Ontology, Theodicy and Idiom — The Challenge of Nietzschean Tragedy to Christian Writing on Evil

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In this article I want to suggest that Christian theologising about evil cannot avoid the multifarious voices of those who have defined what is meant by the term "tragedy", even where it seeks to reject this. This is to argue that the "tragic vision" articulates something important about human and worldly reality, and that theologising that does not acknowledge this will inevitably demonstrate it anyway in its own incoherence. This will be shown in relation to the writings on evil of St Augustine of Hippo and Donald MacKinnon, and finally it will be argued that the only possible "theodicy" lies in the area of Christology.

I begin with the man who proclaimed himself the first "tragic philosopher"[1], Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, produced the most radical and disconcerting (to Christian sensibility) account of tragedy I have yet encountered. Early in that work Nietzsche retells a fragment of Greek mythology, as follows:

> There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest for a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When at last he fell into his hands, the king asked what was best of all and most desirable for man. Fixed and immovable, the demon remained silent; till at last, forced by the king, he broke out with shrill laughter into these words: 'Oh, wretched race of a day, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to say what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is for ever beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. The second best for you, however, is soon to die.[2]

Nietzsche's overarching theme is not so much the origin of tragedy as the problem of existence, and in his hands the story of Midas and Silenus becomes far more than the mere recounting of an ancient myth. For Nietzsche it is a challenge to his contemporary readers—it is their lives that Silenus condemns; and their lives that tragic art is able to redeem. He is not concerned primarily with an enclosed literary world, but with ontology and metaphysics.

Three key terms or archetypes constantly recur in *The Birth of Tragedy*—the Dionysian, Apolline and Socratic. The Dionysian refers to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1996.tb01530.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

"nature" in the sense of the ultimate ground of existence. This *Urgrund* is the terrible truth referred to in the Silenus story. The Apolline is to do with "civilization", with human ordering and illusion. These fundamental "impulses" can exist separately, but when they are combined the tragic art form is the result. Here Dionysian truth is acknowledged but made bearable. For Nietzsche "tragic myth . . . speaks of Dionysian knowledge in symbols." On Nietzsche's account, such tragedy is exemplified by Aeschylus and Sophocles, but by the time of Euripides his third "archetype" has come into play. This is the new rationalism, or scientific spirit, of Socrates. This Socratism is not condemned out of hand by Nietzsche, but it is seen as fundamentally untragic (and so closed to Dionysian wisdom) in its emphasis on what can be explained by the rational mind. Ultimately, however, it only serves to renew tragic awareness in that it becomes clear that not all the problems of existence are solvable in rational terms.

For Nietzsche there is no sense in which human existence can be called "moral". The created order is for him essentially amoral and destructive of human aspirations. Humanity itself is an "incarnation of dissonance."[3] Here is a fundamental challenge to Christian ontology. For Nietzsche, rationalism is inherently limited and unable to express the truth of things. Here is a fundamental challenge to Christian theodicy.

The challenge is deepened by the idiom in which Nietzsche chooses to write. For him truth is ultimately beyond language. The closest approach to reality lies in the use of metaphor and myth, and his book is written in a hybrid, mixed, searching mode. His three archetypes are neither Greek gods nor logical entities. "They are cast in a middle mode of language: they evoke, not a specific genre, or a specific context or time, but a fundamental mood.. of mankind."[4] Nietzsche is seeking to make available to his readers aspects of Greek culture, and in this perspective to show them their world and themselves. He is attempting to embody his own ideal of the "artistic Socrates" in searching for a way to bridge the gap between the logical-analytical and the expressive-imaginative.

Nietzsche, then, raises for the theologian questions about ontology, theodicy and idiom. It is with these difficult matters in mind that I turn for assistance to the seminal writings of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), beginning with the following brief quotation from the second book of *City of God*:

> Many people are continually troubled by the fact that the everyday gifts of God, as also the disasters of humanity, happen to those of good and those of evil life without distinction. The task I have set myself obliged me to attempt a solution, and this has caused some delay.[5]

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1996.tb01530.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Augustine's statement of the problem of evil is so worded as to indicate his "solution", for he distinguishes between the "gifts of God" and the "disasters of humanity." He assumes that to implicate God ontologically in evil is impossible, and that the responsibility for "disasters" can only be attributed to the deliberate acts of will of angels and human beings.

Augustine believes a theodicy to be possible, despite the fact that stating it "has caused some delay". Yet even within its own terms and assumptions, his theodicy never achieves a completed form. Certainly particular themes become consistently important for him, but there are always unresolved questions, as will be seen. His chosen idiom is usually *rational theology* although it must be emphasized that Augustine does use other idioms (such as can be found in the devotional expositions on the Psalms), but not where he is explicitly discussing sin and evil. It is not my purpose to question the richness and depth of Augustine's writing on the love of God, but to suggest that where he considers evil his method and need for a solution sometimes force him into incoherent positions.

The clearest example of incoherence in Augustine's thought is not so much in his profound writing on the consequences of sin, but in his repeated attempts to account for the origin of sin. For him the question of moral agency is answered by finding evil in lust or concupiscence—pursuing temporal things as though they were eternal. The cause of this being nothing but the free will and its free choice. By making God responsible only for good, Augustine has exempted God from any responsibility for evil (for evil is only privation of the good). But as grace comes only to some, without regard for merit, that responsibility is obscure to human beings. It can be asserted but not understood.

As Augustine became increasingly aware of involuntary sin the origin of evil was increasingly pushed back to the *first* evil choice (first of the angels, then of Adam). For it cannot be that human beings have no alternative but to sin, in Augustine's terms, or they would not be responsible (and so not justly punished). A definable cause would either implicate God or require an external force capable of influencing the will. Neither of these is acceptable within Augustine's strong anti-dualism. He insists that the fall, the turning away from God, was freely chosen. But he cannot satisfactorily account for this choice, although it becomes necessary for him to attempt this within the overall structure of his thought. For Augustine's theodicy is increasingly at least as concerned with saving the face of God as understanding evil. Augustine wants to assert that all things come from God and are good, and finds that evil mystifies his attempts to give coherent rational accounts of God and worldly reality.

It is not the experience of evil as something external that Augustine rejects, but the interpretation of that experience. He accepts the existence of demons and the Devil[6], but not as the cause of evil. This he locates in the "evil will", which itself is described as a "deficiency". It is like "trying to see darkness or to hear silence" (*City of God* 12.7). The problem is that the idea of a "deficient cause" is "less a conceptual category than a rhetorical strategy for thinking what cannot be thought."[7] Something of the irreducible character of evil is discovered in the very process of attempting to think it.

Precisely in his resistance to tragedy, Augustine furthers the possibility of Christianity comprehending something of the tragic in the limits and tensions of his thought. The incoherencies in that thought, of which the problematical nature of the fall and the inscrutability of God's justice are two examples, do indicate the real possibility that the problem of evil is insoluble in rational terms. Augustine was not entirely unaware of this, as is shown by his repeated attempts at discussing the fall. The difficulty lay in his becoming trapped in the logic of the debate, unable to transcend a mode of discourse he sometimes sensed was inadequate.

Given such difficulties the "delay" Augustine apologizes for was hardly surprising. The questions of ontology, theodicy and idiom remain unanswered, and the suspicion is left that if an orthodox ontology of God and creation (as absolute Goodness, and created good) is to be defended in relation to the human experience of evil, this will require an idiom other than theodicy or "rational theology".

An alternative idiom can certainly be found in the work of the late Donald MacKinnon (Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, 1960–78) well described by Kenneth Surin when discussing the difficulty of assessing that work. He writes of the reader being

> confronted by a well-nigh intractable difficulty, namely the studied allusiveness (and elusiveness) which is such a pervasive feature of MacKinnon's oeuvre. MacKinnon's evident preference is for an interrogative, as opposed to an affirmative, mode of theological discourse; this being the mode which accords most readily with his characteristic refusal to take up substantive theological positions.[8]

MacKinnon's work mainly takes the form of intensive essays and published lectures, with individual pieces frequently making use of more than one mode of discourse. Closely argued philosophical analysis leads into biblical exegesis, literary criticism, and political and ethical considerations. It is not that MacKinnon is trying to be "difficult"—rather he is concerned to articulate problems and to register the complexity of "reality". For him this cannot be achieved by urbane and uniform prose. He is constantly seeking to relate different levels of truth, different ways of

"receiving" and expressing the truth of God and the world that is "given". He is also concerned that his writings should be *ethical*—that they should not over-reach what it means to live in accordance with what has been written.

MacKinnon's writings unequivocally centre on Christ, in whom he discerns a "mystery of action" which discloses the substance of God and challenges any attempt to represent it. As Christ penetrates the deepest conditions of human existence, so must the theologian seek to do. The priority is not abstract ideas, but human life as it has been, is, and will be. Theological discourse must await "the Father's hour". It must not seek to avoid ambiguity, the constraints of what can actually be lived, or the challenge of tragedy. His most extended treatment of the latter is to found in *The Problem of Metaphysics*, his Gifford Lectures for 1965–66.

There MacKinnon writes that it is sometimes said that Christians and the Christian religion

> have moved beyond tragedy. Yet, one could claim that where the treatment of [the complex of issues known as] 'the problem of evil' is concerned, we reach an area in which in very various ways, theologians have allowed apologetic eagerness to lead them to suppose that they had reached solutions, when in fact they had hardly begun effectively to articulate their problems—this though great constructive energy has been devoted to resolve in one way or another questions raised by the ontological status of evil, whether physical or moral, by the seeming divine permission of the continuance of the humanly intolerable (always subtly distinguished from positive willing that things should be so), by the nature of suffering and the role both of physical suffering and the endurance of spiritual injury issuing from the moral obliquity of stress in human perfecting etc.[9]

For example Teilhard de Chardin's attempt to show how the acceptance of ageing can be converted into spiritual advance is not "the alleged general solution of the 'problem of evil', the all-inclusive answer to the questions elicited by bitter experience of suffering, whether through illness, natural disaster, or by consequence of the wicked actions of others over whose purposes one has no control . . ."[10]

MacKinnon prefers to concentrate on the particularities of the gospels. He writes that in St Luke's gospel there is no picture of a developing ministry crowned with glory after a superficial defeat. Christ endures a searching temptation, and yet refuses the prospect of a bloodless victory gained by throwing himself from the temple parapet, or coming down from the cross. In so enduring, Jesus is able to remain free to associate with the disreputable, to receive the confession of the penitent thief, and demonstrate his perfect obedience to his Father. In his supreme

hour one might say that miracle is "ethically out of place."[11] In Luke there is a sense of a deeply tragic reality, of victory achieved at appalling cost. Christians have tended to shy away from acknowledging this, but MacKinnon wonders whether

> Christianity, properly understood, might provide men with a faith through which they are enabled to hold steadfastly to the significance of the tragic, and thereby protect themselves against that sort of synthesis which seeks to obliterate by the vision of an all-embracing order the sharper discontinuity of human existence.[12]

MacKinnon regrets that few have had the courage to read the gospels as tragedies. Part of the reason is the complexity of the resurrection narratives. Certainly these evidence a victory, in that Jesus' way is affirmed as that of God, but it is not a victory that is free of a tragic quality. "The surd element remains." Two examples of this are the role of Judas and the steps that could not now be taken to prevent the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70[13]

Clearly for MacKinnon the theme of tragedy is closely bound up with his Christology. Those who have made possible his particular "reading" of the gospel stories, the tragic writers, help to make possible the insight that if there can be any "solution" to the existence of evil in the world it is to be found not in general theories but in the historical Christ who encounters the worst that the world can give, and out of that experience offers illumination and healing. Such a "solution", however, does not magically "make everything better". The "healing" is won at awful cost, as is seen in the fate of Judas. It is a hard and painful "solution", fragmentary, difficult to assimilate; but given the way the world is, there is no other possibility.

The power of MacKinnon's case against theodicy as a genre is undoubted. His suggestion that "solutions" to the problem of evil, if they are to be found anywhere, will be centred on the person of Christ has much to commend it. But there are important questions to be answered. MacKinnon's tragic reading of the passion can make it sound that Judas, not Jesus, was the one lost for the sins of the world. And by articulating Christian tragedy, is MacKinnon implicitly accepting some form of the ontological dualism that St Augustine was so anxious to avoid? Further, his writings are incomplete in the sense of continually urging theological reconstruction without proceeding very far along that road himself. Can his ideas be fully thought through and retain plausibility? Tragedy is not easily accommodated even by a theology that seeks to embrace it!

By way of beginning to conclude this article, it is worth briefly pointing out the areas of convergence between Augustine and MacKinnon. Neither write about evil from a fundamentally theoretical motivation. Both are concerned with human response to evil, and the kind of life human

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beings should lead. For Augustine, notwithstanding his theoretical account of evil as *privatio boni*, holiness and conversion are the only adequate responses. MacKinnon constantly seeks to produce writings that are ethical, that encourage good practice in terms of Christian discipleship. Both, in contrasting ways, look to Christ as making possible human response that is pleasing to God. For Augustine it is only through baptism that the process of convalescence can begin as the sinner is precariously led by Christ on the way to God. For MacKinnon salvation involves the bringing together of human malevolence and Christ's reconciling work. Only in Christ's showing up of human violence and self-deception, through a life of gratuitous love and endurance, ending in crucifixion yet continuing through the resurrection, is healing made possible.

The way forward, then, as far as it is possible to discern it, lies in terms of a Christological discourse shaped by a concern for good "practice", close attention to the complexity and contingency of the gospel narratives, and a willingness to face up to the particular sufferings of the world and the claims of tragedy. Here the perplexing fate of Judas and the unspeakable events at Auschwitz must not be avoided. This is a daunting task, and there will be, as Surin has pointed out, a sense of failure at inadequate linguistic and conceptual resources. Nevertheless, what must be attempted "is the hesitant, stammering bringing of [Christ's] reconciling action to speech."[14]

The question to be tackled is, what does God look like when God's narrative is read as incarnate? Attempting to elucidate this will not answer the ontological issues in any simple fashion. The Christology likely to be least inadequate in tackling the themes and issues raised in this article is one that can best understand and put to use a recognition of human finitude and limitation, or the discovery of its own "blindness" (to adopt a phrase from Larry Bouchard).[15] This is an insight that both St Augustine and Donald MacKinnon, for all their differences, would appreciate. In *The Way of Life of the Manichaeans* Augustine wrote of human beings exploring the things of God not as those "able to see, but as [those] who are feeling their way" (2.11). MacKinnon writes again and again of the limits and partiality of human discourse, and of the Christ who does not know when his 'hour' is to come (Mark 13.32).

It is appropriate to end with reference to MacKinnon, where he refers to Jesus' acceptance of his own 'blindness'. He writes that the acceptance of the

> complex discipline of temporality . . . belongs to the very substance of Jesus' defeat. Jesus' acceptance of this part of his burden can arguably be interpreted as a painfully realized transcription into the conditions of our existence, of the receptivity, the defined, even if frontierless, receptivity that constitutes his person.[16]

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1996.tb01530.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here the facing of intractability is seen as an aspect of God "transcribed" into the human world. Such a 'facing' is therefore an aspiration for Christian disciples, for all who work to end suffering, and for those who seek to write on the difficult and tortuous questions this article has sought to examine.

1 In notes on *The Birth of Tragedy* written in late 1888, just before insanity. Contained in an appendix to Haussmann's translation (see footnote 2 below) p193.
2 *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism* (translated by Wm. A. Haussmann) T. N. Foulis, 1910. @3, p 34.
3 *The Birth of Tragedy* @25, p. 186.
4 *Nietzsche on Tragedy* M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, Cambridge, 1981, p 338.
5 *City of God* translated by Henry Bettenson, Penguin, 1972, 11.2 [p 49].
6 For example see Books 9 and 10 of *City of God* or *The Christian Combat* (*The Fathers of the Church* Volume 4, 1947).
7 *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology* Larry Bouchard, Pennsylvania, 1989, op. cit., p 62.
8 "Christology, Tragedy and 'Ideology'", *Theology* 1986 pp 284–5.
9 *The Problem of Metaphysics*, Cambridge, 1974, p 124.
10 ibid pp 124–5.
11 ibid p 133.
12 ibid p 135.
13 "Ethics and Tragedy" in *Explorations in Theology 5*, op. cit., p 194.
14 Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Blackwell, 1986, p 143.
15 *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology*, op. cit., p 228.
16 "Incarnation and Trinity" in *Themes in Theology* T&T. Clark,1987, pp162–3.

Zacchaeus : Chance and Necessity?

Robert Ombres OP

A Sermon, written for the Internet series of weekly sermons by Dominicans, for the 31st Sunday of the Year: C. The Scriptural texts were Wisdom *11:22–2:2;* Thessalonians *1:11–2:2 and* Luke 19:1–10.

Does God play dice with the universe?
Is everything the product of chance?
Is necessity a one-way road along which we must travel?
Why are some people given faith and others not?

These are the kinds of questions that should jostle for attention in our minds as we consider today's gospel. And yet at first sight the story of Zacchaeus up a tree could well seem just a charming and picturesque Oriental tale, told to make the simple point that Jesus leaves nobody out.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1996.tb01530.x Published online by Cambridge University Press