

### Ontology Part 3 : The Cain and Abel Story (or Who do You Love?)

In essay #2, we touched briefly upon the story of Cain and Abel, observing that this first murder in human history occurred only after the complete attainment of full subjective consciousness had transpired, and was motivated by consuming jealousy – an emotion quintessentially related to subjectivity. We noted that it is the nature of subjectivity (that is, of being a *self*, an ‘I’) to exist in relationship not only to the non-subjective world, but also in relationship with other selves as well as with God (the Supreme and Originary Self). It is with the attainment of subjectivity that sin as a possibility emerges: the nascent self can elect to accept its subjective nature as finite and limited (i.e. human) or it, threatened and self-absorbed, can choose to seek to establish itself as supreme. In sum, the human being, as a subjective self, can either live in a way in which it accepts its own finite limitation (its dependence upon God and its essential relatedness to other human selves) or it can reject the reality of its situation and, pitting itself against all other selves, endeavor to assert its subjectivity at the expense of other human beings, and seek to establish itself in place of God.

Sin may be understood to be this frantic and aggressive flight from truth: the self, fully aware of its existence and its selfhood, is ever tempted to try to establish itself as the whole of existence, by subjugating (either mentally or, in fact, physically) the world to itself. Sin is the (self-aware) *part’s* attempt to be the *Whole*. It is the human quest for God gone awry, which perverts itself into a human quest to *be* God. What is most characteristic, then, of sin is its nature as attempt to extinguish the subjectivity (selfhood) of another. Sin takes many forms, but can be seen universally as the denial of one’s equality in subjectivity with other selves, and ultimately, of one’s beholden dependence upon the Supreme Self (God). The sinning self feels itself threatened by the existence of others insofar as they are selves

just as much as s/he is. The sinning self seeks to appropriate as much of creation (reality) to itself and its own determinations as it is able (through knowledge, power, consumption, etc.). It thus worships the creature rather than the Creator, as the worship of the creature betrays an ultimate ‘worship’ of the subject itself – a quest to exceed its own limitation by means of possession, appropriation, or subordination.

Now let us look even more closely at the Cain and Abel story – we have examined the ‘punch line,’ so to speak, now let us see how we got there.

Cain, we are told, is a ‘tiller of the ground,’ while his brother Abel is a ‘keeper of sheep.’ Suddenly – or at least, without directive or direct provocation from God – the boys get it into their heads to offer up a sacrifice to the Almighty. This is the very first mention of sacrifice in the Biblical narrative, and we note that our boys are provided with no instructions concerning how to proceed. First, we must observe that the fact that the text presents the idea of this sacrifice as coming to Cain and Abel without their having been commanded by God to sacrifice is telling of something extremely important: it is of the nature of subjectivity (selfhood) to know itself in the light of God – that is, to be a self involves knowing that one is a creature of God. The desire to worship, to have personal contact with God, to offer God one’s thanks, as well as to sanctify something of one’s life by setting it apart as holy (an offering to God) – these things are pictured in the narrative as natural; they are part and parcel of what it means to be a human self. One does not have to be told.

So, Cain offers up his ‘fruit of the ground’ to the Lord, while Abel immolated the ‘firstlings of his flock and their fat.’ So far, so good. But then a surprising thing happens. God is not pleased with the sacrifice made by Cain, while He is tickled pink with the gift

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from Abel. Observe, if you would, that no reason for God's displeasure is given. It is not said that Cain's 'fruits of the ground' are tainted, blemished, or imperfect in any way. Cain was never told that he should not offer veggies to God. We are to presume that Cain had done nothing wrong outside of the sacrificial situation (we are not told that he had displeased God in any way before setting out to offer sacrifice). Cain, like Abel, has given to God the product of his means of livelihood, a gift which may be said to represent who he is. We are to presume that Cain did his best and gave his best, but God was nonetheless displeased. God "did not respect Cain or his offering."

Abel, on the other hand, had it made. God loved the sacrifice he offered, and loved him for making it. Abel, it would seem, could do no wrong. But what's the story with Cain? *Why* did God not accept his sacrificial offering?

The text itself not only remains strategically silent on this issue, but, I contend, does so in a way that leads the reader to question the narrative from many angles and arrive at many important spiritual truths. The nature of Biblical text, we must remember, is not so much to convey facts of history or even single-answer interpretations, but to provide a means by which we can discover many truths about God, about ourselves, and about our existence. Jewish text, in particular, has this virtue, and Judaism (even in pre-Rabbinic times) involves interpretation, exploration and discussion of sacred texts, rather than simple memorization of them. The things left unsaid in a text such as the Cain and Abel story can prove at least as important as the things it tells us: Biblical silence is a pregnant silence.

There are several plausible interpretations of this text, and I shall offer what I take to be among the most fruitful of them. First, we can attribute God's rejection of Cain and his

offering to God's knowledge of Cain's heart and His foreknowledge of what Cain would, in fact, do in reaction to God's negative judgement. This seems plausible, as God is Omniscient, and certainly knows all there is to know about Cain and his future actions. But what makes this account somewhat less than satisfying is the fact that the text, of course, not only makes no reference to God's having judged Cain in this way, but moreover explicitly indicates that God's displeasure was with the actual offering that Cain provided. It is a stretch of the text, I would indeed argue, to attempt to justify God's rather inscrutable reaction in this manner. There is no direct evidence, either, that God rejects Cain's offering in order to test him (despite God's Omniscience, we can see that God does sometimes test human beings, perhaps for the increase of their own self-knowledge). Once again, it is a possibility, but one that departs significantly from the actual text.

Another fruitful understanding involves the acknowledgement of the awesomeness of God, and the fact that we cannot always fathom God's reasons. God's ways are not our ways. Bad things do happen to good people, and our worldly condition or state is not always indicative of our actions or moral character. Cain's sacrifice is rejected, presumably even though he was good and the offering he made was good. We cannot understand God's reason for doing it, but Cain's worldly condition is now inferior to that of his brother. Upon this interpretation, we are invited to see that our worldly life is not, ultimately, where our heart should be directed, but that our treasure must lie in our relationship with God. Life can be fulfilling and blessed even if we don't have our worldly life as we would want it. We must guard against valuing our worldly life, position, possessions, reputation, attachments, etc. as if they were ultimate, for they are not. And Cain is invited to live justly despite having gotten a 'raw deal' in worldly matters, promised by

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God that if he ‘does well’ (obviously, if he ‘does well’ in light of his new challenges without allowing worldly values to turn him bitter and lead him to sinful, self-seeking rebellion), all will be well with him. A valuable lesson.

Sociologists, of course, offer us the explanation that the story is a product and a reflection of a social struggle for ascendancy between agriculturalists and shepherds, but (while this may indeed be true) such a reductionist analysis of the tale simply ignores the theological intention of the text, its value as a theological document and its nature as an explanation of the human relationship to the Divine. While, certainly, sociological conditions *influence* our ideas, it is a bold assertion indeed to claim that they *cause* our ideas and beliefs: while it is reasonable to affirm a dialectical relationship of influence between our ideas and our socio-cultural situation, to reduce the one to the other denies the very real influence that our ideas often have in the formation of our socio-cultural situation. We are conscious, intending, and choosing selves, after all (and this is what the Biblical text tells us); our ideas influence our situation and our actions at least as much as they are influenced by our situation.

Next, we may look at God’s rejection of Cain’s offering as embodying the principle that the correct way for us to live involves a high level of conscious dependence on God. Abel, as keeper of sheep, is ‘closer to God’ insofar as he is much more dependent upon nature, upon God’s action, than is his brother, the tiller of the soil. Abel is less in control; he is less of an agent in the situation, he has less occasion to use his human ingenuity, his creative talents, his reason than does his brother Cain. As a farmer, Cain’s success depends upon the use of all of these talents and abilities. Cain’s occupation demands that he be a sort of creator: he must plan, execute his plan, use his reason and calculative abilities to make his project work – in short,

his dependence upon God through nature, while of course present, is minimized in comparison with Abel’s. Yet, even reminding ourselves of the symbolic nature of such narratives (that is, we are most emphatically not supposed to conclude from this story that God ‘has it in’ for farmers), we are left wondering why it is that God would give us these creative and ratiocinative abilities and become wrought when we actually use them! What is the message here?

I would argue that, in fact, a part of what is being symbolized in the Cain and Abel narrative is indeed the principle of the importance of remaining conscious of our need for and dependence upon God: the more we utilize our God-given talents and abilities, achieving relative independence, the more we are in danger of forgetting about God and about the fact that, ultimately, everything does depend on God. This line of reasoning dovetails very nicely with the initial story of the “Fall” in Genesis 3: in our analysis of that narrative, we found that our subjective nature as selves is, in fact, double-edged: our most God-like qualities are actualized and are utilized as a result of the very act that the story tells us is forbidden. In that context, as we recall, we did not conclude that God wanted us to remain semi-conscious and animal-like, but rather that the Knowledge was symbolized as forbidden simply to underscore its double-edged and dangerous nature: to live in the image of God is to be separate from God in the sense of having relative independence. However, it is only through such subjective living in the image of God that we can feel the distance between ourselves and the Source of our Being, as well as live in the danger that we might think ourselves to be more independent than we are and forget about our rooted dependence upon God for all things. The Cain and Abel story symbolically makes this point again, but this time with a twist ...

We recall that in our study of the sin of Adam and Eve, we found that, contrary to

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what we might at first think, the Bible is not telling us that we ought to wish or to strive for a return to a pre-subjective state in which unity with nature and with God is bought at the price of our true, reasoning, creative, deliberating, conscious selfhood. Rather, it is our nature as such creative, intelligent, and choosing selves that most defines us as being created in the image of God. So, what ought we to be striving for? We concluded at the end of that study that it is the Redeemed world and our own Redemption as human beings that we must keep as our goal. What is this Redemption? We might understand Redemption as that state in which we are fully subjective – we are fully actualized selves – but are so in such a way that our selfhood does not pit us against God, the world, or other selves in our effort to realize that selfhood. Redemption is living as a self in harmony with our God, the Supreme Self.

Looking at the Cain and Abel vignette from this perspective will, I maintain, afford us some essential and much-needed clarity: We might ask what it is that we must transcend in order to live in harmonious Redemption. The answer can only be that we must transcend or give up a conception of ourselves as being body only -- that is, of seeing the world and its values as the extent of all existence. The sinning, grasping, and contending self seeks its own glorification; it seeks to *be* the Absolute by appropriating the whole world (an impossible task, to be certain), and it seeks to reduce all other selves to objects of its determination and power. The sinning self tries to edge out God, and the sinning self, in order to do that, denies the reality of God and the spiritual. It tries to live in the contradiction of being a self (spirit) while denying Spirit. Such a self acknowledges only the materiality of its nature.

Looking at the Cain and Abel story, we can see symbolized within it this very message. Abel is offering to God (sacrificing, ‘giving up’) animal meat – symbolic of his nature as

an *animal*, a pre-subjective, selfish-desire-and-instinct-driven being. As a human self, one cannot be a mere animal, and to live as one, governed only by instinct and self-serving desire, is to become what we have called the ‘sinning self’ -- that self whose ‘ego’ tries to supplant God and bring the world and other selves into submission to itself. Abel gives up his meat, his animal body, to God, and in so doing, he acknowledges and accepts his spiritual, human nature. He gives up self-obsession in his sacrifice; one’s nature as carnal (animal) is only a part of human selfhood: divorced from spirit, it is nothing other than base self-worship. Yet, our animal nature is close to us (it is half of what we are), thus it is our temptation as half animal to ignore our spiritual component and be mere animal selves – the sinning self that tries to ‘devour’ and subjugate the world and render itself Supreme. And that is what Abel is giving up, that which is close to him but is not authentic. Abel’s sacrifice represents his saying ‘yes’ to God, to living truly in the divine image as carnal *and* spiritual, a self in the dependence and light of God.

In contrast, Cain’s sacrifice is unworthy, as what he gives up does not represent anything truly essential to his soul. His sacrifice of plant matter does not bear the same import as his brother’s offering of flesh and blood: Cain has not given up anything terribly close to himself; he has not given up the human self’s real temptation to inauthenticity. Cain has not submitted himself to God and embraced his truly human nature.

Now this understanding of the text, we may see, is borne up by what happens next in the story. After having had his sacrifice rejected by God, Cain’s countenance fell. God notices this, and informs Cain that he has no reason to despair, as he will be accepted if he does well. Surely this is an inscrutable statement on most interpretations of the text, for we have already observed both that Cain has as yet done

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nothing wrong, and that there was nothing negative said about the quality of the produce that he offered to the Lord. It would seem that Cain had, in fact, done nothing wrong, but was rejected nonetheless! What is God saying to Cain in this passage?

Upon our interpretation, God's words to Cain make perfect sense. Cain has offered *as* he should, but has not offered *what* he should. He has not given up to God his animal, self-serving nature, but has kept that and offered God a mere trifle (something inessential to his life). And Cain's subsequent actions -- befitting only a human animal -- the murder of another self (his brother!), the annihilation of another's selfhood -- shows us precisely what he has not given up. It is, I contend, in seeing what the respective sacrifices represent in the lives of subjective human beings that the deep meaning of the Cain and Abel story can be brought forth.

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November, 2006**