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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

*Please join us for our discussion on Evil! (or anything else for that matter).
We will meet in Gamble 213 on Wednesday, October 19th at 5:00 pm.*

Evil! "Thy Fearful Symmetry"

By Arthur Tanny

Philosophers, prophets and priests have spent millennia illuminating and clarifying "the Good." One of the chief architects of "the Good" is the granddaddy of philosophy, Plato. For Plato, The standard definition of "The Good" is the eternal, unchanging, beautiful Truth. The real universe is essentially good. The universe we initially think we are born into is the not good, or the illusionary, variable, chaotic untruth. But if the universe has always been good, how did the not-good, a.k.a. evil, arise? I am positively sure that Plato would never allow evil to sing in the chorus of his Forms. Like the tyrant from Plato's *Republic*, the masters of evil would probably never be in full control. They would be slaves to their own desires of power and fearful that the illusion would be unraveled. I don't fault Plato for my

befuddlement because at first glance there really is little to gain from knowing evil. However, this knowledge doesn't dispel the notion or even the intuition of a purely malevolent force that seems to pervade our existence.

Evil is something that persistently enters the picture whenever we talk about "the Good" because every idea generates its opposite. As Newton says, "every action has an equal and opposite reaction." Evil generates a fear in the human spirit and that fear has lived along side the culture of good for eons through myths and superstition. Religion often uses it as an obstacle to the ultimate good. We can reason away all these fears, but if you are like me, there is always a part of you that would rather not tempt Satan. Evil is purely psychological. By no means, do I mean to say that evil is a figment of our imagination, au contraire; it is just as real as "the Good."

Common day mode will tell us that there is a self and

then there is an "other-than-self" consisting of independent objects. To this day, I have never heard anyone proclaim that they are evil. The relationship between the self and evil seems to be one where evil is always outside of the self. But how can evil exist independent of me? I am the one forcing its existence. I am freely choosing against it. I say to myself, "self, you are not evil. Those things outside of me, they are evil." Evil exists out of that act of separation and that act of interpretation. Freud theorized about a mechanism of the conscious mind that displaces fears and desires onto other things. Along the same lines, I would suggest that the attempt to separate evil from the self is the activity of displacing our desires and fears onto other things and this displacement is the method of repressing things that we would rather forget.

I think Plato is right in the sense that we naturally want to believe the universe is

good but we realize that objects outside of the self aren't free not to be what they are. They are good. A working record is always a good working record and a broken record is always a good broken record. The self is free to be what it wants. The idea that we could possibly be "not good" haunts us. The very notion that the self could commit mass atrocities, thrive off of hatred and injustice equally bothers us. The simple everyday answer to this predicament would be to separate myself from this possibility and blame it on my "other-than-self." In other words, I can try to ignore that evil is generated by me and within me.

Everyone is familiar with the three monkeys: "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." At this point we realize that evil is impossible to ignore. I advocate the opposite. Evil must be recognized and must be realized as the manifestation of our freedom. The sinner is no better than the saint, and the saint is no better than the sinner; each has the potential to construct a new moral code and live by it. Both the sinner and saint have the potential to transcend the simple black and white construction of good and evil. William Blake, the famous English Romantic poet, was bothered by how the

benevolent God could create the deadly and fearful *Tyger*. Blake poetically writes, "Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright / In the forest of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" The question of how God could be both such a benevolent force, but also something capable of creating such a "fearful symmetry" leaves us fearful of not only the evil but the good as well. The better point, in my opinion, is that the notions of good and evil may be far more complex than we give them credit for and this complexity may be a hint of something we are missing. But the one thing that we can be sure of is we are free to abide, transgress or transcend these terms. We may not have the ability to change the way things are but we certainly have the ability to change the way things will be.



If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Chris Dunn or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either of us (it doesn't have to be good, however it does have to be thoughtful).

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