



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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What Makes Evil Evil?

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"I want to look at good and evil and how they work as forces in the world," Martha said. "I think I have a pretty good understanding of good and God, but don't have such an understanding of evil."

With these words Martha introduced the main theme on which she wanted to focus at the Directed Prayer Retreat. She gave me a series of questions to which she was seeking answers:

What is evil?

Are good and evil two separate forces or are they two sides of the same coin depending on the motive behind decision?

Are both of them generated by decisions people make?

How does good overcome evil?

"I need some clarification," I said. "Tell me some more of what you mean when you speak of evil."

"I guess I'm not very clear myself," Martha replied. "It seems to me that evil is the opposite of good, but I don't know what makes evil evil, or good good."

Martha seemed to be thinking about what she had said, then she added, "I believe God is a summation of all that is good. Goodness is a reflection and an expression of God." She paused, then choosing her words carefully, she continued, "To be good is to be God-like. To do good is to choose to be God-like and to respond to God's love by loving as God loves."

She seemed to be considering what she had said. "That's about as far as I have gone. I feel comfortable with those concepts, but I don't have any answers about evil."

"That's something of a problem, isn't it?" I responded. "If to be good is to be God-like, and to do good is to choose to be God-like, then what does it mean to be evil or to do evil?"

Martha struggled for an answer. "Evil is the opposite of good. Therefore, it is the opposite of God." She hesitated. "That must mean that to be evil or to do evil is to be unGodlike and to do unGodlike things."

"I'm not sure I know what it means to be unGodlike, or to do unGodlike things."

"Neither do I," she replied. "I think what I've said is true, only it's not enough. What do you think?"

I didn't answer right away. "Maybe," I suggested, "there is more to evil than an action. Maybe evil is to seek fulfillment through one's own resources and strengths, leaving God out. Maybe it is to strive to preserve self apart from God. If this is true, it could be that what makes evil evil is the intention behind the action, and not the action itself. Maybe the intention makes an action unGodlike or not."

"I haven't heard that idea before," Martha said, "and I don't quite grasp it yet. I guess I need to hear you say it again."

I repeated what I had said, and sat in silence as she mulled it over. I was intrigued by the play of expressions on her face, but couldn't really tell what they meant.

"You're suggesting that it is the intention behind the action that makes something evil?"

"Yes, you might want to consider that possibility."

"I hadn't thought about it before, but it does seem like a possibility. An action can be either good or evil according to the intention. If I go to help my neighbor with her spring cleaning, and my intention is to ingratiate myself, or put her under obligation to me, that would be evil, wouldn't it? But, if I do it because she needs help and I want to help her, I would be doing the same thing, and it would be good."

"That could be how it goes together."

Martha sat in a deep study. At last she shook herself, looked at me, and said, "What is the intention that turns a deed into good – or evil? Isn't it appropriate to seek fulfillment?"

"Those are very good questions. I wonder where we can find some answers."

Martha pondered this, "Good intention isn't enough by itself."

"Say some more."

"Well, I can tell myself I have good intentions when I do or say something, and it may turn out badly. I can use my good intentions to excuse or justify a bad action or outcome."

I didn't say anything.

"Whether an intention is good or bad doesn't seem to me to be specific enough." Martha continued, "It doesn't seem to me that a bad intention automatically makes the action evil any more than a good intention automatically makes the action good. Maybe it is a particular intention."

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking about the intention that turns a deed into evil – or good. Maybe it is the intention to seek fulfillment through one's own resources and strengths rather than through God's that makes the difference."

"The intention to seek fulfillment? What makes fulfillment so desirable? What is fulfillment?"

Martha spoke musingly. "God created us in His image with the potential for living constructive, useful lives in community with each other. We can be loved and love. We can be served and serve. We can be nurtured and nurture. We can experience all that it means to be children of God. It can all be ours in caring relationship, as God is in relationship with us. God has provided the resources and the guidelines for their use. He has made it clear that fulfillment, satisfaction, wholeness result where those resources and guidelines are used. Fulfillment is for me to know in faith that I am loved and accepted by God.

"He also has made it clear that we are free either to accept or to reject what He has given. When I choose to seek fulfillment through my own resources and wisdom, I choose to be outside the relationship with God. I choose to be against God. The same thing is true if I choose to try to preserve myself apart from God. Acting on the intention to seek fulfillment or to preserve myself in that way makes the action evil."

Martha paused, and seemed to be thinking about what she had said. "That's it. The intention to seek fulfillment, or wholeness, and to try to preserve myself apart from God turns my actions into evil. It opposes God and denies the means given us to be good and do good. It's unGodlike. That's what you were saying, isn't it?"

I didn't answer directly. "Is there merit in being, or doing good?"

"If you mean, 'Does one get credit or reward for being or doing good?' I don't think so. I am good and I do good in response to what God has already given me and created me to be. It is not to get credit or reward."

Neither of us said anything. Finally, I broke the silence.

"Does it seem to you that you have worked out the answers to your questions?"

"Let me think about that," Martha said.

Shortly she continued, "I have a clearer sense of what evil is. It appears that good and evil are two sides of the same coin. And certainly it seems apparent that both good and evil are determined by the motive. "All that seems to fit, but does it mean that I should not seek fulfillment?"

"Maybe," I responded, "what I need to recognize is that I am already fulfilled, and if I am, to seek fulfillment is off target. Maybe, instead of seeking fulfillment I need to acknowledge what has been all the time."

"Certainly." Martha replied. "I don't need to seek fulfillment, if I already have it. But how can that be and why don't I feel it?"

"I don't know," I said, "But I do believe we already have fulfillment. To know and accept that I am loved and accepted by God is to know that I am already fulfilled – completed. There are no strings. Therefore, to seek fulfillment is off target. It is pointless effort."

"I believe that, too." Martha replied. "What happens that I don't feel it, and so I keep on seeking?"

"You tell me."

"It just seems like I ought to do something."

"Do you mean do something to earn – or to gain – fulfillment?"

"Yes. All my life I've been taught to be concerned about whether or not I have obtained salvation. Nobody talked about fulfillment, but I think they may be the same thing."

"Salvation – fulfillment – the same thing?"

"Yes," Martha said. "I was taught that salvation was gift of God, but that I must obey the rules and do all the right things or I would not be saved. Even though God had done all the things for me to be saved through Jesus Christ, I still had to earn it. I lived in fear of being cast into Hell. Salvation was to be saved from my sins."

"That isn't what you mean when you say that salvation and fulfillment are the same thing, is it?" I asked.

"No, fulfillment wasn't a part of the teaching. Nothing was said about seeking, or having, fulfillment. I've just come to realize that I'm not satisfied with the concept of salvation (or fulfillment) as a future reward for proper behavior. I now believe that my salvation is in the realization that I am a beloved child of God and in expressing that realization each day of my life. This, to me, is the same thing as fulfillment."

"I see the similarity."

"But," Martha continued, "I can't seem to get away from an underlying belief that fulfillment is to be earned. There is something else for me to do, so I go seeking."

"And," I said, "we have suggested that to seek fulfillment (or salvation) is to be on the side of evil."

"Yes we have." Martha said. "I don't want to be on the side of evil. That underlying belief must go."

I watched the play of emotions on Martha's face.

"When Jesus summarized the Law, he said, 'Love God ... and your neighbor as yourself.'" "How does that fit?", Martha asked.

I replied, "If I love you for the purpose of getting something for myself, all I've done is use you to try to obtain something. I've neither loved you nor me. It may be that loving you as I love myself is my response to God's love, not what I do to seek or assure that God loves me."

"So we're back to the issue of motive again." Martha considered that, then said, "The same thing applies in First Corinthians, chapter 13, doesn't it?"

"Make the application for me."

"It seems to me that Paul was saying that, unless love is the reason for doing what you do, the result is unsatisfactory to everyone involved. And he was writing about how love expresses itself in human relations."

"What does that have to do with evil?"

"Doing things because of God's kind of love is being like God. Doing things for any other reason is unGodlike. Any other reason would almost certainly involve seeking a desired reward or return, hoping for fulfillment."

"So again you have noted it is the intention to seek fulfillment through one's own resources and strength that makes a deed evil."

"Yes, I have. But I still haven't figured out how good overcomes evil. I believe it does, but I don't know how it happens."

"I wonder if it would help to look at Jesus' parables of the Kingdom?" I asked.

Martha seemed puzzled, so I continued, "I'm thinking about the one about the wheat and the tares specifically. (Matthew 13:24-30) They grow in the field together. If you try to pull up the tares, the wheat gets destroyed also – unless you wait until the harvest, when the two can be safely separated. Maybe good and evil co-exist instead of one overcoming the other. Or to say it another way – evil does not ever become good as good does not become evil. Both exist and are in opposition to one another. Good crowds evil out, and certainly, evil can crowd good out."

"I see that," Martha said. "I need to keep in mind what makes evil evil, and good good."

"Tell me again what that is."

"The result of my effort to find my fulfillment apart from my relationship to God is evil. The result of my realization that God has given me my fulfillment is good. I either seek fulfillment and direct my efforts to gaining it, or know that I am fulfilled by the Grace of God and express that reality in how I live. I am unGodlike, or Godlike. I live on the side of evil, or on the side of good."

Martha was silent for a long time. "As much as I want to, I seem not to be able to be Godlike all the time. That troubles me."

"If good and evil co-exist," I said. "I must face the fact that, in this life, I am, or may be, both. But I set as my goal to be on the side of good."

"Yes," Martha replied.

There was a comfortable silence between us.

I made one final comment. "This has been quite a discussion. It has helped me to clarify these issues, too. The role of intention in human behavior is even more apparent to me. It may seem simplistic to identify evil as the result of seeking fulfillment apart from God but it all fits for me."

"And for me." Martha said.