everything that enhances one's sense of power, that serves the 'will-to-power' is good, whereas everything that undermines or weakens that power is bad. The 'will-to-power' is the most important law of nature, the law to grow and to expand. Those who follow this new path are '*Übermensch*' or the supermen who have replaced the position that God had held in human consciousness with a new eternal goal of self-perfection, which we can only meet by struggling to transcend our mundane existence. This struggling is, above all, a work of artistry. Great things do not come out serenity or peace, but out of chaos and conflict. Accordingly, the *Übermensch* no longer shuns life, but celebrates life, passion, and the body; he no longer avoids danger but confronts it.

According to Nietzsche, the 'invention' of traditional morality by Zoroaster is an enslavement ideology which persists because religious people in particular are too weak to embrace raw nature. They use 'morality' as a way of shielding themselves from hard truths and to hide the fact that they are themselves weak, sickly, and decaying. If they can convince everyone to adopt the traditional conception of morality, they will also have succeeded in neutralising the strong and in empowering the weak over the strong. In traditional morality, according to Nietzsche, being weak is presented as a good thing and supporting the weak is seen as the highest virtue. Morality thus becomes a superstition, an imposition of someone else's ideas which actually serves to artificially limit you while it empowers classes of people who, if left to nature, would probably be 'edited out' of existence by the law known as the 'survival of the fittest'.

### III. Nietzsche's Reformulation of Morality

What is particularly interesting for our purposes is this: Nietzsche actually maintains a concept of good and evil and a preference for the good in keeping with what has been termed the first principle of natural law: "do the good and avoid the evil." He argues for freedom from traditional morality in order to follow the passionate

desires of the heart and for the acquisition of power in order to actualize those desires, to make them real. Whatever enhances our power to achieve congenial objectives of this sort is therefore good and whatever hinders that sense or viability of power is evil. Good and evil remain; they are just redefined. So while Nietzsche thought he was transcending the Zoroastrian invention of morality, he was really only replacing one morality, consisting of a certain understanding of good and evil, with another understanding. It was the material content of what, in the wake of the Zoroastrian tradition, had been taken to be 'good' and 'evil' that Nietzsche took issue with.

The good vs. evil divide thus constitutes what another German philosopher, Dietrich von Hildebrand, used to refer to as an *Urdatum*, i.e., an ultimate datum: something which cannot be denied or rejected without being tacitly re-introduced in one way or another.<sup>[3]</sup> And hence we must conclude that the Nietzschean critique of Zoroaster is not as radical as might first be supposed. Nietzsche jettisoned the traditional conception and went beyond Zoroaster's notions of good and evil, but not beyond the notions of good and evil tout court.

So if good and evil are indeed irreducible qualities of the world, what are we to make of this antagonism between Zoroaster and Nietzsche? Is it true, as Nietzsche would claim, that we must abandon the promotion of *asha* (i.e., the basis for traditional morality) if we are too fully flourish in the only way that human beings can, by becoming *Übermensch*? Should we thus ignore what is now happening in the world in terms of the battle between conventional good and evil, and focus our efforts instead on profiting in monetary and other terms on the dysfunction and decline in a rather cynical sort of way? Is this the best way of 'positioning ourselves existentially in the face of conventional evil?' Before I can answer these questions, I wish to draw the reader's attention to yet another arena in which the categories of 'good' and 'evil' reappear: the nervous system.<sup>[4]</sup>

### IV. Good and Evil in the Nervous System

As has been explained by the numerous adepts of polyvagal theory in the field of psychology, the nervous system has two basic responses: 1) the connect state and 2) the protect state.<sup>[5]</sup>

When we feel safe, we are in the connect state. This is a parasympathetic ventral-vagal response in which we experience positive thoughts and feelings centering around love, joy, peace, freedom, satisfaction, etc. When we feel that we are under some kind of threat, however, our nervous systems activate the protect state, which can take the form of fight or flight, fawn or freeze. The fight or flight is an activation of the sympathetic nervous system which readies us to respond to the threat by combatting it or running away from it. The fawn or freeze is a parasympathetic dorsal-vagal response. In

both manifestations of the protect state we experience negative thoughts and feelings.

As we might expect, a nervous state that is characterized by positive thoughts, feelings, and actions is outward looking and pro-social. This is why the connect state fosters creativity, confidence, compassion, innovation, a solution-oriented approach to problems, productivity, peace, ease, serenity, effective communication, health, and happiness.

By contrast, a nervous state that is characterized by negative thoughts, feelings, and actions is inward looking and ego-centred, focused as it is on 'me' and the perceived threat to the ego, and is therefore anti-social. The protect state fosters fear, anxiousness, doom and gloom, resentments, regrets, isolation/unhappiness, being overwhelmed, uncertain, and/or indecisive, a difficulty-enhancing approach to problems, and ineffective communication.

One important aspect of both states is the natural tendency amongst human beings for the state of their nervous system to, however unconsciously, trigger the conscious mind, the thinking mind, to come up with some 'story' or 'narrative' to explain, or otherwise account for, what is being experienced. When the nervous system is in a safe state, the mind produces positive narratives to accompany it. When the nervous system is in an unsafe state, the mind produces negative narratives to account for the experience. The connect state engenders positive thoughts, feelings, and actions partially because it triggers the conscious mind to come up with a positive story to narrate its experience, whereas the protect state does the opposite because it triggers the mind to tell a negative story. In the words of the psychologist Dr. Jennifer Leigh: "state drives story".

<sup>[6]</sup> It is important to keep this in mind because we often assume that our negative stories, in particular, must be factual; i.e., that they correspond to reality and are based on evidence, when, more often than not, they are cognitive and emotional distortions that are at odds with reality and were triggered by the protect state. They are by-products of the protect state and are as meaningful (or as meaningless) as any other biological function.

It is likewise important to recognize that while the protect state may be unpleasant, it is not evil in and of itself. The protect state exists as a potential mode of our nervous system for a very good reason: survival. When we are indeed subject to some physical or existential threat, the activation of the sympathetic nervous system gives us access to the physical and psychic resources necessary to deal with that threat by fighting, fleeing, fawning, or freezing. It is an adaptive tool that enables us to deal effectively with an enemy or other dangers that might occur in nature. To use the classical example of the saber-toothed tiger that you accidentally come across on the tundra, it would be of no use whatsoever if our nervous systems could only function in the connect

state. In fact, it would be a distinct liability since, unable to defend ourselves, to effectively fight or flee, freeze or fawn, we would become the tiger's dinner in no time at all and the human race would have died off aeons ago.

The protect state does start to become an evil, however, when we spend too much time in it. The constant exposure to cortisol, adrenaline, and other hormones that are produced in the protect state wears down the body and the brain, thus engendering disease and unhappiness. We are not designed by either God or nature to live – as so many of us do – in a chronic state of fight or flight, fawn or freeze. Indeed, the connect state is, or should be, our default state where we are to spend at least 80-90% of our time. The protect state should only be turned on occasionally when it is actually needed and only for a relatively brief period of time before homeostasis can re-establish itself and the hormones that have been released can be re-regulated. The fact that so many of us find it difficult, if not impossible, to live as nature intended within the confines of our 'civilisation' is a sad commentary on the quality of that civilisation.<sup>[7]</sup>

A second problem with living long-term in the protect state (besides the damage it does to the body or maybe because of it) is that it tends to be self-reinforcing and self-amplifying. When the protect state is activated more than it should be it tends to displace the connect state as our default state. That is, it sets up a positive feedback loop, where the more we are in the protect state, the more likely we are to remain or become anchored in the protect state, and the worse or more intense the protect state itself becomes.

There is yet a third problem with living in the protect state on a permanent or semi-permanent basis: it has deleterious effects that go beyond our nervous system. Our very existential trajectory, the success of our 'being-in-the-world' becomes compromised. Living with negative thoughts, feelings, and actions, is bad enough, but this state of negativity simultaneously cuts us off from reaching our highest and best potential. It does this by interfering with the 'energetic momentum' of our 'being-in the world'. Instead of broadcasting a positive signal into the field, our dominant frequency is a negative one. Since like attract like, it should be no surprise that being in a negative state tends to attract negative people, events, and things. The negativity tends to snowball not just in our nervous system, but in our experience and in our world and thus our experience of the inside and outside worlds becomes mutually reinforcing. Our native potential for flourishing is sabotaged from the get-go.

Conversely, when we are able to spend most of our time in the connect state, we don't just have positive thoughts, feelings, and actions, we are driven by the positive. We acquire a positive momentum and that makes it so much easier to actualise our highest and best

potential in all areas of life, to forward the good and to deal more effectively with problems (which can, from the point of view of the connect state, be plausibly re-labelled as challenges) when they arise. The positivity tends to snowball instead and this has repercussions beyond our nervous system as the positivity is mirrored in our experience and our lives.

So the 'good', as far as the nervous system is concerned, is this: to be able to live most of the time in the 'connect' state and to only exit it and enter the protect state when external circumstances genuinely require it, and only for as little a time as may be strictly necessary. The 'evil' is to live in the protect state more than would be necessary in nature, and the more time we spend in it, the greater is the degree of the evil. Furthermore, the distinction between good and evil in the human autonomic nervous system reverberates beyond the nervous system because of the power that the nervous system and its functioning hold over the outcome of a human life. Living with a healthy nervous system is likely to induce a state of human well-being, satisfaction, and flourishing, whereas living with an impaired nervous system is likely to yield the opposite end-products.

## **V. The Intersection Between Psychological Good and Evil and Moral & Metaphysical Good and Evil**

So what is the connection between good and evil in the nervous system with moral as well as metaphysical good and evil? Well, any conceptual vision of the world (such as a religion, a morality, an ideology, etc.) that is taken with sufficient seriousness can, depending on its content, and/or the way in which it is perceived or conceived by an individual's mind (which can be dependent, in turn, on life experiences, familial habits, cultural mores and so forth) put that person consistently in the protect state, or it can help to maintain a person in the connect state. The particular narrative regarding moral good and evil that we hold to be true, for example, may, because of its content, or our mode of understanding it, tend to induce the connect state, or, it may tend to induce the protect state in our nervous systems.

Now, it does not appear to be the case that 'good' in the nervous system should embody any strictly necessary connection with 'good' in the moral sphere or vice versa. In other words, it is possible to be in some form of the connect state without pursuing moral goodness, or *asha vahishta* in Zoroastrian terms. Indeed, one might be engaged in some activity that is clearly incompatible with the establishment of *asha*, such as indulging in recreational drug-use that is nevertheless harmful to health, and still be in the connect state, at least in the short-term. It is likewise possible to pursue *asha* on the basis of the protect state (by, for example, attempting to white-knuckle the realization of the good by 'efforting' or trying ever-harder – which is, incidentally, a very anti-

*asha* way of attempting to bring about the good, but more on this later).

At the same time, there does seem to be a definite connection (though that connection need not be necessary nor sufficient in nature either) between the state of the nervous system and various metaphysical or ontological goods. As was explained in the previous section, a healthy nervous system seems to co-relate well with various ontological goods, such as happiness, flourishing, material well-being, whereas, an unhealthy nervous system, one that is locked in the protect state, seems to co-relate well with ontological evils: sickness, suffering, unhappiness, failure, dissatisfaction and so forth.

I suspect that, for whatever particular reasons, Nietzsche ended up rejecting the traditional morality as it was understood and lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, because thinking about it, trying to live it, etc., put him in the protect state and, by extension, disabled his capacity to live in a positive, constructive manner (as was explained earlier). When traditional morality is conceived as a set of external benchmarks to be observed and its sap, or its proper animating and directing energy, is not understood and experienced organically from within, it should be easy to understand that any such arbitrary conception of morality might be experienced as something that is extremely oppressive and corrosive.

If the connect state represents 'might' on the one hand (whereas the protect state would represent weakness and existential misery), and traditional morality represents 'right' on the other, it seems that in Nietzsche's mind 'might' and 'right' were necessarily at odds with each other. To pursue the 'right' meant to sacrifice 'might' in any form and since sacrificing 'might' for 'right' ended in the poisoning of life and in the gradual destruction of all ontological goods: health, power, pleasure, and satisfaction, etc., Nietzsche opted for 'might' over 'right' and jettisoned the traditional morality altogether. He sailed beyond good and evil (traditionally conceived) so he could live in the connect state. In Nietzsche's substitute or reformed morality, the specific genius of Zoroaster's notion of morality (i.e., morality as *asha*) is likewise rejected and replaced with the naked pursuit of power, the will-to-power in service of one's creative inclinations. One cannot but be reminded here of the Luciferian adage: 'Do as thou wilt'. In this way, Nietzsche put 'right' and 'might' on the same page by redefining the 'right'.

Nietzsche is undoubtedly correct when he instinctively asserts that the right conception of morality must be on the side of a healthy nervous system. There are both theoretical (metaphysical) reasons for this as well as practical ones.

The first reason that can be cited is the one that he gives: if a conception of morality cannot, in some substantial manner, be lived out in a way that fortifies the good of the nervous system but is harmful to it

instead, the attempt to live it out would indeed be *contra naturam* and self-destructive and must eventually collapse in a heap of impossibilities. Attempting to be 'moral' would then represent an exercise in absurdity and futility, just as Nietzsche maintains is the case with respect to traditional morality.

The incompatibility of moral 'right' with nervous system 'might' would also imply something about the nature of reality which would seem, from everything else we know about it, to be false, namely it would imply that the world is not rational, i.e., intelligible. For, if the world is rational, it would only be fitting that what is good in moral terms is also, at least generally speaking, congenial to the nervous system and thus good for the nervous system. What sort of world would be living in if what is good morally speaking is inherently bad for the nervous system and vice versa, i.e., if what is good for the nervous system is necessarily bad in moral terms? This may seem like a merely aesthetic argument, and even as begging the question by presupposing some vision of what or how the world ought to be, but the argument can be developed further.

You see, the 'right' of morality also needs to be on the same page as the 'might' of a healthy nervous system in order for it to properly and completely attain to its own ends. A weak, unhealthy nervous system hampers an individual in his ability to choose wisely and to achieve his objectives, hence a nervous system in the protect state is unable to realise moral objectives in an optimal manner. This lack of effective action means that there will be less moral goodness in the world. By contrast, an approach to morality that incorporates nervous system health has the benefit of making it a lot easier to live a successful moral life. Spending most of our time in the connect state also means the strengthening and the blossoming of a positive state of consciousness and in that state we can act more effectively in favour of both our own good and that of our neighbours. It is in a morally grounded connect state that evil is, in some fundamental sense, already internally defeated, and whatever external manifestations of it remain can be more easily sanitized by intelligent action that is grounded in benevolence. In other words, the connect state is key to defeating the evils with which we are confronted. If this is so, the good or true moral vision of the world and the good of the nervous system are not just compatible, they must be found, in the end, to be mutually self-reinforcing.

For all of the reasons, a true conception of morality must incorporate a due regard for the health of the nervous system. But what does this imply for the traditional conception of morality? Is it indeed the case that a healthy nervous system and the traditional conception of morality, broadly conceived, are inherently incompatible? If so, we *should* reject it as false. Would this then mean that Nietzsche's reformed

conception of good and evil is the only way of aligning the 'right' of an intellectual conception of our moral duties, with the 'might' of a healthy nervous system and its accompanying ontological benefits? Or, can the traditional conception of morality (or something very much akin to it) be approached in a way that renders it compatible with a healthy or 'good' nervous system and, by extension, with a good life (in terms of the various ontological benefits: protection, provision, happiness, freedom, power, peace, well-being, etc.)?

For the time being, let us abstract, just for a moment, from the question of the objective truth of this or that moral vision of the world, can we imagine any sort of approach to the traditional morality that would meet the Nietzschean challenge of nervous system compatibility? Is there a version of the traditional morality, whether objectively true or not, that is at least pragmatically true (i.e., that is in line with the epistemological approach of the American philosopher William James) in the sense that it works well with the nervous system by enabling us to remain and indeed to thrive in the connect state?

In other words, what would be the psychological requirements of a moral theory that accepts the traditional view of good and evil but that does so in, and from, and through the connect state? This we will proceed to examine presently.

## **VI. Relating to the World of Good and Evil from the Connect State**

From a purely psychological point of view, there is a certain path that must be followed in order that, when we relate to good and evil, we can remain in a parasympathetic ventral-vagal response. According to the psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Leigh, the health of the nervous system can be attained not by denying the reality of good and evil, or of light and darkness, or even by seeking to 'transcend it' following Nietzsche's path of 'the will to power', but rather by coming to peace, coming to terms, with the existence of good and evil. More specifically, we have to find some way of approaching the evil, the 'dark', so that it doesn't automatically put us in the protect state.

So how do we come to peace with the bad, with the dark? I can find no better point of departure in answering this question than the advice given in the well-known Serenity Prayer:

*"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."*

It is clear that if we approach those negative things that disturb us and that are amenable to change with the right tools we can eliminate them and hence they will no longer disturb us. But what about the residual negative, the things we cannot change or cannot change so easily? What are we to do about those things?

As we have already seen, whenever we perceive or conceive of something as ‘the enemy’ our autonomic nervous system automatically shifts into the protect state and we are ready to fight, to take flight, to fawn, or to freeze. Thus, if we make the residual bad or the residual dark, the things that we don’t like that we cannot change, ‘the enemy’ we will move ourselves into the protect state in a rather permanent sort of way (because the evil that cannot be changed is always there) and we will consistently experience negative thoughts, feelings, and actions. If we fear or hate ‘the bad’ and make that the defining feature of our identity, then we become driven by negativity and living in that state of negativity simultaneously cuts us off from our highest and best potential.<sup>[8]</sup> This disdain and hatred of the bad as the focus of one’s attention is often the flipside of a neurotic ‘striving for the good’ that actually keeps us from developing our potential to the fullest. This kind of yearning can be so strident that it nevertheless limits us by sabotaging the well-being of our nervous system.<sup>[9]</sup> In reference to this aspect of the problem it is well to remember the adage: “The perfect is the enemy of the good.”

When it comes to neutralizing the ‘residual evil’ psychologically and hence existentially, we first need to correctly identify the negative things that we cannot change as we find them both in ourselves and in our world. Once that is accomplished, we need to ‘accept’ the fact that they exist and are unchangeable (or at least not changeable by us). This is how we deal with the residual negative. For if we accept the things we cannot change, including our own flaws, shortcomings, imperfections, darkness, etc., our autonomic nervous system will remain in the connect state where we have positive thoughts, feelings, and actions. This means that we will still be driven by positivity in spite of the unchangeable evil, and we will still be able to reach our best and highest potential. We will also become more effective, therefore, in changing the things that we can change. In other words, accepting the residual evil also fortifies our capacity to eliminate the changeable evils.

But all this talk about ‘accepting evil’ may make some people nervous (and even put them in the protect state). What does it mean ‘to accept’ the residual evil? It doesn’t mean that we have to like it or condone it. It means that we accept that it exists, as well as its mode of existence: the fact that it is unchangeable. In other words, it means that we stop fighting it because we recognize that fighting it is futile and indeed worse than futile. It’s counter-productive. For, by fighting what we cannot change we only add fuel to the protect state, which undermines our capacity to change what we can change. Instead, by accepting what we cannot change we are embracing life on life’s terms; we cease fighting it and surrender our arms. When we no longer resist the residual evil and understand that no useful purpose is served in resisting

the evil (because our resistance makes no difference to it and indeed only amplifies it further) our nervous system can relax.

Now, it seems to me that one of the most important realms where this acceptance needs to occur is not even in terms of the external world, but in reference to our own subconscious. For, if we can first achieve peace within ourselves, we will be in a much stronger position to deal effectively with the existence of both good and evil in the external world. If, on the other hand we come to believe that we aren’t worthy, loveable, or enough because we cannot accept the bad or the dark that resides within, we undermine ourselves in a way that almost ensures the triumph of evil. This sort of puritanism gives rise to an ego-centric perfectionism. We think that we can only be happy if we are completely good, or if life is completely good. Similarly, bad is seen as the enemy, as something to be disdained, hated, turned away from and that we can’t be happy if life is even partially bad. We might come to believe that we aren’t worthy, loveable, or enough unless we are fully good and that we can only be happy if we are always good or life is always good. Bad is then seen as the intractable enemy, as something to be disdained, hated, turned away from and that we can’t be happy if life is in any way tainted by the bad. In this way, a rigourist, moral perfectionism, i.e., the striving for goodness separated from any consideration of the health of the nervous system, becomes the root of many evils all on its own.

In order to come to proper terms with the reality of our human condition, it is necessary to recognise that, as many of our oldest stories, legends, and myths will testify, our subconscious, by its very nature, contains both light and dark, both the good and the evil, if not as live realities than as potentialities. The psychic forces which, if acted on in a certain direction, give rise to the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth, are present in the subconscious as part of our instinctual endowments. These forces are not evil in themselves, however, in the sense of being ‘morally evil’. They are amoral, though we may describe them as ‘dark’ because they are Dionysian rather than Apollonian, i.e., ego-centric, chaotic, and aggressive, rather than altruistic, orderly, and conciliatory.

Unfortunately, some people, whether on account of their own psychological quirks, cultural conditioning, religious heresy, or other reasons, have misinterpreted the call of morality as necessitating the strict elimination, the psychological amputation of these instinctual forces as if the forces themselves were evil. This is a fundamental misunderstanding, but one that has been productive of the greatest evils. For, whenever we judge, criticize, or evaluate ourselves or feel that we are being judged, criticized or evaluated by others, these activities, if not done out of love and in a constructive spirit, can easily be perceived as a threat by the nervous system. If we

come to believe that being a morally good person or living a morally good life requires the elimination of the Dionysian side of our subconscious both in actuality and even in potentiality, we then put our conscious mind at war with our subconscious mind ... in a conflict that never ends because the Dionysian side of our psyche cannot be eliminated. Unable to complete that task, we are thereby led to judge ourselves as fundamentally 'bad' or 'not good enough' and this puts us in the protect state. And ... once we are living in the protect state we lose the ability to think, feel, and act, in rational, loving, and life-affirming ways and are therefore unable to reach our highest potential. The same dynamic can be set up in our nervous system when we cannot accept our flaws, shortcomings, failures, etc.

Instead of striving to eliminate the 'dark side' of our subconscious, or the dark side of our world, we need to accept the unalterable fact of their existence and to grasp the good purposes that are, or can be, nevertheless served by them.<sup>[10]</sup> The world is not perfect. We are not perfect. Life is not perfect. Events and circumstances are not perfect. But so what? The unyielding fact of this imperfection provides us with the raw material by means of which we can learn and grow. When we approach the residual evil in this spirit, we can learn to understand and even to appreciate the dark side of reality instead of fearing, hating, or ignoring it. We will no longer fight with ourselves or with the world by trying to impose the dictates of the conscious mind on the subconscious and on the external environment. Instead, we will expand more easily into the fullness and wholeness of our humanity as the conscious mind harmonizes with the subconscious and the nervous system returns to the connect state.

In Jungian psychology this is known as shadow work. The message of Jungian psychology is that everything in our subconscious belongs there, both the light and the dark. Once again, 'the dark' is not the same as evil in the sense of moral evil. In order for something to be morally evil, it requires a conscious free decision to engage in some action (or omission) that is incompatible with the moral law. Thoughts, feelings, tendencies, habits that just well up from our subconscious are not evil, though some of them may be dark. Embracing one's darkness means acknowledging and accepting those aspects of one's personality and being that one may have erroneously branded as 'evil' for whatever reason. This process of 'shadow work' brings the darkness to the light of consciousness, increasing our self-awareness. The more that we know and understand ourselves, including our dark side, the less likely is the possibility that our instinctual endowments will be repressed in unhealthy ways and triggered into activation against our conscious will. By becoming aware of and accepting our distinctive darkness, we no longer fear it. And when we no longer fear it we can tame it, re-contextualize

it, and not be dominated or be surprised by it when we find ourselves in difficult situations or moments of weakness. But we can also rely on it when we need to draw on it for inspiration and strength to meet the call of an extraordinary set of circumstances.<sup>[11]</sup> If we can see the goodness in the dark side our subconscious, we can even reach the stage where we do not desire to change it, because we see the hidden purpose and the value of it.

The loving acceptance of what we cannot change also empowers us to show love for others as beings who are fundamentally caught in the same existential position. It inclines us to compassion, kindness, caring, patience, forgiveness, gratitude, awe, wonder and so forth. It inclines us, in other words, to live in a psychological state of grace, where there is no need to prove one's goodness in order to feel that one is worthy of love. Love is experienced instead as unearned merit. And this way of being-in-the world changes us and moves us towards our highest and best potential. For, perhaps more than anything us, love anchors us in the connect state and rewires us for positivity, for health and for happiness, regardless of what the residual evil is doing. Living in psychological 'state of grace' also wires us for morality, i.e., for the effective promotion of what is good.

If there exists a true moral philosophy that in any substantial measure corresponds with the traditional conception of morality, it will have to be more successful than many conventional forms of traditional morality in incorporating the proper attitude to good and evil as dictated by the demands of psychological health and well-being (which, in the final analysis, means the health of the nervous system). On the one hand, a moral vision that does not take the nervous system into consideration is unsustainable in the long-term and indeed counter-productive. On the other hand, it is only in and through a healthy nervous system that we have any hope of actually promoting the good and setting evil to flight. If we are to have a traditional moral philosophy, it needs to induce the kind of psychology, the way of acting and of being, that will, in some sense, defeat the evil in our minds first, regardless of how loudly it might be barking in the outside world. That is to say, the true moral vision of the world will not only inform us correctly of what is truly good and evil, it will show us how to overcome the evil with the least amount of trouble to everyone ... and this brings us full circle, right back to Zoroastrianism.

*Continued next issue.....*

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