

COSMIC DISORDER: THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

By Richard Kirby
Part 3 of 6

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 9TH DECEMBER, 2007

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Theory: Evil is a direct negation of being and goodness, and not just a defection from being and a privation of goodness.

Purpose: Evil must be considered a cosmic-disordering force. It would have no force if it had no power, and this power is the power to negate goodness and being. If evil's being is anti-being, then its power is a kind of antipower which actually robs contingent being of its own proper power, the power that comes from God.

Part 2

5. EVIL AND DAS NICHTIGE

The question remains, in the theological definition of cosmic disorder or evil, as to its nature, scope and limits, so far as these may be known. These are best discussed, since Torrance writes in effect as a Barthian or post-Barthian,¹ under the heading of the Das Nichtige theory. Torrance refers respectfully to the Das Nichtige theory in a note, in which he simply refers the readers of DCO² to the relevant pages of the Church Dogmatics on 'God and nothingness'.³

5.1 The nature of the existence of evil

The question of the Christian boundaries of ontology arises once again when the nature of the "being" or "non-being" of evil is discussed in the context of the Das Nichtige theory.

¹ Note 50, ch. 4. That is, Torrance is in the Barthian "tradition", but with his own views, emphases and concerns overlaid upon a basically Barthian foundation.

² The key to these abbreviations can be found [here](#).

³ i.e. to Barth's CD Vol. III. 3, "The Doctrine of Creation", pp. 288-378.

A part of the discussion of the boundaries of being must be to inquire into the limits of evil. In one respect, evil has no limits. Evil is abysmal, that is, literally without bottom or (lower) limit, Torrance declares.⁴ Evil is radical.

5.2 Das Nichtige

In the tradition of the Das Nichtige theory, Torrance asserts that evil is linked to the forces of darkness upon which God has, as it were, turned his back. This is not the darkness that results from an infinite excess of divine light over creaturely light, but the darkness of a malevolent falsehood and irrationality. Evil remains an utterly inexplicable mystery but a fearful actuality. In like manner, Karl Barth spoke of Das Nichtige as an entire sinister system of elements – not comprehended by God’s providence – in opposition and resistance to God’s world-dominion. It is alien factor. It threatens and actually corrupts world-occurrence.⁵

5.3 Evil and the *privatio boni* theory

Evil is therefore a direct negation of being and goodness, and not just a “defection from being and a privation of goodness”.⁶ The half-truth of the Augustinian-Thomist doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* is too weak to explain the fearful, malevolent actuality of evil, Torrance believes. The *privatio boni* theory must therefore be regarded as a false explanation of cosmic disorder. It must be superseded by some kind of concept of disorder as evil’s rupturing of being, so that (contingent) being lurches away from the creator towards the non-being which is a correlative quality of attribute of anti-being. Non-being and nothingness, rather than the absence of good, are the key notions in the definition of cosmic disorder from the foundational concept of evil.

5.4 Anti-being

The actual passages of Torrance’s text where he specifically refers to anti-being are helpful in comprehending his ‘metaphysics of paradox’ and his exposition of the problem of evil. Thus, he states that “‘Anti-being’ (Torrance’s speech mark) ...can have no independent existence over against God who is the sole source of being.” [Moreover], God rejects evil with his Godness, for by being God he excludes all that is anti-God.⁷

⁴ DCO, p. 115.

⁵ Barth, CD Vol. III. 3, p. 289.

⁶ DCO, p. 119.

⁷ Ibid.

Torrance inquires into the question of the relation of evil, as anti-being, to being in the wider sense: “What kind of existence does evil or this anti-being have?” “It ‘is’ what God negates – an ‘improper existence’, which Karl Barth has called an ‘impossible possibility’”.

Thus, evil has “some sort of actuality” – “it is certainly very actual” – but its existence is not of the same type as other being. It does not “originate from creaturely being as such”.⁸ It can have only a “desperate quasi-existence”. It is real, in a sense, but should be regarded as having a “perverse reality” under the ban of the divine rejection [for evil has] “no substance or perpetuity of its own”.⁹ The “realm”, to speak metaphorically, of anti-being, is non-being; at least, it is to non-being that evil lures the creature.

5.5 The power of evil

Evil must be considered a cosmic-disordering force. It would have no force if it had no power, and this power is the power to negate goodness and being. If evil’s being is anti-being, then its power is a kind of antipower which actually robs contingent being of its own proper power, the power that comes from God. The power of evil is the theological anti-type to the divine power of grace. The power of evil is to be the enemy of goodness. Evil, whatever its “unexplainable” irruption into created existence,¹⁰ has the power to introduce disorder, to bring about ontological collapse”, and to infect creaturely being in such a way that the creature “willingly revolts from the Creator in a suicidal movement and lurches towards non-being”.¹¹ The power of evil is to lodge in the created being, so that “the creature becomes evil and does evil of itself”.¹² The force of evil can make of the creature a sinner.

6. EVIL AND THE THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE OF MAN (THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY)

6.1 The Fall

Torrance’s account of cosmic disorder centres upon his theorizing about evil as anti-being. His account is essentially concerned with the presentation of a reasoned, thorough and self-consistent exposition of the contribution of the concept of radical contingency to the Christian doctrine of creation.

⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 118.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Accordingly, his concerns are primarily with the questions of order and ontology in creation as a whole, and only secondarily with theological anthropology. His account, for example, of “what theologians term ‘the Fall’”,¹³ as he puts it, is marginal compared with his concern to define the problem of disorder/evil in such a way as to protect the cogency of the doctrine of contingent order. Thus, his remarks about “the Fall” are subordinated to his statement of a direct and ongoing link between “Evil” and creaturely being, including, or comprising, Man. Torrance’s remarks about the Fall are just that – hardly longer than aphoristic statements. Thus, he states that Decay, decomposition and death have been affected by “The Fall”.¹⁴ A part of this is that Evil has “engulfed mankind” and deceived mankind. “The Fall” (as it relates to man; we have seen that Torrance considers the whole creation to be fallen) is defined here as [“i.e.”]: “Man’s estrangement from God resulting from his sin in seeking to make himself independent of him.”¹⁵

It is not stated by Torrance whether this is intended to be correlated with a particular concept of history, such as the Sin of Adam at a particular moment of time in the Garden of Eden. Torrance does not discuss “Adam” with respect to the fall of man, nor “Satan” with respect to the fall of the creation, nor does his brief account of the Fall lend itself to any particular historical interpretation. It is probably fair to assume, in the light of Torrance’s wider theology, that he would declare as inadmissible to “theologic” any bifurcation between historical time and the time of salvation. His concept of “Adam” would be deuter-Barthian. Without extrapolating too far from the *textus receptus* of Torrance’s thought, it would perhaps be fair to say that “the Fall” is trans-historical: it must be assumed to be continually intersecting the life of creaturely being in time as well as space, and the life of created being in relation to the (possibly continuously created) cosmos. This is how the doctrine of Original Sin could be interpreted in a deuter-Barthian way. It would explain how a new-born babe requires redemption and reclamation while being in some sense a new creation – or at least a pro-creation. It would explain why those parts of the cosmos/creation, if any, which are in some sense coming into (created) being are also coming into fallen being, or perverted being.

Secondly, Torrance defines the Fall of man by its effects. “Here”, [i.e. in The Fall], he writes, “there has opened up in man’s existence a gulf of corruption and perdition which threatens to swallow him up”.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The proper theological definition of the Fall and its effects also requires a delimitation of its consequences. The Fall, from the human point of view at least, is not to be understood as total. Nor is it irremediable. For “God refuses to be estranged from man or to forego his claim over him.” God will not allow man to “fall completely away from him”. God continues to sustain man in being even in this fallen condition. For man is the creature which God had made to be ‘good’.¹⁷

Here we see an important part of the specifically theological (and especially the theistic) definition of the context, if not the fact, of cosmic disorder. Cosmic disorder, theologically conceived, has to do with a disorder in the relationship between the creature and the Creator, the holy and the unholy. The disorder of the cosmos is the disorder of the creation, including the human creation. It is a form of disorder which, in theology, is to be construed only in terms of a disruption of the good order which should prevail in the contingently ordered cosmos. Cosmic disorder, to the theologian, therefore cannot be understood in terms of the life or nature or *modus operandi* of the cosmos/creation *in se*. Torrance points out again and again in DCO that the disorder of the cosmos is to be understood as a disorder in its contingency. This disorder cannot be understood except by reference to the extra-cosmic context, the divine ground and the divine order, of the cosmos/creation.

What is interesting about Torrance’s account, however, is the concepts which he chooses in order to explain how contingent order can become disordered. Earlier in this chapter we cited Professor Colin Gunton’s definitions, or implied definitions, of cosmic disorder, noting the importance of the concept of sin. This could be regarded as a benchmark against which to compare Torrance’s definition or implied definition. Torrance, however, speaks comparatively little of sin, and speaks primarily of evil. Evil, a semi-transcendent force or power, is the anterior cause of sin. Man sins because he is lured into it by that force, entity or antientity denominated by Torrance as evil.

However, the human part of cosmic disorder has emphatic limits set to it by the Creator: “By continuing to love man and by insisting on reclaiming him, God opposes man’s self-will and self-isolation, rejects the evil that has overtaken him and negates the corruption lodged in his existence, which has the effect of bringing the divine judgment to bear upon man not only in his inward being but wherever the rupture in his relations with God is actualized in his physical existence – in decay, decomposition and death.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 123-24.

The foregoing passage represents an important part of the theistic “boundary,” context or horizon of the problem of cosmic disorder: it makes God the Saviour/Redeemer the entity in Whom not only (existentially speaking) hope resides, but also the One Whose Being and Whose power sets a margin and limit to the disorder itself. This is an important part of the systematics of the exercise; it also has the effect of shifting the focus away from the disorder, and the doctrine of the Fall, back to the Christian doctrine of God itself. And this is appropriate for the theological definition of cosmic disorder.

This line of thought could be led on to the *O Felix Culpa* argument, and with it the Christological, pneumatological and ultimately ecclesiological elements or implications or boundaries of this definition. However, in this study we are concerned with theological definition in the narrow sense, and so can relate it to the doctrine of God primarily, while noting its ramifications and derivations and destiny, and noting too that one could speak of the Christian theological definition as necessarily involving Christology, at least in the sense of the doctrine of the Saviour or Mediator, and with it soteriology, and also a doctrine of revelation.

Our research thus discerns a key element in the theological definition of cosmic disorder. This might be designated its *boundedness*; its firm grip by the Lord of Life; its destiny in the “holocaust of salvation”. Torrance points out the mysterious way in which evil, having been Judged, not only has limits set to its influence, but is actually made to work for the divine purpose. “Meanwhile, while all creation is in an agony of suspense and expectation waiting for that end [the complete overthrow of evil], evil is paradoxically and marvellously¹⁹ made to serve the purpose of God’s love for his creatures.”²⁰

Torrance then goes on to analyze what he calls “The human predicament”. This provides a bridge between his account of evil and his statement of the priestly and redemptive role of man.

¹⁹ In this respect, even the apparently gloomy topic of cosmic disorder can become an occasion for a doxology, an epiphany. It can lead to a liturgy of praise, a celebration and a pointer to mission. It points to, and can share in, successful, final, complete mission, given that mission itself is also an act of God, an *Opus Dei*, a mighty act of God in the Psalmist’s sense. This connection between the themes of disorder/chaos and victory is the connection made, of course, by the Cross. This sweep of thought from disorder to mission/eschaton is part of the systematics of “disorder”; it brings out the interconnectedness of the many components of the Christian faith. Even cosmic disorder is not ultimately divorced from worship. The very attempt to “define” cosmic disorder leads to the Cross of Christ and hence to the act of worship and true communion between God and his creatures. The evil powers are indeed “nailed to the Cross” (Col. 2:15).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

6.2 The “Human Predicament”²¹

The human predicament includes the very lodgement of evil in human being. For evil is “now so interwoven with what man is in will and act, in his spiritual and physical existence, that sin and corruption are ultimately inseparable” [“Evil works to dissolve the creature’s relation to God”]. Hence it is with the whole man that God interacts in his rejection of evil, for the whole man is forced to live and die under the thralldom of evil – he “lives and dies under the threat of destruction”. But God saves man. God has acted to negate, to nullify evil. Divine judgment has been passed, enacted, upon evil.

The human predicament is understood in part as the bitter legacy of corruption and death. But in Torrance’s theology these are to be treated not merely as the natural outcome of man’s contingent fragile existence but also as the inexorable outworking of the divine opposition to the evil that has invaded and taken hold of human being. The human predicament is the state of anxiety and dread in which human life must be lived. Also, “Evil is a chasm which has opened up in our violence and death and guilt.”²²

The “theology from above”, the vertical dimension, becomes very evident in this account of the human predicament. Despite Torrance’s commitment to a personalistic theology, and the idea of the basic grammar of theology being relational (Trinitarian) being, he does not construe the “human predicament” in terms of inter-personal disorder. This, it might be said, robs him of the opportunity to describe the human predicament in “horizontal” (inter-personal) terms and hence tends to marginalize the position of human political life in his theology. It would appear that sooner or later such a “vertical” theology will lead to individualism, narcissistic religion and pietism. It may also lead to a repressive society. It would appear, therefore, that Torrance’s account of Michael Polanyi’s thought is cut off from his “vertical” account of the human plight.

It is humanity which crucified the incarnate love of God, Torrance asserts.²³ It is humanity, he states, apparently employing the historic present, which or who “sets itself implacably against the order of divine love of God even at the point of its atoning and healing operation.”²⁴

²¹ Ibid., p. 124.

²² Ibid., p. 115.

²³ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁴ Ibid.

If, however, it was not “humanity”, but either a few, uncomprehending, humans, or some non-human power of cosmic evil, then this statement would be a misleading one. However, it must be taken in the context of Torrance’s theory that man is “seized of evil”.

Torrance’s thought is not maximally clear here, but he may be suggesting that the human plight includes perennial rebellion against the Creator. It might be conjectured that Torrance’s theology, being deuter-Barthian, would not be so concerned with sanctification as with redemption. A Christo-monistic theology would naturally tend to marginalise the theology of sanctification, rather than regarding it as an essential part of theological anthropology. A theology which gave emphatic weight to the mission of the Holy Spirit, in the development of the personhood of human being, would tend to speak of the work of the Spirit of God in human personality as well as the profound rebellion of the creature. These considerations would tend to place Torrance’s theology in what John Hick terms the Augustinian rather than the Irenaean tradition of theology,²⁵ although parts of the latter’s thought would – in Hick’s interpretation at least – suit the “personal” strands of T.F. Torrance.

[Part 4](#)

Sermon Word Total: 2,627

Meditation Seed Thought: Evil remains an utterly inexplicable mystery but a fearful actuality.

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²⁵ John Hick, [God and the Universe of Faiths](#) (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 54; and [Evil and the God of Love](#) (3rd ed.: London, Macmillan, 1985), p. 210.