

## A LITTLE MISTAKE IN THE BEGINNING...

“A little mistake in the beginning becomes a big mistake in the end.” This aphorism, simply an expression of common sense, is attributed to Aristotle. If I am not careful about where I am going as I walk through the bush I will find myself astray. I can stop and correct the error but if I don't I will end up a long way from where I intend to be. A pilot who neglects constantly to monitor the course he is flying will very soon find himself lost.



The principle applies in thinking as it applies in navigating. If I think the world is adequately defined by its material causes only and ignore its formal causes, I will very soon be talking nonsense. This is what happens with those who follow Darwin's theory of evolution. They find themselves living a contradiction. The student of biology immersed in Darwin's thesis that living things are constantly changing sees no difficulty in enrolling in a science whose whole ground depends upon elements that are not changing at all, whose laws of behaviour are fixed.

You will remember the mistake William of Occam made about universals, rejecting the common sense assessment that they are realities to which existing things rigorously conform. This error, this mistake, led to other errors. He taught that things were good only because Almighty God willed that they should be good and that the Almighty could, if He chose, have willed them to be otherwise; that He could have willed that lying, theft, murder and idolatry were good rather than evil.

It is not hard to see how the one error flows from the other. *Good* is a universal—we apply it to all sorts of things and desires. If *good* is no more than a name we give by convention to things that appeal to us; or if, at best, it is no more than a concept we agree on—if it is not *a reality*, something objective,—then we might as easily call a good thing evil, or an evil thing good. We might take the view that things were good only because God chose that they should be.

The confusion at stake is that between—

[ the <i>natural</i>	which proceeds from an intrinsic principle
[	without knowledge of end, but <i>with such</i>
[	<i>knowledge presupposed in its Author; and</i>
[ the <i>voluntary</i>	which proceeds from an intrinsic principle
	with knowledge of end.

We won't go into this further here other than to insist that some things—natural things—are beyond our power of will ('the voluntary') to determine.

Occam's error gave rise to another. He asserted that God's will is autonomous, that is, without direction from intellect. We find this error expressed in popular thought, in the slogan "God can do anything!" Can He? There are some things that not even God can do. He cannot make contradictories exist in the same subject: He cannot make a square circle, for the definition of the one excludes the other. He cannot create another God like to Himself. Nor can he make good what is intrinsically evil.

Occam failed to understand the nature of will, whether created or uncreated. Will is the appetite that follows on intellect. Intellect ordains and will bases its choices on what intellect has first ordained. A will without an intellect directing it is impossible. God made us, He reveals in the Book of *Genesis*, in His own image and likeness. This likeness is chiefly in our possession of intellect and will.

We read in the first chapter of the Gospel of St John these words: *Omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est.* "All things were made by Him and without him nothing that is made was made." God made all things and they reflect the being of their Creator. Every thing that exists has four transcendental characteristics—*One, Something, True and Good.* These perfections do not result from an act of God's will, but in virtue of God's intellect which ordains them. They reflect God's essence—*What He Is*—for God's intellect has no other reality to contemplate than His own essence, His own essential goodness. Through His essence God understands all things—all *actual* things; all *possible* things.

Aristotle defines the *good* in the first chapter of his *Ethics* as "that which all things appetite (or incline towards)"—though it's not really a definition since good is one of the first things apprehended that cannot be defined only described. The good is always something positive. Evil, in contrast, is something negative, something denied, something lacking. It is not evil in a tree that it cannot see for it is not due to a tree that it be able to see. But it is an evil in a dog, for sight is something *due to* a dog as part of its nature. In the same way—

- idolatry is the negation of the worship due to God alone;
- theft is the negation of right to ownership of property due to another;
- murder is the negation of the right to life of every man.

It is impossible that idolatry, theft or murder could ever be good.

The effect of Occam's error was to diminish the operations of the Divine will to the level of the human, to treat it as if God was as unpredictable in His behaviour as fallen man. The approach is intellectually childish. His foolish ideas were adopted by Martin Luther and they went on to work immense harm in the Protestant Revolt among Catholics. Luther encouraged his followers to sin more vehemently. *Don't be sorry; just cast your sins upon Christ and trust you are forgiven!*

This error has produced its fruit in the atmosphere of atheism that dominates the minds of the members of western society. These convince themselves that things

which are intrinsically evil such as abortion, contraception, euthanasia and homosexuality are good. They give themselves excuses to justify their erroneous judgements. They pass legislation to establish these evils in society, thereby ensuring its eventual downfall. The French have a saying which is apposite: *les extremes se touchent*—“the extremes meet”. The extremes of Occam, of Luther, of modern atheism, all agree in their embrace of the same error.

There is another extreme which joins them, that of Mohammedanism. For Mohammedans think that God’s will is autonomous, unfettered by an intellect ordered to His essential goodness. They think God is able to embrace evil at will.

Mohammedanism is at root a Christian heresy whose error lies in rejecting God’s revelation to the Jews in the Old Testament and, through Jesus Christ, to all mankind in the New Testament. They reject all that Almighty God has revealed of His inner life as a Trinity of Persons in one Godhead, of his creation of man and of man’s fall from grace; of His initiative of sending His Son to save mankind through His life, death and resurrection. In place of this they propose their own revelation though ‘the prophet Mohammed’.

But this ‘revelation’ is defective on its face—is no revelation at all—for, as St Thomas points out, Mohammed produced no signs in a supernatural way which alone fittingly gives witness to divine inspiration for a visible action that can only be divine reveals an invisibly inspired teacher of truth. (*Contra Gentiles* Bk. I, 6)

Having erred on so fundamental a matter as what God has revealed to man, it was inevitable Mohammedanism would err in its understanding of God’s nature; would misunderstand God’s essential goodness and His essence as being its very self—the One whose essence is existence. Aristotle saw this and the best of Mohammedan philosophers, Averroes, having studied Aristotle’s works, saw it too. He tried to reconcile his grasp of reality with Mohammedan teachings but Mohammedans rejected his efforts and burnt his books.

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