God and Good

JOHN MAHER

We, for all our protests, exist in the world as bodies. Our notions of the immaterial, the spirit and the soul, are all in some way forced into communication with extant matter. We can only perceive, or perhaps invent, ethereal concepts of ourselves as “spirit” through conscious minds grounded in our very earthly brains—so why do we reject the earthliness of those brains so fervently?

The Gospel of Mary, a Gnostic work that lies outside the current biblical canon, seeks to reconcile how immaterial souls perceive the world around them through earthly minds. One of many “Gnostic Gospels,” The Gospel of Mary is a suppressed and nearly forgotten writing on Christ that was barred from what we now call the New Testament due to its (still) controversial theology. Though the text is fragmentary, it can still be read clearly enough: “He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which is between the two—that is what sees the vision” (Mary 10:20). These, the words of the Savior, Jesus, describe a cosmology of being that unifies the soul, the spirit, and the mind. The nature of the spirit is difficult to decipher because more than half the gospel is lost, but we can deduce from Mary’s later statement on the journey of the soul after it has left the shackles of the material world and the body that tied it there. When asked by the mysterious “fourth power” at the apex of its journey, “Whence do you come, slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?” (Mary, 16:10), the soul responds,

What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a world I was released from a world, and in a type from a heavenly type, and from the
This image of the soul’s ascent adopts a markedly different tone from that of the words of Jesus in the canonical Gospels; indeed, the apostles express skepticism that these are truly the words of Jesus. But the intent remains coherent: the soul and body are not interchangeable in this gnostic account. While the divisions between soul, spirit, and mind may be somewhat murky, the divisions between the metaphysical and the physical, between the immaterial and the material, are clear. More than that, the material seems only to tether the otherworldly—the soul refers to its previous earthly nature as “overcome.” Desire and ignorance are portrayed as negative bodily states, the soul’s superior nature not subject to their influence.

As unorthodox as this gnostic Jesus may seem to modern Christianity, both The Gospel of Mary and the canonical gospels hinge on the promise of eternal salvation for human souls. But that promise is only ensured through a religious relationship with Jesus Christ and is not a static cosmological inevitability. In The Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Our progression towards Heaven and inevitable judgment through the eyes of Jesus is constantly present as we read the rest of the gospel. We are bidden to follow Jesus’s teaching not simply because of his divinity, but also because it is the only path to his kingdom of bodiless Salvation. Such a potent incentive calls upon us not only to accept God, but also to depend on him. Indeed, Jesus tells us, “But first seek the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you besides” (Matthew 6:33). Admittance into the kingdom of heaven becomes the urgent priority, restructuring the physical human experience into one focused on the Christian divinity and devotion to God. After all, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment” (Matthew 22.37-38).

Christian tradition has continued to reinforce the idea not only that the body and the soul are unequal, but also that the body is subservient to the soul. From Biblical teaching to Catholic and Protestant doctrine, Christianity has taught that our presence on the Earth is a temporary one, a transitory moment compared to the promised eternity of bodiless salvation—an eternity that can only be earned by “buying into” the faith. This focus on the supernatural soul and the unbalancing of the body-soul equation, however, begs the question of how we are to perceive or adhere to morality in a world that is temporary and essentially inferior. If salvation is available only to the soul,
how can we translate the promise of salvation into a morality—a schema of good and evil—applicable in the material world, the world of the body?

Christian dogma refuses even to consider the issue, instead exhorting us to love God and offering salvation in return. Yet this doctrine raises problems of its own; so long as we are alive, we cannot escape the physical world and the experience of suffering—of evil—it imposes on us. And this experience threatens our love of God. St. Augustine took it upon himself to explain away this problem of morality with a Neoplatonist-inspired theodicy, a method of reconciling the extrema of morality with the purported earthly influence of the divine. St. Augustine’s God is not a limited one; he believes him to be all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing. Of course, even St. Augustine immediately thinks of the “problem of evil” when conjuring up the image of such an overwhelmingly powerful entity: “But a problem remained to trouble me. Although I affirmed and firmly held divine immunity from pollution and change and the complete immutability of our God . . . I had no clear and explicit grasp of the cause of evil” (113). How can evil exist if God fulfills such stringent criteria? If he lapsed in any of those three “immutable” functions, he would cease to be God at all.

Rather than alter his firm theological schema, St. Augustine draws the problem of good and evil into the realm of humanity, dogmatizing the concept of “free will” by saying, “I directed my mind to understand what I was being told, namely that the free choice of the will is the reason why we do wrong and suffer your just judgement” (113). St. Augustine argues that our will allows us to choose to reject the good. When we perform evil, rather than simply suffering it, we act in accordance with our own desires, not God’s. Our flawed nature excuses God from intervening to prevent evil, as he would then be invalidating his doctrine of free will.

This argument is enough to quiet St. Augustine’s doubts. But to the astute (or perhaps merely awake) reader, his theological proofs are riddled with logical gaps. Doesn’t God put evil into motion if he is all-knowing? Isn’t it a mistake of St. Augustine’s to attribute the very material logic of his free-will doctrine to an all-powerful being whose substance cannot be comprehended materially? And though this question may lack academic validity, doesn’t evaluating such a being as “all-good” seem wrong? A being that makes creatures capable of committing atrocity after atrocity, often in his name, but refuses to intervene?

It seems an unfair exchange that we must love such a God so absolutely. And yet, the promise of salvation mitigates human suffering entirely. We love God, and we are granted certain survival after death. That certainty is only
equaled by the knowledge that we must die in order to be saved. But how are we simultaneously sure that we will die and that we will survive death? We can’t acknowledge our mortality if it’s no longer final. So certainty of salvation must replace our certainty of death. Through dependence on God, through love of God, we conquer the material world, transcend it by surviving death. This begs another question: How terrified of death are we that we must love a deity whose existence we have no way of confirming in order to reconcile ourselves with death? Might that love betray a deeper fear?

Love of God suddenly becomes a matter of supreme self-interest. The dangling carrot of salvation, ever-present in the Gospel of Matthew, makes it well worth having to love a distant divinity if doing so means we become immortal and, therefore, immaterial. Galen Strawson, in his essay “Religion is a Sin,” analyzes the self-serving platitudes of the ultra-religious, and he does not spare St. Augustine or St. Paul, considering both to be “brilliant monsters of egotism.” He goes on to claim that “almost all religious belief, considered as a sociological phenomenon, is about self” (26). A religious outsider, Strawson is not shackled in the same way St. Augustine was when he drafted his theodicy. An atheist, Strawson has no all-powerful, all-good, or all-knowing God to answer to, and his moral evaluations are grounded in the material.

They are also extremely candid; Strawson wonders why “we find that people who have religious convictions are on the whole morally worse than people who lack them” (26). Outside the closed system of faith, Strawson reasons,

The religious (sociologically speaking) tend to be religious because religious belief provides them with a framework in which they can handle certain unattractive elements in themselves . . . the correlation between religious belief and relative moral badness in the strictly descriptive sense (which is not incompatible with charm) is particularly striking. (26)

When we strip away the theological and theodicean oeuvres, Christian morality becomes a façade concealing self-interest. The Gospel of Matthew is a compelling argument for devotion not because of Jesus’s parables, but because devotion releases humans from the crippling fear of death. If we follow Jesus’s teaching to “take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that other people may see them,” we hope instead that God will see our deeds, and reward us with immortality in heaven (Matthew 6:1). Christian-motivated “goodness” isn’t “goodness” at all; it’s selfish altruism, with a core of cowardice.

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True goodness is irrelevant to Christian dogma. Because of the promise of bodiless salvation, material human suffering is essentially unimportant, a distasteful but temporary obstacle on the road to a better eternity. Theodicy is a weak attempt to wave away the severe and cruel nature of an “all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing God” who leaves us to our suffering: “Genuine belief in an omniscient, wholly benevolent and omnipotent God is, in my judgment,” Strawson writes, “profoundly immoral: it shows contempt for the reality of human suffering, or indeed any intense suffering” (28).

The Gospel of Mary claims that evil is an earthly affliction; whereas, goodness, the inclination of the soul, is attained by breaking free of the earthly, the bodily. While we’re in our bodies, then, we have no hope of goodness. But what about St. Augustine’s doctrine of free will? Does he not place moral culpability and responsibility for goodness in our own hands? Not in the least: St. Augustine’s theodicy equates acceptance of God with goodness. Just as we are told in The Gospel of Matthew, St. Augustine says we must be completely dependent on God. St. Augustine’s “good” is love and devotion to God, the same love and devotion that defangs material suffering and rewards us with a prosaic promise of salvation.

In his own meditations on religion, Strawson argues that “faith in the importance of goodness requires the idea that the good—those who have or acquired a ‘good will’—may be rewarded in a life after their biological death” (28). So without God, can we be good? Do we not need “faith in goodness” to manage the “problem of evil”?

The problem with that question is its terminology: the “problem of evil” is meaningless outside a religious framework. We’ve already dismissed mindless adherence to Christian theology as “good.” When we remove the incentives from that concept of good (in search of a true, selfless goodness rather than egoistic cowardice), both good and evil become equally baffling concepts. Our capacity to help another person at the cost of our own well-being is just as amazing as our capacity to inflict pain. Evil is not a “problem,” in the sense that its source is human, not divine, and it is a facet of material existence to be tackled by the individual, not a paradox inherent to the nature of God. Solving evil—and thereby being good—is up to us.

So perhaps instead of pondering the question, “Do we need God to be good?” we should ask, “Can we be good if we have God?” Christianity, like any religious devaluation of the material, precludes us from morality, and instead encourages amelioration of fear through incentivized devotion. As frightening and confusing as the knowledge of our temporary nature can be, it does us no good to sublimate our fear through a constricting dogma that prevents us from choosing between good and evil. If we want to embrace true morality and break free from our great fear of death, we must choose: God or good?

