

Ontology 2 : Paradise Outgrown – Genesis 1:1 - 1:4

In the first part of our study, we observed that God's initial Creation of the universe is best understood as an act of separating off (dividing) what may be termed otherness from Himself: that the otherness which ultimately gives rise to the realm of creation is in fact already contained within God. The first separation (the creation of the heavens and the earth in which the earth is but an amorphous void) results in a duality, or a binary relation (there is God and there is the formless universe). And each subsequent act of creation is a further act of division in which two results from an initial singular thing. By a process of dividing and dividing again, God fashions the physical universe into pairs of complementary, yet opposite elements, and it is by way of this ordering process that multiplicity finally arises within the created realm. By division, we can see, each genus comes to include many subsets or species (kinds). Thus, God's way of ordering the created world is both binary (consisting in pairs of opposites) and one of increasing complexity. Each stage of creation produces something that is more complicated, more distinguishable from the formless, featureless state of the earth of Day One than what has hitherto been created. There is division, but it is not a simple division of something into two constitutionally similar halves. Something is added to the nature of the creation at each stage along the way. In division, there is more and more otherness coming to be manifested: otherness or difference from the original formless matter of the earth of which each thing is made, and difference (in the sense of increased differentiation as individual objects) from God. Day Six of the Creation has God creating human beings (male and female, in a binary and complimentary pairing) – the final and clearly most complex of the things created thus far. It is this, human, creation, that is made 'in the image of God.'

The first human beings, Adam and Eve, are people. They walk and they talk, and they know what it means to say 'I.' Like God, Adam and Eve are *selves*. It is this factor that distinguishes Adam and Eve from the other animate creatures which God has created before them:

the animals that crawl, slither, fly or swim upon the earth have not the capacity to experience themselves as enduring, intending or deciding centers of experience in the way that the human Adam and Eve do. (This difference in kind between humans and animals—the difference of subjectivity (Selfhood) and relative independence – is what is represented by the scenes in which God both has Adam name all the animals (these animals are objects of consciousness and knowledge for Adam, who designates them and exercises a measure of control over them by his use of names and concepts) and has Adam look for a suitable companion from among their midst (there is none suitable, as an appropriate partner would have to be both complimentary and opposite: Adam's possessing a subjective consciousness renders him so different from the rest as to require nothing short of another subjective self as his compliment.) Despite some similarities (insofar as these other animals possess consciousness of the world around them) the non-human animals neither choose, intend nor project themselves into the future as people do, nor do they possess the independence from nature that is characteristic of being human. They experience the world, but they do so primarily as driven and determined by instinct.

Yet, so, in a very real sense at this stage of the game, do Adam and Eve. Our first people are so 'at one with nature' and so at one with God, that they bear little resemblance to the human beings we are today. This depiction of this primordial human state is not so much an effort to narrate the history of the human race as to communicate the incompatibility of the notions of subjectivity and complete identity with God in Nature. Though depicted as individual persons, the characters of Adam and Eve before the 'Fall' are symbols of prelapsarian identity with the All or the Whole, rather than of true subjective consciousness or human life. They can think, but they don't really have to; they can act, but what for? They are made in God's image, but the situation depicted in the Garden of Eden scenario is one in which every need is attended to, everything assured, every goal, physical or spiritual, either achieved or

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effortlessly attained. Our story has, in representational language, shown us that though subjectivity has been in principle attained, it will remain merely potential without a ‘gap’ between the human individual and the Absolute Unity we call Nature and God. More simply put, to be a true self, one must live in a true difference from God, and one must live in a true difference from the orderly flow of Nature in which thought, decision and intention are replaced by instinct. To exist in the supposed paradise of the Garden of Eden would be to exist in semi-consciousness, animal-like; human beings would be the most intelligent creatures of the forest, but animal creatures they would remain.

The ‘gap’ between human being and Nature, the ‘gap’ between the human being and God, is a *separation* (once again). While yet a part of Being -- while yet of God and of the earth -- the human person, to be a person, represents a more complex creation, one whose further definition and differentiation from the Whole *includes his or her knowing that there is a separation and a differentiation*. The human person or subject can say “I” in the sense that s/he knows himself to be a thinking, choosing, experiencing consciousness which is not God and not merely continuous with the natural world around him: s/he is a separate conscious entity. Thus, the human being cannot run on mere instinct. S/he cannot let nature do his thinking for him. This gap or separation is symbolized by the story of the eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad, and the first couple’s subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden: the fruit is the fulfilment of subjective potential (the highlighting of the fact that personhood integrally entails a separation from the Whole); the banishment is the reality of the fact that once self-consciously aware, the human being cannot legitimately opt out of selfhood. For good or for ill, the human person is distinct from the unity of the natural order that surrounds him.

I suggest to you that the narrative’s depiction of Adam and Eve’s initial state of unreflective existence in Paradise, along with their later

disobedience and banishment from that state, in fact represent the revealing of the true nature of the human person as Subject and the fact that, in order to be the fully conscious, God-imagined and self-directed elements of God’s creation, human beings must be distinct and separate from God, while yet of the Whole of Being. The story of the Fall is a symbolic description of the human self within the realm of Being.

We would, at this point, do well to wonder why, if all that we have said is true, and our very most Godlike aspect is precisely the subjective self-awareness and consequent freedom that, in fact, necessarily separates us from God, Scripture emphatically equates the attainment or possession of this separate consciousness with nothing less than sin. It is by *transgressing* a commandment of the Almighty that Adam and Eve achieve self-awareness and the godlike qualities of freedom, creativity and drive, and full sense of individuality. Are we to suppose that God did not really desire that we be fully aware and individual beings? Should we believe that the human creativity by which the heights of civilization and culture have been attained, and the cultivation of the world of human meaning and depth of purpose which have emerged from subjective consciousness are in some sense, contrary to God’s will? It is in our freedom and our creativity that we most nearly emulate our God. How are we to interpret the fact that the Genesis narrative has these qualities stemming from nothing other than sin and disobedience? And, in contemplating our answer, we might consider the related question of whether the Paradise of the Biblical Garden of Eden really is a paradise after all.

One key to understanding the deep issues underlying the Adam and Eve story is, I would indeed argue, the fact that although usually taken to *explain* the entrance of sin into the pristine world, this ‘explanation’ assumes what it sets out to prove: the ‘argument’ is a circular one. Let us briefly examine this. If Adam and Eve’s disobedience is the explanation for (among other things) the human tendency to sin (to desire that which is contrary to God’s Commandment and Will), and before this act,

Ontology 2 : Paradise Outgrown – Genesis 1:1 - 1:4

human beings had no sinfulness (i.e. sinful desire) in them, how, we might ask, did it come about that Eve (or Adam, for that matter) was susceptible to the suggestion of the snake, when that suggestion was clearly and explicitly of something that was contrary to God's Will and Command? Again, if Eve did not already have the desire for things not permitted her by God, how could anything the snake said to her result in her wanting to try the fruit? Clearly, there was in her (and, as we see further on, in Adam as well) some measure of vague desire for that which God had forbidden to them.

The answer, I submit, is this: rather than an explanation for the historical genesis of sin, the story of the Fall is most properly to be seen as a description or a glimpse into the anatomy of subjective consciousness and (in its potency) sin. What is it that Adam and Eve desire (what does the snake offer)? Knowledge of the good and the bad – consciousness of the nature of the world necessary for true choice, for a life of reason and self-determination, as opposed to a continuation of undifferentiated unity with Nature and with God: the snake offers the first pair the development and realization of the human nature that God had blessed them with; he offers them human, as opposed to mere animal, life. The snake is the symbolic representation of the human potential to live in accordance with subjective self-awareness, creativity and dignity – the coming of true consciousness – gifts that God had already bestowed upon Adam and Eve and which render them in God's image. Yet this gift of subjective consciousness had, until this point, been undersymbolized in the narrative: while numerically and physically separate (distinct) from one another, from God, and from the natural world, the first humans were not as yet self-aware or fully conscious – their 'subjectivity' was, in essence, merely potential. The further narrative event of the story of the Fall serves to underscore the fact that the subjective potential was already there (and thus, God-given), as the desire to overreach the original state of semi-conscious primordial unity was present (they desired the fruit, albeit vaguely). The Fall likewise (and perhaps most

importantly) flags the fact that the subjective state is a double-edged sort of blessing: it is with the experience of the "I" that the Self can begin wrongfully to set itself in opposition to God (the Supreme Self) and to other selves, seeking to establish itself falsely as Absolute. We have the power to choose goodness or to choose sin.

This is, I realize, to some minds, a rather radical interpretation of the story of the Fall. A simple understanding of the text would have us believe that everything was hunky-dory, wonderful, in fact, in Paradise before Eve decided to heed the words of the snake. Upon disobeying God and partaking of the fruit they had been forbidden, Adam and Eve became sinners, and the world was forever changed. Since then, great evils, both human and natural, happen every day, we struggle with the inclination to sin in our own lives, and the path of our life's journey is often far from smooth. All these negative things are the direct consequence of the first couple's disobedience. This we hear from the pulpits, this we learned well in Sunday school. Would that they had never sinned! Oh, to have the chance to return to Eden! Or not.

I submit that it is first and foremost the fact of separation in the sense of distinction from God which is being symbolized by the fact that God orders Adam to refrain from partaking of the fruit of the tree. This is to say that rather than desiring that human beings remain limited to animal-like subsistence in unselfconsciousness, God intends for them to exist as fully realized and subjective selves. Yet, this relative independence integrally involves distance, separation, and loss of unity – all neatly indicated in symbolic language by prohibition. Self-aware or self-conscious subjectivity represents all those qualities by virtue of which humanity is most closely in God's image; yet it is had only at the cost of enduring a consciousness of one's identity *as distinct from* God. Individual identity fundamentally involves a brokenness – one is aware of one's partial separation from the very ground of one's being. Packed right in to the existence as subject is an essential longing: one

Ontology 2 : Paradise Outgrown – Genesis 1:1 - 1:4

longs for the very unbroken unity with God that is impossible if one is to be that which one most essentially is. Subjective identity and consciousness is at once a blessing (gift) and a curse.

And it is the very nature of the human being which makes sin possible. As fundamentally united with Nature, as thus, with God, the animal cannot sin. The animal works only in accordance with the laws of nature; all that it does constitute aspects of the harmonious operation of the natural order. The animal cannot pit itself against the natural order, but is part of what constitutes that order. Not so with man. As a thinking, choosing, self-conscious and thus free being, the human person, if behaving in a human fashion, constitutes a break with the unthinking order of mere instinct and nature: s/he is free to choose to act in accordance with the requirements of morality or to reject them. Thus, while not in itself sinful, the human individual's existence as individual, reflective, self-identity is the very condition for the possibility of sin.

The fact that it is the human being's existence as self-reflective subject that renders sin possible extends beyond the bare fact that as a choosing being, man is responsible for his choices. Crucial to the notion of sin is the fact of *what* it is that one chooses. And this, above all, refers back to the fact of the self. One can make choices based upon a desire for self-aggrandizement (that is, one can be self-serving) or one can choose in accordance with one's essential nature as a self related in its very nature to God. For, although the human being is a conscious entity with an identity distinct from that of God and God's order, s/he nonetheless exists only *within* that order: one is fundamentally and in one's very being, *of God*. We can see sin as the attempt of the human subject to establish its subjective identity over and against the subjective identity of other selves, and over and against the underlying unity of the self with God.

Thus, though extreme in its nature, the story of Cain and Abel reflects the essential nature of human sin: as the self strives to establish its own

identity, it can choose to extend beyond itself; the finite self attempting to secure its selfhood overextends its boundaries, and seeks to be the Infinite. Sin seeks to raise the individual self above all others and all finitude: in sin the individual ceases to seek God and rather attempts to *be* God. And this attempt is both impossible to fulfil (one is not God) and unwarranted (as finite, the human being cannot encompass or appropriate the Infinite Whole of which one is a part). Thus, the sinful soul is that finite subjectivity which, out of fear or jealousy, seeks to annihilate the subjective selves of others, establishing itself as supreme. And the quintessential representation of this desire – the epitome of sin – is the murder for self-gain of the Cain and Abel story.

Selfhood is the ultimate gift from God – it is this that renders the human being that element of creation which exists in God's image. Yet it is this same feature of human life which is the parent of sin. The Paradox of the human condition is this: that the human being, as finite subject (self) is a self among selves, whose essence and purpose is a union with that Supreme Self (God) – a union in which the individuality of the finite self is preserved and not annihilated. Rather than a return to Paradise and the pre-human state of incomplete subjectivity, we should be longing for the Redeemed state of the world, in which union with God and full human subjectivity obtain in blessed harmony. The Book of Genesis seeks to reveal the nature of that Harmony; we have only to open our eyes. The Kingdom of God is always already there

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