

The Nature of God: A Comparative Analysis of *Young Goodman Brown*
and "The Tyger"

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(Editor's note: This essay by Brandon Gannicott is the winner of the North Award for the best paper in the 2013 Agora.)

Because our society is founded on the Judeo-Christian tradition, the labels "good" and "evil" are deeply ingrained in our collective moral framework. We trace the qualities of "good" to God, the Creator, and the characteristics of "evil" to Satan, the Tempter (Jaynes 67). This belief that God is good, that Satan is bad, and that humans must embrace one while rejecting the other has been a cornerstone of our thought for centuries. However, the inherent conflict between an omniscient, benevolent God and the existence of suffering, or evil, vexes philosophers and everyday thinkers alike. A survey conducted by George Barna asked American respondents what question they would pose to God if they had the opportunity and were assured of a straight answer. "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" was the most common response, indicating that this question continues to perplex us (Ahmad 101). This pain and suffering is sometimes caused by forces beyond human control, but frequently, it is caused by people. We tend to connect the perceived good or evil of an act to the moral worth of the actor, leading to a damaging cycle of misplaced guilt when applied to ourselves. This view casts the world in absolute terms and encourages the repression of supposedly evil urges and the necessity of secrecy for the urges that we find hardest to contain. Furthermore, this view makes us wonder if we should endeavor to stamp out any negative feelings that religious dogma has deemed undesirable. Taking that approach would mean that our mission on Earth would

essentially become self-destructive because we would be silencing our primal voice, and in turn, taking that route would indicate that we would be living in contradiction to God's design.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's seminal work, *Young Goodman Brown*, and William Blake's pair of poems, "The Tyger" and "The Lamb," when taken together, provide rich fodder for an exploration of good, evil, and the nature of God. In "The Tyger," as a companion to his earlier poem, "The Lamb," Blake asks a fundamental question about the supposed benevolence of God, whereas Hawthorne's piece presents a multi-layered argument against Puritan conceptions of absolute good and evil. Their works complement each other and suggest that ultimately, the Creator is more like his creations than traditional theology would have us believe. The question of God's moral disposition does not necessarily have to be relegated to ineffable mystery, privy only to those with sufficient faith. I contend that there exists a reciprocal relationship between all Creators and their Creations, instantiated in the act of Creation, such that greater understanding of one party's nature yields symmetrical understanding of the other. Our difficulty in accepting the presence of evil in our lives may lie in our disinclination to engage and to reconcile the evil within ourselves.

How shall we define good and evil for the purposes of this discussion? Though unanimous consensus is very rare in philosophical circles, a working definition of "good" might include such classical virtues as compassion, mercy, selflessness and respect for natural rights. Evil, according to University of Tennessee lecturer Michael Jaynes, is the set of "actions that occur with regular frequency in the human experience that have been labeled 'bad'...by a magisterial society" (69). Thus, "evil" acts as a signifier of societal attitudes as evinced by the variance in morality over time and across cultures. The next step after defining "evil" is to

explain its presence and, if possible, to reconcile its conflict with the existence of an omnipresent and benevolent God. In attempting to address this dilemma, I will focus on the philosophy put forward in Blake's and Hawthorne's texts, interpreting them in terms of a theory of reflexive divinity.

This theory draws on Romantic philosophy, which sprang up in response to the dehumanizing developments of the Industrial Revolution, and which made the natural state of humans sacrosanct ("Romanticism"). William Blake, the adopted father of Romanticism in England, produced engravings of astounding quality alongside his poetry and prose. The subject matter of his engravings often ran counter to orthodox religious doctrine, and therefore, he was ignored until his posthumous biography was published by Alexander Gilchrist (Bloom 5). As a Romantic, Blake believed strongly in the cultivation of earthly joy and rejected the traditional virtues of self-denial. He also disagreed with the concept of a separate and superior God *vis-à-vis* humanity, holding instead that divinity resides in humans (Blake 30). Specifically, the imagination became the residence of the divine for Blake: "the Human Imagination, which is the Divine vision & Fruition in which Man liveth eternally... it is the Human Existence itself" (qtd. in Wilson 67). This notion of confluence between humanity and divinity provides the foundation for my explanation of the problem of evil.

Blake's illuminated volume *Songs of Innocence and Experience* contains "The Lamb" as a "song of innocence," and indeed, it portrays God as meek and mild, a lamb himself (485). In this poem, Blake presents an immature, one-dimensional conception of God as the embodiment of love and happiness, echoing the message of the New Testament (Bahnsen). The complete absence of any mention of evil consigns it to an ill-defined *other*, as a force antithetical to God.

Evil as a predatory counterpart to God arrives in the second part of the volume, in the “songs of experience.” “The Tyger” seems to be influenced by the Old Testament, with its God of jealousy and wrath (Pink 75). The narrator of the poem wonders aloud at what “immortal hand or eye” would craft a beast as terrible and powerful as the tiger. The titular animal becomes an emblem for evil, a consuming force of destruction. The tone of “The Tyger” is intimidating and terrifying, comparing God to a foul blacksmith, daring to build a predator whose only mission is to bring death to its prey, which happens to be other products of his anvil. In “The Tyger,” Blake makes reference to the tiger’s sibling in line 20: “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?,” a query whose incredulous tone contains the gist of Blake’s challenge. The paradox is clear: if God is a Lamb, and if He created his beloved humans in his own image, as indicated in Genesis 1.26, then why would He create suffering and fear, in the form of the Tyger?

Nathaniel Hawthorne also challenges the assumption that reality is split cleanly between good and evil. Hawthorne is known for his melancholy stories revealing the dark side of the Puritanical worldview, writing tales that warn against living in a world of moral absolutes. *Young Goodman Brown* is open to various interpretations: the dark mass observed by the titular character at the climax of the narrative can be seen as a symbol of Christian hypocrisy, and Young Goodman Brown’s failure to resist the Devil has been taken as a rallying cry to uphold the Christian faith (Jaynes 68). However, a closer reading reveals that Hawthorne included much more in his work than what either of those somewhat shallow summaries captures. In fact, Hawthorne is attesting that what we define as “evil” dwells in every human heart: “The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man” (9). Hawthorne claims that evil is a part of our humanity: “Welcome...to the communion of your race. Ye have found

thus young your nature and your destiny" (11). However, it would be premature at this point to conclude simply that men are fallible and that Hawthorne's Puritans are hypocrites. Hawthorne is suggesting that despite centuries of literature and popular wisdom to the contrary, the attempt to repress and purge "impure" instincts is a mistake; under these circumstances, Hawthorne depicts Brown as retreating within himself when exposed to the natural imperfection of humanity and dying a bitter man. The young Puritan expects everything to fit neatly into good or evil categories and is not able to process the revelation that human nature resists these polarizing labels. In *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne also raises questions about the nature of the Almighty: why would a loving God imbue his creatures with sin, if He is purely good and genuinely interested in what is good?

In these works, Blake and Hawthorne have raised the eternal question of evil and provided some steps towards resolving it. Blake's duo of poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* challenges the assumption of a purely good Creator, by pointing out His willingness to create evil. Hawthorne challenges the same assumption by affirming the truth that no one can live up to the standards dictated by an absolute set of morals, and thus, according to Puritan thought, we are born evil. Therefore, we are faced with the paradox induced by viewing the world as a war between God and the Devil, "good" and "evil": If the force for good loves His creatures, it is hard to understand why He would also introduce evil into their internal and external reality.

A possible answer to this problem begins with the concept that we were made in God's image. This foundational assumption bridges the gap between the corporeal and the divine, allowing for an interchange of characteristics between the two. One need not believe in God to

accept the similarities between Him and humans: if we dreamed Him up, and if religion is entirely man-made, we would *still* expect to see ourselves reflected in Him, and *vice versa*. Human nature is “likely in a neutral state in regards to traditional ideas of good or evil,” and such is the state of the Creator (Jaynes 70). Therefore, I hold that the ancient axioms of good and evil do not satisfactorily reflect the evident condition of humanity, which is ever in a state of flux that encompasses moral right, wrong, and everything in between. The conflict between the concept of a loving God and the existence of evil can be resolved by allowing for the Creator and everyone in His creation to enjoy a reflexive relationship, in which truths about one illuminate symmetrical truths in the other. God, as a perfect Creator, naturally brings the full spectrum of what can exist into being, so evil exists in our world as well as our hearts.

Having established a reflexive justification for the existence of evil, it remains to be shown how we may understand it. The first step to understanding worldly evil is to embrace the natural urges within us, to assimilate them into our consciousness, and to learn to moderate all impulses, regardless of ethical categorization. If God created us and the universe, we can infer from our own natures that He must embody both good and evil along with everything else in order to be perfect. Unlike the Creator, we cannot always act with omniscient knowledge and perfect judgment, and we will fall prey to excess and commit evil acts. Perhaps much of our inability to accept the existence of evil in the world stems from our reticence to accept evil within ourselves. As we grow and learn from our tribulations, we must shed the innocent understanding of good as exemplified in “The Lamb,” come to know the reality of evil in “The Tyger,” and unlike Goodman Brown, have the courage to fulfill our natural roles and to live fully realized lives, with no need for polarizing terms that deify half of our internal psychology and

condemn the other half to guilt.

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