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Blurred Distinctions: A New Look at the Problem of Evil in Early Medieval Christian Paintings

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Abstract

Early medieval paintings have often been overshadowed by the grandeur of later Renaissance art. The paper attempts to challenge the perspective of viewing medieval paintings as mere precursors of later developments and offer fresh interpretations that highlight the complexity, intentionality and dialectical depth of these works. By doing so, we can reassess these artworks and move beyond traditional narratives that dismiss them as unsophisticated and instead recognize their contribution to medieval visual culture.

Keywords: art, complexity, dialectics, re-imagine, narrative

Introduction

There is no simple answer to the problem of evil, or even a definition for the word. There are a wide range of viewpoints which offer themselves up to the relation between evil and human nature and varied conclusions are arrived at, if any at all can be arrived after examining each of them. Modern dictionaries define evil as anything which inflicts pain or death, or which obstructs life's freedom, expressions or the resources needed for its sustenance. Forms of abuse and cruelty are also considered evil. Some philosophers opine that evil exist only in relation to good - it is to some merely the absence of good. It denies the presence of evil as an active force in its own right. Evil vanishes when the things is restored to its ideal state in the same way darkness vanishes as we turn on the light bulb. Evil can be considered as a distortion of natural affairs. From this perspective, civil actions have their basis in normal psychological drives and positive intent. Distortions can be detected in so-called sins, lust may be considered as a distortion of love or interpersonal attraction, greed a distortion of the drive to acquire the necessary material for life. Here evil becomes a psychiatric disorder. But during medieval times, mental illness was generally considered to

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be a form of 'demon possession' to be treated by priests and their exorcisms. With the development of secular science of psychology, the 'devil' and 'evil' were discarded as relics of an age of superstition.

To the ancient Hellenes, evil was disorder, chaos, anything that disrupted the structure of their lives. The Hellenes equated order and structure with goodness as it helped their lives function and protected them. On the same token, disorder, chaos and anything that disrupted was bad and thus evil. With the conception of Socratic Ethics and Platonic Forms, these concepts gained a more moralistic tinge to them that has stuck with them ever since. These ancient philosophers had a profound influence on the formation of church doctrines. Christian philosopher Saint Augustine worked much of Plato's works into church doctrines whereas a thousand years later Thomas Aquinas brought works of Aristotle into church doctrines.

Gradually, evil became whatever violated religious laws. This was the claim of any religion which attempted to crystallize spiritual principles and values into religious laws and commandments. The philosophical question of the early Middle Ages tended to focus on what is real and how it is known. Such questions by Christians, included queries about nature of God, about God's relation to the created knowledge probed the relation between faith and reason, especially the limits of order, the problem of evil and about the status of universals, questions about reason in knowing the divine. As we see in the famous concept of 'On Contempt for the World' or '*De Contemptu Mundi'* by Eucherius Lyon of 6th c., the world was seen as the basis of all temptations and lures. It was considered that God used the world paradise should withdraw himself from its allurements and live instead a cloistered existence centered on the contemplation of the sacrifice made by the savior to otherworldly heaven in place of the punishing fields of natural reality.

The problem of evil finds its classical expression in the *Book of Job*, which poses the question, 'Why do the righteous suffer?' Through its early history, Hebrew saw the world as a battle field between good and evil but Satan was not a major figure in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. He was more of a trickster, not this personification of evil. 'That doesn't occur until the New Testament and takes off in medieval Christianity', says De La Torre, professor of Social Ethics in his book *The Quest for the Historical Satan* (Torre 2011). Satan later came to represent all of the different forces of evil combined. Philosophers dealt with the concept of evil before and after Christianity established a monopoly over the subject. The relatively secular had difficulties similar to the Hebrew in explaining human sufferings and misfortunes. For the Greek philosopher Plato, evil represented the demiurge's limitations in trying to create the actual from the ideal (Plato 360 B.C). Christianity moved the locus of the problem of evil from issues of divine creation to concerns about human sinfulness. Within the dominant version of Christian theology, God could not possibly have any attributes of evil.

Evil, for Christians, had an all too human and not as a divine limitation. Therefore, in the New Testament Satan has a human face. Augustine saw evil as the absence of good and this 'privation' (Augustine trans. Chadwick, 2008) of good could manifest in various ways, including illness and bad fortune. He believed that God created all things well, and that evil arises from the misuse of free will by rational creatures. It is a 'force' that tempts humans away from their natural state. Evil is personified in the figure of Satan. God and the devil, in mainstream Christianity, is portrayed as fighting over the souls of humans, with the Devil seeking to lure people away from God. This struggle found its expression in medieval art and paintings.

In medieval age, art was used to portray the spiritual world. There was no interest in depicting three-dimensional figures. They had flattened perspectives and lacked naturalism. The new Christian philosophy that scored attention mirrored this ideology in painting. During the development of Christian art in Byzantine period, a more abstract aesthetic replaced the naturalism previously established in Hellenic art. This new style was hieratic, meaning its primary purpose was to convey symbolic and theological meanings rather than accurately render objects and people that were the premise of realistic art of the Renaissance and Enlightenment period. Realistic perspective, reverse perspective and standardized conventions to portray individuals and events, proportions, light and color were ignored in favor of simplistic geometrical forms; Christian painters used the size of figures and primary colors to indicate their brows and intense eyes which became common motifs to capture piety. Often figures are clothed in the Persian garb. For instance, the frescos in the Roman catacombs of the 3rd to 5th centuries employ simplistic figures and symbolic imagery like the Good Shepherd, the *orans* figure not because the artists lacked competence but these forms conveyed spiritual truths beyond mere representations. Similarly, Byzantine icons and early medieval manuscript illustrations use abstractions and intricate patterning to evoke divine transcendence. Hans Belting, the notable art historian opines that medieval art was not concerned with mimicking reality but with making the sacred visible (Belting 1994).

Pope Gregory of 6th C. in his letter to Serenus of Marseilles declared 'painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read' (Martyn 2004 ed.).This statement served as a guiding spirit throughout the middle Ages. *The Book of Kells* (Trinity College Dublin, MS 58 ed. Bernard Meehan) illustrates Christian symbolism. Colors continue to separate some figures from the rest of humanity. Saints are embedded in gold; bold reds and blues surrounded by other beings. Art increasingly focuses on the supernatural asserting complete independence from the material world. Radiant colors, suspended angels, penetrating eyes and intricate symbols were the prevailing motifs used to represent the supernatural world throughout the early middle Ages. The paintings were active forces in the liturgy, reinforcing theological doctrines and imperial authority.

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Yet something continues to disturb the intellect, a blurred distinction appears like a shadow in the psyche, sense organs begin to itch at the sight of few paintings. The medieval theme of the war in heaven that led to Lucifer's Fall shows us graphically how the process works. In this painting from 12th c. one side is viewed as totally good, fair - haired, white-skinned and attractively garbed in pastels. The other side is viewed as loathsome, slimy, and scaly, portrayed in the dark colors of mud and rotten vegetation. It unambiguously expresses the medieval Christian ideology of the concept of binaries - compartmentalized distinctions so to say. What is interesting, however, is the same greens and browns used to depict the demons also vibrate in the wings of the angels, as if to whisper that even the medieval artist knew, unconsciously that any apparent difference between them was an illusion, for both wings and scales come from the same root, an earthly verdant fertile root. If we notice the site of each wound: a spear is thrust straight down each demon's throat - the efficient 'machine - like' 'angels' are deliberately destroying the throat, the voice systems so that these voices may never be heard. Each dragon's head is lifted as if to speak, each seems to the straining to be heard - and in that vulnerable moment, each one is swiftly silenced.

Frederic Jameson in his *The Political Unconscious* has recognized the fact that the concept of good and evil is a 'positional one that coincides with categories of Otherness' (Jameson 1981).Jameson further suggests that 'evil can be defined as **"whatever is radically different from me"** and that the differential thus established between the individual self, the personal ego, and the Other constitutes evil as anything that embodies **'a real and urgent threat to my own existence,'** whereas, one would presume, even though Jameson does not specifically say so, that anything which benefits "me" would be seen as a positive good. Making his point as clear as possible, Jameson says that "the Other . . . is not so much . . . feared because he is evil; rather he is evil *because* he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar" (Jameson 1981). The other is not so much feared because he is evil; rather he is evil because he is other, alien, different, strange, unclean and unfamiliar. When we examine the painting from this light it becomes clear how the 'fictitious world' of Christian belief is composed of those elements of otherworldliness traditionally held by Christian theology as signifying superior states of human experience. In medieval terminology, this sentiment was expressed by the admonition that world, the flesh; the devil was elements of absolute contempt.

Conclusion

Denying truth, justice and wisdom to any thinker who does not adhere to belief in Christian version of God has been the first principle of militant Christian ideology, the first perception of exclusionary perceptions of human reality, the first principle of 'reason' that underlies and justifies its effortless leap from verbal condemnation of the other to an active campaign of annihilation and genocide against the rights of the other to exist. Therefore,

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today a more logical way to think of the problem of evil and on the human level à far more useful way of looking at evil is the absence of those qualities that make us uniquely human; our enormous capacity for consciousness, choice and most important empathy and love. Seen from this perspective as Riane Eisler puts in his *Sacred Pleasure* -'in the intolerance, fear and rage that drives us to dehumanize or demonize others, we become less human ourselves. We become 'evil', self-righteously projecting our own inner shadows onto others as our excuse for destroying them' (Eisler 1996). The reassessment of the early medieval Christian paintings reveal an art form that move beyond the notions of primitivism and become intentional expressions of not only faith but power and identity. Through uncovering new evidences and redefining methodologies, early medieval Christian paintings demand a new look and a renewed appreciation for its enduring legacy in the history of Christian visual culture.

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