Abstract: I comment on certain aspects of Kirk Kanzelberger’s article, “Reality and the Meaning of Evil”, especially the distinction between “beings of nature” and “beings of reason” in the account of evil. For this, I employ the analogy of C. S. Lewis’s “Meditation in a Toolshed.” I also consider the nature of the object of the moral act as a being of reason. I conclude with some reflections on Kirk’s notion of the “mystical daydream.”

Kirk Kanzelberger begins his article, “Reality and the Meaning of Evil,” with a bit of fiction. This seems appropriate since, in the course of his reflections, he will show how our ability to create stories for ourselves plays a crucial part in our capacity for evil. Here, I’ll comment on some of his arguments, by no means doing justice to their depth and insight, but highlighting certain aspects of them.

Kirk’s opening story is about an encounter at a cocktail party between an avid, neo-Thomist graduate student and his friendly conversation partner. Our tendency, on hearing any story, is to identify ourselves with one of the characters. In Kirk’s story, I found myself identifying with both characters.

Over many years of teaching philosophy, I’ve often explained (as Kirk’s graduate student does) that evil consists not in something positive but in a lack of being or actuality that should be present. Like Kirk’s student, I’ve been quite pleased at how this explanation shows that God, the First Cause of all being, is not the cause of evil. I’ve suggested that Thomas Aquinas uses a kind of “metaphysical scalpel” to dissect the evil act, showing God to be the ultimate cause of the act insofar as it has being, but not insofar as it is lacking in being. It is precisely insofar as it is lacking in being, however, that the action is evil.

Much as I agreed with Kirk’s graduate student, however, I was also drawn by the arguments of the other character, who says: “Evil—evil itself—isn’t only privation. It is like a dream, a shadowy reality but a reality nonetheless, and evil. It is what the wicked want... And it doesn't stay in their heads. It emerges and it

1 Correspondence to editors@realityjournal.org.
2 See Michael J. Dodds 2012: Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas: 240-41: “The effect of the deficient secondary cause is reduced to the first nondeficient cause as regards what it has of being and perfection, but not as regards what it has of defect; just as whatever there is of motion in the act of limping is caused by the motive power, whereas what there is of obliqueness in it does not come from the motive power, but from the curvature of the leg. And, likewise, whatever there is of being and action in a bad action, is reduced to God as the cause; whereas whatever defect is in it is not caused by God, but by the deficient secondary cause” (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1266-68: ST 1a, q.49, a.2, ad.2. For this reason, as Edward Schillebeeckx explains, it is not God but human beings who are the “first cause” of moral evil: “[H]ere we have finitude, as it were, as ‘the first cause.’ As soon as there are creatures, there is the possibility (not the necessity) of a negative and original initiative of finitude, if I can put it that way... For Thomas, it is a senseless philosophical undertaking to look for a particular cause, a ground or motive for evil and suffering in God; these do not necessarily follow from our finitude, but they do draw their fundamental possibility from there” Schillebeeckx 1980: Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord: 728-29).
Evil doesn’t feel like, and isn’t experienced as, just a lack of being. It feels like something more. Somehow the metaphysical account is not the full story, and Kirk’s article fills us in on what’s missing.

To find that, though, as Kirk explains, we have to take another look at the world we’re living in. It’s not just the metaphysical world of “beings of nature” but also the semiotic world of “beings of reason,” the “lifeworld” of our language, thoughts and experience. This world is also real and, in comparison with it, the metaphysical world is something of an abstraction since it leaves so much out. As Kirk points out, when the world is taken simply as a collection of beings of nature, “[t]he meaning of ‘reality’ then collapses into an accepted synonym for the being of nature, and ‘realism’ itself turns into a form of myopia that fails to see realities constituted by cognition for what they are”.  

In his article, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” C. S. Lewis alludes to something like this distinction between “beings of nature” and “beings of reason”. He makes a distinction between “looking at” an experience from the outside and “looking along” it by entering into it. He imagines himself in a darkened toolshed where a small beam of light shines through a chink in the roof. When he “looks at” the beam, he sees a bright patch with a few dust motes floating in it. When he shifts his position to let the beam strikes him directly in the eye, he “looks along” it, and suddenly sees through the chink in the roof to the bright blue sky and white clouds beyond it. Similarly, if one stands outside of any experience and “looks at” it, one sees something quite different than if one enters into the experience and “looks along” it. If one simply “looks at” the experience of falling in love, for instance, one may be able to see and measure brain activity and gland secretions, but one will miss the true depth of the experience which can be found only by entering into it and “looking along” it. Lewis concludes that, in order to discover reality in its fullness, we must look not only “at” experiences (as empirical science tends to do), but also “along” them (to encompass the depth of reality that goes beyond the empirical).

I think that limiting oneself to “looking at” is something like limiting one’s account of reality to include only “beings of nature” and leaving out the rich world of experience to be found in “beings of reason.” When that world is included, the “beings of nature” are recognized as “objects” of experience, part of the broader “objective world” of human life. As Kirk explains: “This world, the objective world, is not a collection of things but a fabric of experience woven of natural as well as cultural strands, all alike objective or existing as known, and all alike public in principle”.  

Our account of the nature of evil must include not only the metaphysical world of beings of nature but also the experiential world of beings of reason. An account of natural evils (such as blindness) can be given purely in terms of beings of nature, explaining the different ways that such beings are subject to privations (such as lack of sight). An account of moral evil, however, requires a broader vision of the world including beings of reason and the complex web of relationships to which these give rise.

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mere nature, inasmuch as the object bears a cultural significance which is for us more formal and essential in the object than its physical constitution. Often enough, objects in the human lifeworld have nothing in them of nature, but are pure objects.

-Kirk Kanzelberger, “Reality and the Meaning of Evil” [READ ONLINE].

The moral act itself is fundamentally a being of reason. Aquinas says that whether an act is good or bad depends on its object. The object “is not the matter of which (a thing is made), but the matter about which (something is done).” The nature of this object has been a matter of considerable dispute. What is clear is that the object involves not just the thing that happened (a trigger was pulled and someone died), but the understanding and will of the doer (who may, for instance, intend the act as either self-defense or murder). Aquinas teaches that, in choosing to do evil, one desires the good to which the evil is attached more than the good of which the evil is the privation (as one may desire the perceived good of being free of a blackmailer to which the act of murder is attached more than the good of justice of which murder is the privation). When evil is desired in this way, the act must be viewed not as essentially good and incidentally evil (as involving some privation), but as essentially evil (just as the conversation partner in Kirk’s opening story intuitively recognized): “The action done is a deficient good, which is good in a certain respect, but simply evil.”

Kirk explains that a moral act involves both a free movement of the will and a consideration of the norm of morality which entails both “the order of reason and of divine law (ordo rationis et legis divinae).” This norm is not just some arbitrary code of morality, but a standard that is connatural to the human being since “in being true to this norm, the rational being is being true to its own nature, willing an end that is due—an end, in other words, that represents the excellence of its own way of being and acting.”

The question is, if this norm is connatural to the human being, how or why would a human ever act against it? This brings us back to our capacity for story-telling. This ability can be a good thing, as Kirk notes in his wonderful review of Tolkien’s account of fairy tales. The positive aspect of story-telling is also exemplified in the musical, The Man of La Mancha, when the priest character expresses a very favorable view of Don Quixote’s story-telling delusions in seeing a wretched kitchen wench as a great lady whom he names “Dulcinea”: “There is no Dulcinea. She’s made of flame and air. And yet how lovely life would

6 1271: ST Ia-IIae, q.18, a.2, c.
7 1271: ST Ia-IIae, q.18, a.2, ad.2.
9 1266-68: ST Ia, q.19, a.9, c.: “Never therefore would evil be sought after, not even accidentally, unless the good that accompanies the evil were more desired than the good of which the evil is the privation”.
10 1271: ST Ia-IIae, q.18, a.1, ad.1.
12 Ibid.
seem, if every man could weave a dream to keep him from despair. To each his Dulcinea, though she’s only flame and air.”

Often enough, however, we freely and consciously manufacture the wrong sort of story for ourselves—a story that deludes us into thinking that the good which is really connatural to us (and in which alone we can find true happiness) is evil. As Kirk explains:

A daydream becomes *mystical* when the “deficit of being” that is overcome by the fictive capacity is that very *futility* that moral demands would impose upon the daydream. The mystical daydream triumphs over moral constraints, as creative fantasy triumphs over natural constraints, through the positing of new forms of relativity that amount to a reimagining of the moral universe, in which the daydream is no longer a “relative good” (*secundum quid bonum*) but that which is simply good. The demands represented by the norm of morality become the demands of an adversary, the enemy of what is simply good.

Kirk is to be commended for his article, not only for showing us the speculative importance of recognizing the “lifeworld” of ideas and signs, but also for alerting us to the practical importance of seeing how easily we may slip into our own mystical daydream.

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