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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL UNDER THE PREMISES OF PRAGMATISM

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Abstract: *Evil has long been an issue completely ignored in the history of philosophy – it currently occupies the boundary between metaphysics and what is beyond mystical. Besides that, the vast majority of attempts to define evil have either failed or used theistic premises (such as the existence of God) in order to better understand it. In this paper, it shall be proposed that pragmatism could provide a better outlook on this regard, but also that if one ought to define evil one must also move away from theistic philosophies. Pragmatism could be the first step in this direction.*

Keywords: *Pragmatism. The problem of evil. Theism. Deflationary move. Mystical.*

O PROBLEMA DO MAL SOB AS PREMISSAS DO PRAGMATISMO

Resumo: O mal tem sido um problema completamente ignorado na história da filosofia - atualmente ocupa a fronteira entre a metafísica e o que está além do místico. Além disso, a grande maioria das tentativas de definir o mal falhou ou usou premissas teístas (como a existência de Deus) para melhor entendê-lo. Neste artigo, será proposto que o pragmatismo poderia fornecer uma visão melhor acerca disso, mas também que, se alguém deve definir o mal, também deve se afastar das filosofias teístas. O pragmatismo poderia ser o primeiro passo nessa direção.

Palavras-Chave: Pragmatismo. O problema do mal. Teísmo. Movimento deflacionário. Místico.

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Introduction

It is not easy to find an appropriate definition to what evil specifically means. Furthermore, it comes with no surprise that such an issue has been relegated to the bottom end of philosophy given the difficulty in order to obtain a proper definition to the term. One might even be as bold as to say that evil occupies a boundary somewhere between the mystical and the metaphysical threshold of pure philosophy. On the other hand, it is a subject that keeps hanging in the balance because we, as human beings, living together in society, need a clear definition to what evil is in order to move ahead and stipulate clear parameters for ethics, aesthetics and social

practices as well. Here, in this paper, it is proposed that the premises of pragmatism could not only be valuable, but also very reliable to put us in the right direction to solve the issue. Furthermore, it will be argued that one must also move away from theistic arguments if one is to “tackle” the issue more seriously without appealing to the mystical premises (such as the existence of God) that have been used to study the subject so far.

Pragmatism or ‘pragmatisms’?

While dealing with pragmatism it is important to highlight that many authors who have declared themselves belonging to the same school of thought have also presented many different aspects of what they have judged to be the real pragmatism. In a very brief and short way, we could easily compare the two most important names of this pragmatic philosophy: C. S. Peirce (Pragmatism’s founder) and William James (Pragmatism’s most important disseminator). It is important to do so, because as Sami Pihlström (2014) in his book *Taking Evil Seriously*¹ has said, we are able to choose between two versions of the same theory – Peirce’s restrictive one and James’s liberalized one. On Peirce, Pihlström writes:

If we really strictly require the objects of our theories and conceptions to have practical bearings, then certain skeptical scenarios, for instance, won’t make sense at all (...). Here the pragmatic method appears to be too restrictive. (Pihlström, 2014: 3 – 4)

On James, there is another point:

If the pragmatic principle is liberalized, in William James’s manner, to cover not only the conceivable bearings of the objects of our conception but also the bearings of our beliefs (...) it may, clearly, make a dramatic difference for us in our lives whether we believe in a skeptical scenario (even hypothetically) or not. Our attitudes, emotions, and beliefs obviously make a huge difference on our lives. But then, the pragmatic method may turn out to be too loose: can we just believe whatever we find most rewarding or subjectively satisfying in life; are there any even relatively objective normative criteria for the legitimacy of such beliefs? (Pihlström, 2014: 4)

In a way or another, what we have here is a very good summary of which discrepancies might lie in the heart of the pragmatic theory. It is no surprise at all that Pihlström will adopt in his book the middle way: he will combine the Peircean account of real generals, then if we ought to define evil we must give to it an all-encompassing definition (evil must be equally evil in every situation it occurs); and James’s broadly pragmatic approach in order to challenge “relativisms” of morally

¹ Probably and most likely to be the most relevant effort in order to understand evil from a pragmatic point of view so far.

and theistic dimensions of all sorts (there are no moral holidays, as James put it, when it comes to evil).

However, there might be someone else that could as easily provide a solid and reliable version of pragmatism, someone that was careful enough not to jump into a more restrictive or liberalized version of pragmatism²: Frank Ramsey. Ramsey's most important contribution to pragmatism was probably what became known as the 'deflationary move'. According to the author, "a belief is true if it is a belief that p , and p " (OT: 9). Further on, as we shall see, such a premise might provide a very interesting and pragmatic definition for evil and how it works inside our very own human logic. By his deflationary move, Ramsey wants to prove that the nature of our bearings must arise necessarily from the nature of truth itself. If we consider "a belief that p , and p ", true definitions will be self-evident and self-explanatory. The example he provides us is very elucidative to say the least:

- (i) The earth is round
- (ii) It is true that the earth is round
- (iii) Anyone who believes that the earth is round believes truly

In the end, what we have here are three subtle ways to implement a pragmatic perspective in central themes regarding philosophical issues. If we prefer Peirce's conception, then it is no surprise that we are willing to consider the effects and the practical bearings of the object of our conception to have. If it is James's visions that seem most appealing to us, then we might even postulate, as Cheryl Misak once said (2016: 53), that "variable human experience determines the truth of each person's belief". Or we could also aim for a more refined theory that creates a bridge between both authors, measuring degrees of beliefs – Ramsey's theory that is (even though he tends to be closer to Peirce's conception of truth).

Defining Evil: the real problem of evil

Now that the pragmatic method was briefly analyzed, we must understand to which problem its methodology shall be applied. Obviously that here the inquiry aims to understand what evil is. Tracing back the history surrounding the problem of evil, it was Leibniz who firstly addressed directly to this issue. According to the German philosopher in his work *Theodicy* (also the last work of his life), evil could appear in three different stages of existence: metaphysically, physically and morally. Metaphysically speaking, evil is part of the defects and imperfections that make part of every creation, because nothing is perfect (except for God) – in this sense evil would be intrinsically inherent to existence. In physical terms, evil could be associated to the human body with a direct impact on the human soul. It is the body that suffers the inconveniences of existence – our bodies will eventually get sick, fragile, punished, mortified, and will eventually die. Here Leibniz makes a good point: evil must be sensed, it must be among us in terms of reality. It makes no sense to talk about evil if we cannot experience it. From this angle, the creation of an ethical

² I owe this entire argument to Cheryl Misak. For more, it might be interesting to read her "Cambridge Pragmatism" (2016).

system fighting against evil, as we shall see, will be crucial to the theistic theories that heavily rely on God in order to justify existence. Such a reflection was many years later also proposed by Italian philosopher Umberto Eco. When he speculated about ethics without the existence of God, he demonstrated some of the practical effects of evil:

In my letter exchange with Cardinal Martini (1927 – 2012), he asked me if it would be possible to create an ethical system without God. I answered him that it would be possible as long as this ethical system would be based on the human body. The body has the necessity to stand up, to sleep, to eat, to drink and so on. If those necessities are respected, therefore there are also ethical conditions. When one is hanged by his feet, obliged to lay on the ground, when one is not allowed to stand up, when one has his tongue split in half and is not allowed to speak, then you have a situation that is not ethical. The fundamental ethic is also based on the necessity of the body. When one follows this ethic, one is also a perfect Christian. (ECO, 2013: 65, interview)³

And lastly, back to Leibniz, what we have are the considerations of moral issues in which evil represents the failure of virtues against ourselves, others and even God. The point though is to realize that even if Leibniz made a profound philosophical contribution speculating about a heavily ignored aspect of human life, even delimitating the issues that have perpetrated the debate regarding evil, he never obtained a fully accomplished explanation of the term. He did speak about consequences related to the effects of it (we might even postulate if such an attempt had something of a rudimentary pragmatism on it⁴), but in the end of his inquiry he did not achieve or postulate a full definition to the term. And, even more importantly, his account depended entirely on the speculation of God's existence. After him, many other philosophers have also written about the meaning of evil, but none of them took a considerable amount of time taking evil as their main topic of analysis such as Leibniz. Evil would only become a resonant problem in philosophy many years later – especially after Hannah Arendt's attempt to understand the banality of evil (a term which she coined in her considerations about the meaning of the Second World War).

According to Arendt, evil has a lot to do with our capacity to take decisions (it results from the implication of our acts). Those implications come from a metaphysical "good and evil" background that we have in our minds, therefore the

3 Original version in German: " In meinem Briefwechsel mit Kardinal Martini (1927-2012) fragte mich dieser, ob es möglich wäre, eine Ethik ohne Gott zu begründen. Ich antwortete ihm, dass es möglich sei, indem man die Ethik auf den Körper gründet. Der Körper hat das Bedürfnis, aufrecht zu stehen, zu schlafen, zu essen, zu trinken und so weiter. In dem Maße, wie man seine Bedürfnisse respektiert, hat man auch ethische Bedingungen. Wenn man jemanden an den Füßen aufhängt, ihn zwingt, am Boden zu liegen, und ihm nicht erlaubt aufzustehen, wenn man jemandem die Zunge abschneidet und nicht zu sprechen erlaubt, dann haben Sie eine Situation, die nicht ethisch ist. Die grundlegende Ethik gründet sich also auf die Bedürfnisse des Körpers. Wenn Sie dieser Ethik folgen, sind Sie ein perfekter Christ“.

4 It is important to consider that C. S. Peirce considered Leibniz one of the greatest philosophers of all time and also regarded him as one of the pioneers in terms of semiotics.

eternal clash between good and evil will require (but will also transcend) moral dispositions and law – they will represent the last consequences of our actions. That is why evil requires other actors; it does not work under the premises of solipicism, for instance. Evil only exists if there are solid moral norms, because evil will always be practiced or happen as an action over someone else (here we could even pose the following pragmatic question: is evil ultimately a final disposition to act?). The prohibition of evil will also legitimate culture, because the perception of our very own conscience (in accordance with the rest of our communities) also means the perception of what will be considered good or evil, right or wrong. Here, we might even see some sort of a paradox in Arendt's reasoning. In her words, we have a natural orientation to differentiate right from wrong – but only the dispositions included in a certain culture (in which we are inserted) will actually delimitate our dispositions to practice or abstain from evil. That is why she writes about the dangers and problems of totalitarian regimes, because they will subvert and justify arbitrarily what might be good – they stretch logics way too far from human reality. In this point, we might even see some similarity with Ramsey's view. Logic does no good far away from the human soil. But once again the problem here lies in the fact that not even Arendt is able to specify what evil really is. From this comparison between Leibniz and Arendt, from theistic and non-theistic arguments, it becomes clear that the problem of evil is one of those typically problematic issues to philosophy. We might see its practical effects – then it would require someone out of his best judgment to not consider genocide, terrorism, rape and many other themes as the true face of evil. But even though we are able to distinguish evil in practice, we still might be at trouble while trying to define it.

Evil and theism

The fact that it is hard to achieve a proper definition to the term “evil” granted theistic philosophers an advantage in this situation since the very early beginning. It could be easily justified that evil is what is against God. When talking about philosophy and theism, it is important to highlight that theism is a theory heavily relying on the existence of God (or Gods). It's a philosophical system that will propose that (a) God exists and everything is related to Him; or (b) He might exist, but we don't have any access to Him; or (c) He exists, but it makes no difference nonetheless⁵. However, what we can perceive from all theories above is that each one of them believes or at least recognizes that the existence of one God, several Gods or an all-encompassing God is possible, plausible, real or truthful. Whatever is the case here, one question will quickly arise and be easily distinguishable inside a theistic system (and that's why the problem of evil is so important to them): if God exists, and if He is all powerful, why does He allow evil to exist? And as consequence, why does God allow humans to suffer? Such a quandary will need a convincing answer, because especially in theistic approaches to philosophy, as we have seen with Leibniz for instance, ethics and morals are largely based on the divine rather than on the human aspect of life. There is a strong necessity to anchor values on mystical premises that, in a way or another, will not be fully available to inquiry. Those issues that are raised here belong to the very core of the dilemma that most philosophers of religions have been trying to solve for years – each one of them with different grades of success in their attempts to finally address the question.

⁵ This would be some form of deism.

Some names have also gained a lot of relevance in the field in the past few years, such as Plantinga, van Inwagen, Gyekye, Swinburne and many others. The great question, however, is if it is even possible to make the case for evil existing outside the premise of God's existence. Can we admit the existence of evil without acknowledging a supreme being above us? In this paper it shall be proposed that yes: not only can we say evil exists, but also that evil exists independently of an intelligent conscience to define it. The point though is that philosophers have ignored evil outside theism for quite a long time; and the ones who didn't do it have had problems to define it.

Pragmatism and evil

Let us take a moment and think for a second. If we were to define pragmatism very easily and simply, its definition would be that it is a philosophical theory that aims to measure our degrees of believe and, furthermore, that will try to assess the extension of our beliefs up to the point in which we ought to act, or even bet upon it. The greatest merit of this theory is that we do not take it merely in terms of a theory, much on the contrary. The most important thing for a pragmatic thinker is empirical experience: use and practice of beliefs, final dispositions for action. Now let us take evil and insert it under Ramsey's deflationary move, that a belief is true "if it is a belief that p , and p " – which means basically that "evil causes evil". However, it could seem very unsatisfactory to define evil as what causes evil, if not a very vague definition at all. But here, if we use James's twist of truth and usefulness, then one might logically consider that evil is what I believe that causes me evil. Even if something turns out to be good at a later stage, it still was bad at an earlier stage; it still was a source of evil to me. For instance: there is no question that a war is a great source of evil to everyone. But let us say that a certain war was a positive event because it prevented us from an even worst and enduring outcome. Even so, one still cannot deny that even though evil might paradoxically bring us a reward in the future, it was still evil at first. On the other hand, if one still thinks that such a definition is still unconvincing, we could bring Claudia Card's⁶ (2002: 3) somehow pragmatic definition of evil to the table: according to her, evil means "foreseeable intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing". In both ways it is a disposition for action: one is either willing to cause evil to someone else or avoiding evil from another one. But Card's solution is not at all complete – negative outcomes deriving from irrational entities are still part of what evil is. No one could say that an animal attack that disfigured someone is no evil at all, or that being stuck in a major cataclysmic event (such as Hurricane Katrina) is not part of what evil is. Another answer to this dilemma would be a return to Ramsey's pragmatic premises; consequently, one might say that:

- (i) Evil is what, in right mind, I don't want to happen to me (or that I want to avoid)
- (ii) It is true that evil is what, in right mind, I don't want to happen to me (or that I want to avoid)
- (iii) Anyone, in right mind, who believes that evil is what one does not want to happen to oneself (or wants to avoid) believes truly

⁶ Although not a pragmatist in essence, she provides some sort of pragmatic definition to evil as well.

In the end, if we are to take evil seriously, then we might be able to postulate that pragmatism could definitely pave the way in order to obtain a better definition to the term. It is way past time to understand evil outside the philosophy of religion and outside theistic premises. Pragmatism, or a pragmatic point of view, could be the first step to achieve such a goal.

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