

The problem with evil

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Abstract

This essay contends that there are significant theological problems connected with the use of the term “evil” to label states of affairs, such that the “problem with evil” is that we are too quick to presume to know what evil is. If evil is defined as that which is against the good, and the good is identified with God’s will, then the use of “evil” should be restricted to those actions of free creatures that *oppose* the divine will. The classic understanding of evil as a *privation* of good will therefore be rejected, on the grounds that it depends on an expectation that the good of individual creatures should conform to a general type. It follows that instances of what is traditionally termed “natural evil” are not properly categorized either as evil or as good, but rather as occasions for the discernment of how God’s will for creaturely flourishing is to be realised in a particular context.

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The “problem with evil” that I want to explore has to do with our use of the term to label certain states of affairs. This problem can be seen in the human desire, seemingly reflexive in us from the moment in childhood when we acquire the necessary vocabulary, to label things as good or evil. My contention is that this desire creates significant problems. At one level, this should come as no surprise to Christians, for the primordial temptation of human beings recorded in Genesis is precisely that they should come to be “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in his classic essay, “Creation and Fall”, to know good and evil is fundamentally God’s business, and not ours. That we should seek to acquire such knowledge is thus indeed (as the tempter suggested) to be “like God”, but not in the way that God intended when creating us in the divine likeness. To be made “in the image of God” (the *imago Dei*) is to be called to communion with God; but to be “like God” (*sicut Deus*) as one who presumes to know good and evil is to reject such communion by rejecting God and setting ourselves up as the arbiters of what should and should not be. To be knowers of good and evil in this sense is to sin, and thereby to give evil a place in creation that was never intended.¹ This certainly does not mean that the language of good and evil has no place in our theological vocabulary, but it does mean that it needs to be deployed with considerable circumspection. We should use it less.

Or so I shall argue. First, however, it is necessary to provide some orientation to what the word “evil” means, and why its use should be considered a “problem” at all.

¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, vol. 3 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* [hereafter *DBWE*], trans. and ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Cf. Bonhoeffer’s later comments in *Ethics*: “The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge.... For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin.” *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *DBWE*], trans. and ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, *et al.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 299-300.

That this is a topic fraught with difficulty is clear from the various conceptual schemes to analyse the human experience of evil, which may draw on any number of combinations of the categories of moral, natural, physical, and metaphysical evil. And if one digs deeper and moves from the categorization of different types of evil to explore the range of contemporary theological approaches to the topic of evil, a similarly wide array of strategies is on display, with some arguing that the whole project invariably commits the theologian to the task of providing justification for the unjustifiable and therefore should be rejected altogether as an appropriate topic of theological reflection.²

In this context, it is important to emphasise that the problem *with* evil that I want to discuss is different from the problem *of* evil that since the eighteenth century has been described using the term “theodicy”. That is, I am not offering an account of God’s relationship to evil, beyond the claim (theologically trivial if God is, as Christians hold, wholly, maximally, and indefectibly good) that God opposes it. Theodicy undertakes the much more ambitious task of attempting to account for the reality of evil in light of God’s goodness by showing how the two are somehow compatible – how it is that the reality of evil coheres with God’s good will for the existence and flourishing of creation. I venture no such account, because I do not believe one can be offered. Indeed, the fundamental intuition behind the argument I offer here is that our understanding of how God relates to any aspect of created reality is profoundly mysterious: Christians are called to trust that God will ultimately vindicate God’s good intentions for creation, but apart from those events (which are for Christians limited to miracles and the actions of Jesus of Nazareth) that can be immediately predicated of God as an agent, our ignorance of how God is

² The most noteworthy examples of this last approach are Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991) and, somewhat less emphatically, Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

active in the world, bringing God's purposes for creation to completion, is profound.³

With this perspective in mind, my focus in this essay is not to presume to adopt a God's-eye view of evil, but rather to interrogate the human use of the term in order to exercise theologically appropriate restraint in its deployment.⁴

The Nature of the “Problem”: Defining Evil

In order to consider how one might navigate these tricky theological shoals, “evil” requires careful definition. A Christian account of evil is inseparable from the doctrine of creation. Since the end of the second century, it has been a matter of near consensus among Christians that God created the world from nothing (*ex nihilo* in Latin). As Anselm of Canterbury noted a millennium ago, this phrase is open to various forms of misunderstanding.⁵ Most obviously, in everyday language the claim that an entity was created “from” something is to specify the material *out of which* it was made (for example, a table from wood, a cake from flour, sugar, eggs, and butter); but Christians do not believe that the world was created “from nothing” in this sense, as though “nothing” were something, and thus named some sort of substance. Instead, the phrase functions precisely to indicate that there is *no* already existing stuff that serves as the ground, basis, or material for God's creative work, so that to say that God creates *from nothing* is to say that God does not make use of *anything* in creating the world. In short, “from nothing” does not specify the material out of which creation was made, but rather serves to exclude

³ For further discussion of this point see Ian A. McFarland, “Present in Love: Rethinking Barth on the Divine Perfections”, *Modern Theology* 33/2 (April 2017): 243-58.

⁴ “I would like to think that this essay reflects something of the Spirit of Karen Kilby's exhortation that “Christian theology ought *neither* to construct theodicies, *nor* ignore the kinds of problems theodicies address. It ought instead to acknowledge itself to be faced with questions it cannot answer, and to be committed to affirming things it cannot make sense of.” Karen Kilby, “Evil and the Limits of Theodicy,” *New Blackfriars* 84/983 (January 2003): 13.

⁵ See especially ch. 8 of the *Monologion* in Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion and Proslogion, with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), 20-22.

the idea that there is any material that serves as the substrate of creation. Creation from nothing means that God is the sole condition of the world's existence in every respect and at every moment.

So how in this context is evil to be understood? I would propose that within the framework of the Christian doctrine of creation, the most theologically sound way to define evil is as *that which is against God's will*.⁶ For if God, as Creator, is the sole condition of creation's being at all (or, if you will, the only "factor" that has to be taken into account in assessing the source and character of the created order), and if, as Christians also claim, God is inherently and perfectly good, then it follows that nothing evil can be the product of God's intentional action. If evil is the opposite or contradiction of the good, therefore, it is reasonably defined as that which is against God's will.

Now, if God is good, and if God's will as Creator is that creatures exist as the particular sorts of creatures they are, it follows that creatures' existence is good. Considered in this perspective, it would seem to follow that evil may also be defined as that which threatens or inhibits creatures' flourishing as the beings God intends them to be. And this is in fact another standard definition of evil.⁷ As we will see, however, the task of identifying what it means for a creature to flourish in the way God intended is more complicated than it may initially appear, and it is the set of difficulties that attend our talking about good and evil in this context that lie at the centre of what I call "the problem *with* evil."

⁶ '...for at the end of all subtleties, sin and evil can only be specified as that which God does not want.' Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 174.

⁷ See, e.g., the entry "Evil" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1917): "Evil, in a large sense, may be described as the sum of the opposition, which experience shows to exist in the universe, to the desires and needs of individuals; whence arises, among human beings at least, the sufferings in which life abounds." <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm>; cited on 8 November 2016.

But before we get to that, let me take a moment to review “the problem *of* evil” in its classic form, which emerges from the question of how any deviation from God’s will is possible, if God, as Creator, is the sole antecedent condition of all that is, and thus of every aspect of every creature’s existence at every moment of its existence. The issue is classically framed as the “Epicurean trilemma”: in order for evil to be possible, then *either* God is not omnipotent (or, in specifically Christian terms, does not create the world from nothing), *or* God is not good, *or* evil is not real. Christians have wanted to reject all three of these possibilities (though in practice most Christian theodicies tend to take the form of variations on the third, arguing that what we experience as evil is not finally quite so bad after all). But if it is the case that God is both all-powerful and indefectibly good, then *unde malum* – whence evil?⁸

As a first step to sketching the contours of Christian engagement with this problem, I will turn to Thomas Aquinas, who is helpful in that he frankly acknowledges that the frequent failure of creatures to flourish seems to cast doubt on God’s presence and power in the world; indeed, when addressing the question of God’s existence in the second question of his *Summa Theologiae*, the reality of evil is the first objection that he offers to the proposition. He answers this objection by citing with approval Augustine’s argument that God’s permitting evil to exist, far from casting doubt on God’s limitless goodness, actually reflects it, insofar as God’s power includes the capacity to draw good out of evil.⁹ I do not find this argument convincing, for while it is indeed a central

⁸ See David Hume’s restatement of “Epicurus’s old questions” in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 10, 2nd ed. (London, 1779), 186. The attribution of the trilemma to Epicurus goes back to the fourth-century Christian writer Lactantius. See Reinhold Gleib, “‘Et invidus et inbecillus’: Das angebliche Epikurfragment bei Laktanz, *De ira Dei* 13,20–21,” *Vigiliae christianae* 42 (1988): 47–58.

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] 1.2.3, 60 vols. (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1964-1981).

conviction of Christian belief that God has the power to draw good out of evil (see Gen. 50:20), that is a rather different – and significantly less ambitious – claim than Thomas’s contention that the permitting of evil, understood as a prerequisite of God’s ability to draw good from it, might itself be taken as a mark of God’s goodness.¹⁰ The claim that God “permits” evil is probably unavoidable for Christians who confess creation from nothing, and thus that there is no factor alongside God that grounds created being; but in order to avoid any implication of divine complicity in evil, such language must be deployed very carefully. Specifically it must not be used as a means to suggest that Christians have any *positive* understanding of how evil comes to be, still less as a basis for giving content to God’s relationship to evil, but solely as a means of addressing the three legs of the Epicurean trilemma by maintaining: 1) that God does not intend or enact evil (since God is good), 2) that evil is not beyond the scope of God’s power to redeem (since God’s power is unlimited), and 3) that evil is not an illusion (since we are, following Amos 5:15, instructed to hate it).¹¹

Within these fairly restrictive limits, the definition of evil as “that which is against God’s will” serves to make it clear that God’s attitude toward evil is always to oppose and condemn it. In this context, I want to reflect on how this understanding of evil relates to the definition proposed by Augustine (who was himself drawing on Platonic thought): that evil is a privation of the good (*privatio boni*). At first glance, this

¹⁰ Cf. Luther: “how can one make sense out of the fact that [God] doesn’t punish evil, but rather lets it happen? Either he mustn’t be able to punish it, or he doesn’t want to do it. If he doesn’t want to punish it, then surely he’s a rogue; but if he cannot punish it, then he’s not almighty as God ought to be.... You won’t find even a Turk who could make sense out of that! And this why wise people...come to the logical conclusion that there is no God at all.” (Sermon 8 after Trinity, 1531, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Loyola, 1982 [1967]), 47.

¹¹ For a more extensive discussion of the language of divine permission, see Ian A. McFarland, “Present in Love: Rethinking Barth on the Divine Perfections”, in *Modern Theology* (forthcoming).

definition has much to recommend it. First of all, it means that evil has no independent ontological status that would render it capable of either being viewed as a product of or posing a limit to God's agency, since as privation it is quite literally nothing – no sort of substantial reality – in itself. At the same time, neither is evil simply an illusion, since despite its insubstantiality, it has genuinely deleterious consequences for creatures that require God's saving activity (see 2 Tim. 4:18). To take the classic example, rot, in eroding the goodness of the apple, also degrades the apple's being; but it is also utterly dependent (and thus parasitic) on that being, so that as soon as the rot has completely destroyed the apple, it, too, ceases to exist (so that in consuming the good, evil is also self-consuming). In these respects a privative understanding of evil seems strongly compatible with a definition of evil as that which is against God's will. After all, insofar as Christians confess that God is the entirely good Creator “of all that is, seen and unseen,” it follows that everything God creates is good (Gen 1:31). So since God wills only the good, that which is against God's will would seem to be equivalent to a privation of the good.

Evil as Intrinsic to Creation: Metaphysical Evil

Unfortunately, things are not quite so simple, for it turns out that a strict application of the definition of evil as privation of the good leads to some rather strange results, which run quite counter to the idea that evil is that which is against God's will. Consider that if God is good and, indeed, perfectly and infinitely good, so that God instantiates all goodness – every perfection – in the divine being, then all the creatures that God brings into being, just by virtue of the fact that they are other than God, represent a declension from this fullness and thereby a *privation* of the perfect goodness

of God. It was this kind of reasoning that led G. W. Leibniz (who also invented the term “theodicy”) to coin the phrase “metaphysical evil” to describe created being as such, on the grounds that everything that is finite suffers an ontologically intrinsic – and thus “metaphysical” – privation of the infinite goodness that pertains to God alone. But since Leibniz also held that God wills that creatures exist, his rigorous deployment of the definition of evil as privation of the good leads to a direct conflict with the definition of evil as that which is counter to God’s will.¹²

Now, it might be thought that this dilemma could be resolved through some fairly minor terminological clarification. Leibniz, after all, explicitly contrasts “metaphysical” evil, understood as an *essential* “privation” of God’s infinite good, which is intrinsic to every creature by virtue of the very fact of its being a creature (that is, not divine), with “physical” evil, or creaturely suffering, which might be defined as an *accidental* privation of good that results from some particular interaction with other creatures (e.g., being deformed, wounded, eaten, infected, burned, etc.). With that distinction in mind, it would be possible to avoid his claim that all creatures are evil (even if only in a “metaphysical” sense) by refining our understanding of privation, such that evil is not understood as privation of *the fullness of* good, but more specifically as privation of the *particular* good that pertains to a creature in its concreteness insofar as it just *this* type of creature.¹³

Certainly such a redefinition would be more in line with the repeated emphasis in Genesis

¹² Leibniz locates the source of evil in general in “*an original imperfection in the creature* before sin, because the creature is limited in its essence” and then goes on to define metaphysical evil in particular as “mere imperfection,” in contradistinction to physical evil (suffering) and moral evil (sin). G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, tr. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 135-36.

¹³ So Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.1: “evil as such is the privation of a particular good, a privation that is associated with a particular good.” Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950), 349: “If in the relationship between God and creature a ‘not’ is involved, the ‘not’ belongs to the perfection of the relationship, and even the...’not’ which characterises the creature belongs to its perfection”.

1 on God's beholding the goodness of all the different kinds of creatures God had made (vv. 4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). On such an account, it would be evil for a dog to have a broken leg, say, since having four functioning legs constitutes a genuine privation of the created goodness of canine creatures; but it is not evil for a dog to be unable to fly.

The Problem of Evil as the Problem of Sin

But how is it that physical evil, this accidental privation of a particular good, happens at all? How does it come to be that in a world where God, as Creator, is the sole antecedent condition of all that exists, a dog's leg comes to be broken? One possibility is that the break is caused by the dog's having been severely beaten by her (human) owner in a fit of rage. This sort of account traces creaturely privation to what the tradition (including, again, Leibniz) termed "moral evil," or, to adopt more specifically theological language "sin." Sin, or moral evil, includes all those actions that are 1) freely willed by creatures and 2) contravene God's will. On this understanding evil refers specifically to creatures' own perverse turning from God. Of course, this definition of moral evil does nothing to explain it. After all, if it is the case that God creates the world from nothing, such creaturely turning from God should never occur, since every instance of creaturely willing – like every other created event – has its sole ground in God's willing: I can only will freely because God enables me to will freely (and, indeed, to will freely whatever it is that I will) at the moment I do so.¹⁴ That creatures whose actions are in this way utterly dependent on God should turn away from God is therefore utterly inexplicable, since if God creates from nothing, then no event happens independently of God. To

¹⁴ Note that this emphasis on God's utter sovereignty in relation to creation renders the so-called "free will defense" of evil bootless, as the latter depends on a zero-sum account of the relationship between divine and human activity that is not consistent with the idea that God is the sole antecedent condition of all created effects – including the free acts of creatures. See Kilby, "Evil and the Limits of Theodicy," 17-19.

suggest otherwise makes no more sense than to suppose that a novelist is less the cause of her character's free decision to renounce love for duty than of that same character's getting wet in the rain. When Christians affirm that some things in the world are the product of creaturely freedom, they are affirming that the many types of creatures God brings into being includes some – humans, (traditionally) angels, and (possibly) life on other planets – whose actions are not determined by the operation of physical laws.¹⁵ To say that such creatures act freely is simply to affirm that, unlike other types of living and non-living creation, they do what they do as personal – and thus responsible – agents. Thus, human eating, unlike that of a rabbit, is something ascribed to a conscious subject: it is something that *I* (or *you*) do.¹⁶ That God should cause certain creatures to exist in this way is perfectly consistent with God creating from nothing. The theological difficulty arises not from the fact of free action as such, but with the idea that some such free actions go against and thus constitute a rejection of God's will.

That such acts of rejection *do* take place is the clear teaching of the Bible (see, e.g., Gen. 8:21; Ps. 51:1-5; 1 John 1:8), but, again, that they *should* occur seems utterly incompatible with the Christian doctrine of creation. Nor does the belief (also attested by Scripture) that such evil actions cannot finally prevail against God's will for the ultimate redemption of creation (Isa. 65:17-25 or Rev. 21:1-6) and, indeed, can even be turned to

¹⁵ I include among physical laws not **only** gravity, electromagnetism, and the like, but **also** instinct, which I take to be a very complex sort of physical law that determines the behaviour of living creatures, and which is effected by a series of interlinked biochemical processes internal to the creature that take particular form (and thus produce specific behavioural effects) through interaction with external environmental stimuli.

¹⁶ Note that such an understanding of freedom does not imply a "liberty of indifference" according to which my free actions are (as a very condition of their being considered free at all) utterly under my control. On the contrary, the degree of conscious control free creatures exercise over their actions varies widely: I cannot control my being hungry, curious, or sweating in the same way that I do my walking to church or typing these words; but in across all these cases it is nevertheless true that *I* am hungry, curious, sweating, walking, or typing. On this basis it is possible to **make sense of** the claim of Maximus the Confessor (which he ascribes to Cyril of Alexandria) that "in a rational nature, nothing natural is involuntary" (see his *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, in PG 91:296A).

good (Gen. 50:20) render them any less problematic. To be sure, Christians have generally maintained that God's relationship to such actions should be understood in terms of "permission" rather than active or efficient willing. As already noted, such language has its uses as a means of affirming both that God does not commit evil (i.e., to "permit" is not to enact), and that the consequences of such actions do not remain beyond the scope of God's power to redeem (i.e., evil has only so much power as God "permits"); but it doesn't explain why God should "permit" actions that contravene God's will. After all, any being who can be said to "permit" an action by definition has the power to prevent it – and all the more when the being is God, apart from whom no creature can do anything (including acting freely) at all.

From this perspective evil is a genuine problem – something that does not seem able to be squared with the confession of a God who is both absolutely good and absolutely unconstrained in the exercise of that goodness (that is, "omnipotent"). To be sure, in confessing Jesus Christ crucified, dead, and risen Christians affirm that God has both condemned and conquered evil with a power that is definitive, even if fully and finally visible only on the last day (see Rom. 8:18). But in so doing they offer no explanation – let alone justification – of why creatures should do evil. It is no real explanation of evil, for example, to say that someone is tempted to do it, for why should we find evil tempting? Even if we are inclined to follow the example of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and lay the responsibility for our sin at the door of another creature who enticed us (since God, according to Jas. 1:13, tempts no one), that simply defers the problem, for the question remains of how *that* creature came to do evil.¹⁷ The reality of

¹⁷ Augustine famously traces creatures' capacity for evil to the fact that they have been created from nothing and so have a tendency to fall back into nothing; but to speak of creatures having any such

moral evil thus constitutes a genuine theological problem for those who confess faith a God who creates from nothing. Such evil has no necessity, no rationale whatsoever: it is a problem that is theologically insoluble, since any possible resolution (that is, any explanation of *why* God should permit evil) would effectively undermine its status *as* evil by showing how it was somehow in conformity with the divine will (and thus *per definitionem* not truly “evil” at all). Further, while moral evil is certainly against God’s will, it does not seem best characterized as a privation of the good, for even the sinful creature is still fully good and, indeed, exercising the freedom that is constitutive of its peculiar goodness. The horror of sin is therefore better described as the contradiction of the good rather than its privation.¹⁸

The Status of “Natural” Evil

But moral fault is not the only possible source of physical evil. There are a variety of other ways in which the dog’s leg might come to be broken apart from the malice of its master. The animal might tumble into a hole, be struck by a falling tree limb, attacked by a bear, or injured in any one of another seemingly arbitrary ways. These sorts of causes of “physical” evil – events like predation, disease, natural disasters, and the like – are traditionally designated by the phrase “natural evil”. And it is here that the application of the language of “evil” seems problematic. The difficulty is that while

tendency (as, e.g., a ball has a tendency to roll down an incline unless held back) presupposes that they have some reality independent of God – and that presupposition is inconsistent with creation from nothing. To draw an analogy, my ideas exist as *my* ideas only so long as I have them. The moment I cease to have them, they cease to exist; without my thinking them, they become nothing. But it makes no sense, as far as I can see, to say that they have a *tendency* to become nothing. They have no “tendency” at all: they are if I have them, and they are not if I don’t, and that’s all there is to it – and so, too, with creatures before God.

¹⁸ Thomas sees sin as an example of privation in that it can only be explained as some lack of order in the will of the sinning creature (*ST* 1.49.1.3), but since he specifically adds that the lack itself is not the fault “but rather that the will acts from this defect”, the cause of sin evidently originates with the creature’s own impulse. Cf. his *On Evil*, 3.1.8: “Therefore, God does not cause grace not to be supplied to someone; rather, those not supplied with grace offer an obstacle to grace insofar as they turn themselves away from the light that does not turn itself away”.

such events are certainly capable of analysis in terms of creaturely causes (e.g., a cheetah killing a gazelle, the shifting of tectonic plates producing a volcanic eruption, the mutation of a virus leading to a new disease), these causes are not rooted in the willing of created agents, making it hard to see how they can be described as violations of the divine will in the way moral evil can.¹⁹ In other words, if 1) evil is defined as that which is against God's will, and 2) it is impossible to assign responsibility for "natural evils" events like predation, disease, disaster, and so forth to a *created* will, such that 3) the only identifiable will behind such events is God's (indeed, that is what it means to define them as "natural" rather than "moral" evil), then it seems problematic to characterise the such realities as evil in the first place.²⁰

In order to appreciate the point I am trying to make here, consider the phenomenon of death, which would seem to be catastrophic form of physical evil, since it does not merely threaten or inhibit the creature's existence, but actually brings it to an end. The Old Testament writers certainly regarded death in just such radically negative terms, as reflected in their conviction that the one who goes to Sheol, the shadowy underworld to which all human souls are consigned after death, falls out of communion not only with other people, but even with God (Ps. 6:5; Eccl. 9:10; Isa. 38:18; but cf. Ps.139:8). Following and even accentuating this line of thought, during most of the church's history Christians have viewed death as a punishment for sin rather than part of

¹⁹ Of course, in the Book of Job Satan is responsible for the calamities that befall the protagonist; and elsewhere in Scripture angels are ascribed agency in, e.g., sending pestilence among the Israelites; but I am inclined to interpret such passages as serving to affirm God's ultimate sovereignty over such events rather than to provide a literal account of their efficient causes. Paul speaks of the creation being "subjected to futility" and "in bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:19, 21), and these are seemingly viewed by him as wrapped up with the effects of human sin – but he also seeming ascribes both directly to God, who through the processes of futility and decay is working out creation's redemption.

²⁰ While I recognise that the distinction between "moral" and "natural" is often anything but clear-cut in particular cases, it nevertheless does illuminate the conceptual difficulties in deploying the word "evil" where opposition to God is not in play.

God's intention for creation (Rom. 5:12; 6:23; cf. Gen. 3:3); as such, it is an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). More recently, however, theologians following other scriptural threads have proposed instead that death, defined simply as the end of a creature's life, not be considered evil in itself, but simply as a mark of creaturely finitude (Gen. 6:3). Here it is sin that renders death a punishment (Gen. 2:17; cf. Matt. 10:28; Rev. 20:14, 21:8) and an enemy, so that it is not finitude as such, but finitude marred by sin (viz., the rejection of the divine grace that is the condition of creatures' finite existence) that is destructive of one's relationship with God and other people. Such a picture certainly seems to cohere better with modern scientific accounts of natural history, since the fact of death long precedes the appearance of human beings (and thus of human sin), as well as being a necessary condition for the evolution of new species. It also has a definite theological appeal, since it reinterprets death as a manifestation of creatures' temporal finitude, in line with Ecclesiastes' claim that for "everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," including "a time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccl. 3:1-2; cf. Acts 17:26).²¹ If God has indeed made "everything beautiful in its time" (Eccl. 3:11, RSV), then death is arguably just part of what it means to be a (material) creature and thus should not be regarded as evil in itself.²²

²¹ Lin Tonstad writes that apart from sin "death appears not as threat (of non-being) but as the completion of what each particular [creature's] 'thisness' is". Lin Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 241.

²² Again, this does not mean that our current experience of death as fallen creatures corresponds to God's original intent, or that death is an ontologically necessary feature of creaturely finitude. After all, it is a well-established feature of Christian belief that some creatures – angels – do not die. Their immortality can be viewed as a function of their immaterial nature (at least if one adopts the angelology of Thomas Aquinas): as pure spirit, neither their coming to be nor their ongoing existence is dependent on relationships with other creatures (viz., they are not born, they do not metabolise materials from their environment); nor, by the same token, is their being vulnerable to decay or degradation by virtue of such relations.

So far, so good. But to stop here is to ignore the problem of the radically different ways in which creatures encounter death. There may not seem anything objectionable in the idea of a creature's existence being limited to a particular, finite time, but that doesn't address the contrast between the adult who dies "old and full of years" and the child who perishes after a short and painful existence. Considered in terms of that sort of contrast, the experience of death offers a particularly striking example of an obvious problem with the idea that mortality – or any other form of "natural evil" – is simply a part of the inherent limitation of created nature, for the simple reason that in innumerable instances these limits seem in a profound sense *unnatural*, because they impede the creature's capacity to experience the full goodness of their nature. And, here, too, there seems solid biblical ground for such judgment. After all, when Isaiah says that in the kingdom of God the person who dies at less than 100 shall be considered accursed (Isa. 65:20), the implication seems clear that it is not God's will for people die young. And yet because this passage refers to what *will* be in glory rather than to the present day, it does not follow that anyone who fails to reach the century mark in the here and now is to be accounted as accursed. After all, on what basis do we know what counts as the proper length of existence is for any creature in the present? If it is indeed true that God "has made everything beautiful in its time," who are we to judge what that "time" is in any particular case? Is it any more reasonable to say that a human being should be expected to live to a certain minimum age than that she should grow to a certain minimum height?

One obvious rejoinder to these questions is that we actually do have a basis on which to specify the "proper" length of a human life. It is of the nature of an infant to become a child, and of a child to mature into an adult. Aside from the intrusion of death

into this sequence, that is the natural form of human existence in time. Moreover, we have experience of the richness of a ripe old age: the joy of seeing one's children, and one's children's children mature in their turn. In this same vein, the Bible itself, even when adopting an otherwise rather jaundiced view of the human condition, suggests that it is normal for people to live seventy years or more (Ps. 90:10). In this way, we have a vision of what it means to be a human being (or a dandelion or a cuttlefish or a dog) based on our knowledge of the natural life-cycle of the species, and to the extent that an individual creature fails to live out the common features of that type, we therefore seem to have a solid basis for identifying a privation of good that, as such, constitutes genuine evil, because it is against God's will for a particular type of creature.

The problem with this line of reasoning, however, is just that it depends on the idea of a *type* and thus fails to attend precisely to the concrete particularity of each individual creature, which, as a distinct object of God's creative work, cannot rightly be considered only as an instance of a broader type. From this perspective, the category of "physical" evil turns out to have much the same problem as that of metaphysical evil: in both cases a particular vision of the good is set up as a standard to which a creature needs to conform, and any point where the entity in question fails to measure up is called evil. But if it is the case that a creature should not be viewed as deficient for failing to exhibit the inexhaustible goodness of God, why should it be viewed as suffering a privation for failing to correspond to some putative standard of normalcy for its type? To restrict ourselves to the case of human beings, we are conscious of an enormous diversity of callings, such that what is good for one person (being married, having children, studying physics) is not for another. All have their several callings, such that the demand that each

conform to a single, uniform type or measure of “the human” fails to reckon with the biblical insistence that each member has its own place in the body; “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Cor. 12:17). In short, we do wrong when we suppose that all creatures are meant to conform to a model that we may develop of a given type, because in every case the privation of some particular goods is ingredient to the realizing of others.²³

Thus, although the idea that all creatures should live to the full age attainable by their species has a certain appeal, it arguably buys into a rather prejudicial teleology, according to which a life needs to attain some pre-determined end in order to qualify as fully good. Over against such a position, the Scottish theologian Ruth Page’s dictum, “Teleology now!”, serves as a corrective to the urge to equate creaturely flourishing with a given creature’s achievement of any future *telos* or outcome (e.g., a ripe old age). The point of the phrase, “Teleology now!”, is to insist that a creature’s existence as lived in the present is always already fully good in itself. To maintain otherwise is to subvert a fundamental principle of a properly Christian theology of creation, namely, God’s joy in the sheer existence of creatures at every point of their existence, such that every moment of a creature’s existence may rightly be considered “an end in itself.”²⁴ For if an entirely good (or omnibenevolent) God is the sole antecedent condition of any creature’s existence, and thus of the particular form that existence takes, then it seems logically

²³ Importantly, my line of reasoning here is not intended as an argument for a radical nominalism or constructivism, as though the very idea of creaturely types or species were illegitimate. The point is not to gainsay that human beings are different from elephants and oak trees and, as such, have their own characteristic ways of being that are recognizably different from what would be typical of a paramecium or a whale; but only to note that such characteristics are best understood as a framework for developing a varied range of distinctly human goods rather than as a template to which all members of the type must conform.

²⁴ Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 63.

problematic to view any such particular form of that existence as evil. To do so would be to presume that we, as finite human beings, know what the good of an individual creature is or, more comprehensively, what it means to speak of a particular creature as “good” in the first place.

But here, too, counter-arguments are evidently near to hand. After all, when we see a person at risk of dying (drowning in the middle of a lake, say, or being crushed in the ruins of a building toppled by an earthquake), we feel obliged – and for good biblical reasons! – to do what we can to prevent his death. And the fact that such a course of action occurs to us indicates that we cannot simply reduce all teleology to the present tense.²⁵ We can and must insist that an infant is fully and entirely good in its infancy (“Teleology now!”), but that does not prevent us recognising that an infant is destined to mature, and that we have a responsibility to nurture it toward the anticipated future end of adulthood. Creatures exist in time, and if every moment has value in itself, nevertheless the idea of creaturely flourishing cannot escape some reference to a temporally extended, natural teleology that justifies the claim that an acorn flourishes in becoming an oak, a colt in becoming a stallion, and so forth.²⁶ Nevertheless, a distinction may be drawn between how I am called to respond to a particular creature’s situation under a specific set of circumstance and the judgment that the circumstance in question are evil. After all, it is certainly not self-evident that the faithful Christian response to every given instance of creaturely suffering – spiders catching flies or wolves killing caribou, for example – is

²⁵ Katherine Sonderegger presses the point that finitude cannot be regarded as simply neutral, noting that “ignorance... should be distinguished from finite knowledge, though it is no easy matter to say how such a distinction should be made.” “Finitude and Death”, in the *T & T Clark Companion to Sin*, ed. Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 393.

²⁶ See especially the discussion in Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 35.

always to try to prevent it. Again, if the Bible foresees a time when “the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isa 11:7; 65:25), in the present time God seemingly approves a state of affairs in which the young lion hunts its prey (Job 38:39; Ps 104:21; Isa 31:4; Amos 3:4). The fact that God promises a time when certain extant forms of intra-creaturely relations will come to an end, that does not make them evil now; after all, the Bible also foresees a time when human marriage and procreation shall be no more (Matt. 22:30).²⁷

Within the human sphere particularly compelling arguments along these lines come from the field of disability studies, beginning with noting the prejudicial nature of the very category of “disability” itself.²⁸ Against the perspective that sees disability as an evil comes the objection that “*disability is a meaningful and formative aspect of who a person is*”.²⁹ Advocates of Deaf culture, for example, have long criticized the assumption that lack of hearing is rightly viewed as an evil – a “problem” that needs to be fixed – and the same sorts of questions can and have been raised with respect to other forms of both physical and mental disability. The point of such claims is not to promote indifference to people’s physical circumstances, but rather to note that a faithful response to the disabled will be the product of engagement with them rather than *a priori* judgments about what it means for them to flourish as human beings. Where one

²⁷ Another category that modern Christian thinkers from Reinhold Niebuhr to Paul Tillich to Edward Farley have invoked to account for this contrast between the eschatological ideal and historical experience is “the tragic.” Insofar as [this term is deployed](#) to take seriously the pain of circumstances without rushing to an axiological evaluation of good and evil, the impulse behind such classification is to be commended. But insofar as it still seems to hold that what is ought not to be, it is not clear to me that it has really avoided the problem.

²⁸ “To expose and label a body as disabled is always already to determine to correct the deviance, to assume as natural the transformative transcendence thereof...through cure or cosmesis...and keeping deviance at bay and under control via strategies of confinement or containment.” Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 60.

²⁹ John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 9. This same point is arguably reflected in traditional Christian iconography, in which the martyrs are portrayed with their injuries, in line with the biblical teaching that the risen Jesus continues to bear his wounds (John 20:27).

person's agency is directed toward the diminishment of another's, then it is appropriate to speak of evil – the moral evil of human sin – but, as the disabled have pointed out, this can occur as easily by misplaced efforts to heal (i.e., to bring someone into conformity with a particular type) as by deliberate intent to harm.³⁰ For this reason, where there are simply different instantiations or enactments of human existence (e.g., without hearing, in a wheelchair, with Down's syndrome), such judgments are probably better kept at bay. In cases of injury or illness that bring loss of function, there is every reason to suppose that the proper response is one of attempted amelioration of the afflicted person's capacities, but such efforts are better conceived in the context of mutual discernment, aimed at fulfilling all the participants' callings to live out the lives they have been given, than as battling evil.³¹

Crucially, this is not to affirm that any instance of human (or other) suffering not caused by sin is “really” good in God's (or anyone else's) sight; that would be to indulge in just the sort of theodical project that I want to reject. But given that the contrary position, that all such suffering is inherently evil and thus to be eliminated, has led to social policies like forced sterilisation and euthanasia, it is far from clear that the converse is any more desirable. I would suggest rather that the temptation to adopt the stance of an observer who knows good and evil and to label suffering as either one or the other should be resisted. Suffering is better viewed, I would argue, as an occasion for

³⁰ As Betcher puts it, in such cases “humanitarian concerns misfire[] into eradicating alterity”. *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 57.

³¹ For this reason I am not persuaded by the definition of evil initially proposed by David Ray Griffin and recently taken up by Thomas Oord, according to which evil is that which “all things considered makes the world worse than it might have been” (Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 65). Such a definition presupposes, again, our ability to identify what is good for a particular creature and, indeed, for the world as a whole, not to mention that we can confidently suppose ourselves to have considered “all things.” “All things considered” is it better for a foetus with Down's syndrome to be aborted, as Richard Dawkins has suggested?

engagement and discernment, not least because suffering stands at the heart of even the most productive and fulfilling of human relationships. In other words, because suffering is evidently ingredient in the very process of living out relationships with other creatures – human and non-human – it is properly seen as giving an occasion for the mutual discernment of what it means to be human in relationship with others.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Language of Good and Evil

So what is the place of the language of good and evil in Christian discourse? Let's take each term separately. The burden of the foregoing argument is that the use of the term "evil" should be limited: it should not be deployed to describe states of affairs, but only to characterise those actions of human being (as well as any other personal agents there may be) judged to be counter to God's will. In short, the language of evil is properly used to name sin, and thus as a means of characterizing (and thereby seeking to change) behavior. By contrast, its deployment to characterize situations or states of affairs that are not readily ascribed to moral agents is more hazardous, not because such situations may not require a response as urgent, serious, and deliberate as any instance of sin, but because in such cases what we perceive can be characterized only as a lack of good rather than its denial, and the fact that all creaturely goodness is characterized by diverse forms of lack makes judgments of the particular form a creature's life should take problematic. One's response to a given situation, however, compelling and urgent it may be, is therefore best conceived in terms of discernment of the good that we are called to realize in a given situation rather than battling evil.

What about our use of the term good? At one level, its proper use parallels that of evil, to identify particular sorts of actions, namely, those that are to be imitated, praised,

or encouraged as according with God's will. But beyond this, the term should also be used, consciously, unequivocally, and following Genesis 1 to affirm that all creatures are good. This is not to say that all creatures are good *for us* as human beings (for evidently not all creatures are), but it does mean that each creature has value to God, and thus none can be viewed as purely instrumental to our or any other creature's well-being. And this creates a puzzle, for though we can and must as Christians affirm that each individual creature is good, we can claim no clear prior understanding of *how* it is good – what its place is in the divine economy. Indeed, we have enormous difficulty in figuring that out for ourselves: determining our individual vocations – the precise form of our goodness as God intended it for each of us – is a long, difficult, and ongoing process that requires us to exercise our most profound abilities of discernment while drawing liberally on the counsel of others. How much more difficult, then, to presume to know the good of other people, let alone other creatures whose nature is profoundly different from our own?

And this is why “good,” though rightly applied to creatures as such and certain of their free actions, is no more appropriately used to describe states of affairs considered apart from moral agency than evil is. Crucially, then, the refusal to label states of affairs evil does not entail, as though by a sort of semantic or logical reflex, the conclusion that they must therefore be judged good. Indeed the very fact one might be tempted to draw such a conclusion shows the degree to which an ontological dualism, in which we feel compelled to label things as good or evil, is deeply rooted in us. But notwithstanding the Bible's unambiguous assertion that everything God has made is good, Pope's judgment that “whatever is, is right,”³² is excluded precisely by virtue of the fact that this goodness

³² More fully: “All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;/All chance, direction, which thou canst not see/All discord, harmony not understood,/All partial evil, universal good:/And, spite of pride, in erring reason's

is a work in process, and one that is not realised independently of our actions – which may be either good or evil. Again, an infant is good in its infancy, but that judgment is not the end of the matter but its beginning, for it forces on us the question of *how* that goodness is to be honored in the flux of time. What does it mean, concretely, to respect a particular infant’s goodness in light of her or his specific characteristics and circumstances? And here, “whatever is, is right,” is of no help, because it ignores the fact that what is, is passing, and that what will be – the “is” of the future – is not yet and will ineluctably be shaped by our actions now. As Herman Melville once put it, “the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete,”³³ and that means (among other things) God’s will for particular creatures is bound up with our interactions with them. It is my contention that such response is not enhanced by labelling matters good or evil, as such labelling tends to short-circuit the process of discernment in which humans seek to further God’s good will for creatures in any given situation by attending as much as possible to the perspectives of all those concerned.³⁴

In one respect the upshot of my argument is fairly straightforward: that evil is not properly defined as a privation of good. It is not properly defined in this way because all creaturely existence is characterised by such privations, both “metaphysically” (since creatures by definition lack the full perfection of God) and “physically” (since each individual creature is distinct from all others). In other words, the particular good that you, me, and every other creature exhibits, is constituted by a lack of a countless number

spite, One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.” Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle 1, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44899>; accessed on 19 November 2016.

³³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1943 [1851]), 43.

³⁴ Note that this perspective is quite different from pedagogical interpretations of suffering of the sort proposed by John Hick, since it does not presume to provide an explanation for why God permits suffering to occur (again, it is not a theodicy) and certainly does not presume to claim that suffering has any inherent meaning or purpose.

of possible goods – far more *possible* goods, in fact, than the *actual* goods that we possess. But that does not make the creature’s life any less a good; it is merely to note that created good is always and inherently characterised by privation, but that it is a defining feature of creation is that the creature defined by these many privations, whatever limited goods it possesses, is truly good in itself.

And yet if my proposed rejection of one classic definition of evil seems fairly academic, it carries with it a potentially much more serious set of implications, for if evil is not rightly defined as a privation of the good, then it is not proper to call anything evil on the grounds that it exhibits a privation of some good. To revert again to the example of disability, to be without a limb cannot simply be described as an evil (as though the person were as such deficient and in need of restitution). Again, it does not follow that such privation is to be described as good, either (though the disabled person certainly is to be so described). The point is rather that neither label is appropriate, and, and that the temptation to apply them signals a re-emergence of the primordial sin: the desire to “know good and evil,” that is, to presume to have God’s perspective on what ought to be. How one deals with an incidence of injury, disease, or any other such event – whether one’s own or that of a neighbour – is a matter of discernment that stands at the absolute center of the human project; but it is not, it seems to me, aided by the imposition of evaluative categories on the state itself. If someone has cancer, say, the task is to work with that person to discern her vocation, her calling, her place in the body of Christ, and thus the particular good of her life as one that includes cancer, rather than presuming to know the content of that good in advance. My own supposition is that in the case of a person suffering from cancer treatment aimed at a cure will be among the outcomes of

that discernment process. My only point is that it needs to be an outcome and not something presupposed in advance.

Now at this point someone might argue that I have not grasped the full weight of privations to which human beings are “naturally” vulnerable. Deafness, amputation, Down’s syndrome are one sort of thing, it may be objected, but Tay-Sachs disease, lissencephaly, clinical depression, and the like are another, the seriousness of which defies the sort of restraint in the use of the term “evil” that I am advocating. Against such an objection, I can, in the first, instance, only repeat the point that my plea for reticence pertains to the use of “good” as much as “evil,” so that refusing to label such conditions evil does not entail the claim that they are good. Second, I would note that if we no longer reflexively view lack of sight or hearing or bipedal mobility as evil, such was not always the case, and that the gains resulting from our changed perceptions have not been a diminishment of concern for persons in such circumstances, but rather increased commitment to their flourishing precisely through a process of discernment to be carried out, to whatever extent possible, *with* them rather than *for* them.

It is vital to acknowledge that in such cases the work of discernment may well be both painful and difficult. Moreover, since it is bound up with the refusal to label any given state of affairs as evil *or* good, it in no way precludes people turning to God in supplication, lament, or even accusation and protest as they confront concrete instances of human disability, injury, disease, and the like. Again, my point is emphatically not that people should refrain from resisting or seeking to change states of affairs ascribed to natural causes – the process of discernment may well entail just the opposite – but only to argue that this process is not necessarily enhanced, and may be harmed, by deploying the

language of good and evil.³⁵ For the “solution” to “the problem with evil” is not any calculus that allows one to perceive the good of creation (or our small part of it) in abstraction from particular cases, but precisely to engage with the world as it is in order to honour the goodness of what is. For while every person is good in herself at every point of her existence, it is not possible in the same way to say that any particular situation in which the person finds herself is good, though we certainly may in the best cases trust that will prove to be part of her goodness and at the worst is not irreconcilable with it.³⁶

Let me close with a final thought. The fourteenth-century anchorite, Julian of Norwich, wrote, “alle is good but syn, and nought is yvell but synne”.³⁷ I have sought to defend the second half of this statement, on the grounds that viewing anything other than sin – that is, creatures’ contradiction of God’s will – as evil leads us to categorize as evil that which falls short of our visions of perfection and thus to fail to see – and, worse, to seek to eliminate – the genuine goods that surround us and have the potential to enrich our lives and the lives of others. And yet if I am with Julian in agreeing that “nought is yvell but synne”, I am not willing to affirm that “alle is good but syn”, at least if that “alle” includes particular states of affairs – most especially those that include creatures’ suffering. For the heart of “the problem with evil” is a too eager desire to classify things

³⁵ For a moving account of the pain as well as the joy of the process in one context, see theologian Frances Young’s memoir, *Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

³⁶ As disabled theologian Sharon Betcher puts it, “For disabled persons, physiological disablement is not existentially a suffering: It is what is, the condition and possibility of our livingness, even our liveliness.” Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 62.

³⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ed. Denise N. Baker (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 55. For the connection between sin and that which is against God’s will, see 23: “For our good Lorde endlessly having regard to his awne worshyppe and to the profyghte of all them that shal be savyd, with might and right he withstondyth the reprovyd, *the which of malyce and of shrewdness besye them to contrary and do against Goddes wyl*” (emphasais added).

as good or evil in the first place. As Julian herself was very much aware, the world is a place of great misery and suffering, much – if not most – of which cannot be attributed to sin. Julian thought that she had been granted a glimpse of how in God’s eyes all is good, and, indeed, how it will be that in glory we, too, will see that it is all good.³⁸ And yet however crucial such conviction may be to the Christian hope, I think it is necessary to draw a distinction (as Julian does in other parts of her work) between the claim that all *will be* good and the affirmation that all is good *now*.³⁹ To avoid any naïve (or, for that matter, insidious and self-interested) baptizing of the status quo, it is vital to insist once again that the refusal to call present states of affairs – including creaturely suffering – evil is not to imply that it is good. To do otherwise is to presume far more insight into God’s will for the world than is granted to us here and now.

For it is surely a conviction of Christians that all that God makes is very good, but it is no less a Christian conviction that creation has not yet reached its end. Because “the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete,” we can claim no advance knowledge of what the good of creation will finally look like. What we can do is to work to discern it, in the confidence that we have been called to share in its making, and that when in the fullness of time it does appear, we, too, will look out on everything that God has made and affirm that it is “very good.”⁴⁰

³⁸ “And then shalle none of us be steryd [steered] to say in ony thing, “Lorde, yf it had been thus, it had ben wele.” But we shalle alle sey with one voice, “Lorde, blessyd mott [may] thou be, for it is this, it is wele. And now we see verily that alle thing is done as it was [before] thyn ordynance or ony thing was made.”” *Showings*, 124.

³⁹ Most famously, Julian hears Jesus himself use the future tense in this regard: “*alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thyng shalle be wele*”. *Showings*, 39.

⁴⁰ An earlier version of this article was presented as part of the McDonald Lecture Series at St. Mellitus College, London, in November, 2016.