

THE THEOLOGY OF EVIL FROM THE GIFFORD LECTURES, BRAND BLANSHARD

I am not wholly insensitive either to the evil in the world, and the moral morass into which it has drawn religion. The more I have thought about religion and evil, the less willing I have become to tie ethics to religious belief. Let me explain.

The treatment of evil by theology seems to me an intellectual disgrace. The question at issue is a straightforward one: how are the actual amount and distribution of evil to be reconciled with the government of the world by a God who is in our sense good? So straightforward a question deserves a straightforward answer, and it seems to me that only one such answer makes sense, namely that the two sides can not be reconciled. Many attempts at reconciliation have been made: evil was introduced by man's free will, and became general through inherited original sin; it is offered to test us or to educate us or to strengthen us; it is really an illusion, and if seen in perspective would vanish away; it represents some inexplicable impotencies (unfortunately conjured up ad hoc) in the divine power; and so on, and on, and on. These theories break down so promptly and notoriously that theologians commonly give up and fall back on faith to justify a belief that eludes support by evidence.

Some theologians, aware of this conflict, have at certain points resorted to open revolt against human reason and its morality. We have studied this revolt in the theological line that runs from Luther through Kierkegaard to Brunner and Barth, and seen that it is self-destructive. For my own part, I am ready to stand correction for the ignobility of my naturalistic ethics, but not from theologians of this stripe. If their ideal of goodness is the will of a Deity who could inflict or permit the evil we know in the world, they have no consistent standard at all. How can anyone of clean conscience call good in the Deity what he would regard as intensely evil in man? To tie ethics to the will of such a being is not to exalt one's ethics but to reduce it to incoherence. I do not doubt that in many respects morals have profited by their association with religion. But I cannot admit that anyone who holds to traditional doctrines of original sin, the atonement, or eternal punishment is standing on ground that entitles him to call a naturalistic ethics degrading. It was his own great authority who said that one should remove the beam from one's own eye before attacking the mote in another's.