

As children, we are all taught the story of Adam and Eve. It seems straightforward: the devil approaches Eve, tricks her into eating the forbidden fruit, and ushers in the Fall. On the surface, this is a cute fable to teach children right from wrong. But with closer inspection, we can unlock some key elements which unfold into deep philosophical meaning.

Almost any Western study of the origin of evil requires visiting the Book of Genesis. In Chapter 2, we see God (or the Lord God) issuing commands and establishing what we come to recognise as the Garden of Eden. Chapter 3 begins, quite literally, with the serpent. There are variations in translation: some English translations begin with “And the serpent¹,” “Now the serpent²,” “But the serpent³,” or simply “The serpent⁴.” In German, the 1522 Luther translation begins “Und die Schlange” (and the snake), while the much later 2000 Schlachter translation begins “Aber die Schlange” (but the snake). Finally, the Latin Vulgate begins “Sed et serpens” (but the serpent).

Right away, there are some interesting things to note. First, the selected Latin, the German, and various English translations (also French) all identify this entity as some sort of crawling thing. The Latin and many English translations suggest a more general “serpent” while the German translations often follow Luther’s lead and call it a snake. Second, there a clear transition going on here. Consider: the previous chapter was setting up a new world, and the very first word of the next chapter announces a sort of disruption. In all previous declarations, God was announcing new elements, similar to introducing new cast members in a play.

Up to this point, all action and speech has been either from God, or an acknowledgement from creations of God of His goodness. Now we suddenly have a character speaking in an independent manner *not* in direct accordance with the will of God, and it is such a profound change that it prompts a new chapter and introduces this new word, “sed” in the Latin. Thus we have a disruption both at the level of narrative (chapter break) and of individual word, and the first challenge to God’s authority. Finally, we have the introduction of evil, which falls in accordance with Aristotle’s observation that in a complex tragedy, “the change of fortune involves a reversal or a discovery or both.”⁵

What kind of change is this? If we accept as complete our lessons from Sunday school, it is the introduction of evil into the world. Eve disobeys God, who throws a fit and kicks them out, ushering in horrible things like suffering and death. But this seems a bit simplistic and overly deterministic. Eve *may* have disobeyed God— joined in disobedience by Adam, who was standing right next to her— but if God actually saw that all of these things were good, why would an “evil” serpent be creeping around the Garden in the first place?

If we assume the serpent represents evil, then we also need to ask precisely *when* evil enters into the story. If evil was there all along in the form of the serpent, then the all-knowing God was incorrect to say that everything was good. If evil only entered when Eve made the choice to disobey God, then was evil in Eve, or in the choice itself? Put another way, could the lesson of this passage be that free will is evil? But if that is the case, then giving a choice at all would be in itself evil, meaning that the only good is mindless obedience, which doesn’t make any sense at all.

¹ New International Version

² New King James Version

³ Wycliffe Bible

⁴ Living Bible

⁵ *Poetics* I,1452a14 tr. Kenny

One approach to answering this question is to raise another: what exactly *is* a choice? To fully exercise free will, to make a choice, requires a multi-stage process. It begins with the stage before we are confronted with a choice, followed by the choice itself, then our action of actually making the choice, and finally, the stage where we have chosen. This is clearly what happens in this verse. The serpent emerges, offers a choice, Eve attempts to negotiate, and then chooses. But where does evil fit into this? It is clearly the second stage, which means that the initial stage of choice does not contain evil. Which also means that while evil is part of the choice process, it is *not* choice. What we have just witnessed is the introduction of time, via the stages of a choice.

Interpreting the serpent as representing time, rather than evil, makes much more sense. Aristotle comments in his *Physics* that we use time to explain a lot of bad things, such as ageing, decaying, and dying, but not so many good things: “In its own right, time is responsible for destruction rather than for generation, because it is a number of change, and change removes present properties.”⁶ We will return to this point presently. If this what the author of Genesis intended, we can view time as a conduit through which morality enters the world. But then we have to turn around and ask what *morality* is. Can morality exist only within time?

Let us reduce all of morality to a choice between good and evil. If we choose that which is good, we turn towards the good. If we choose that which is evil, then we turn towards the evil, which is also turning away from the good. We might also say that choosing the good is turning away from evil, but this isn’t quite true here. In the stages of choice, at the very first stage, before choice, we are already in some given state. If that state is the Garden of Eden, then, with the first stage, we are defaulted to the good, and it is only with an active choice that we turn away from the good. This would then offer a logical conclusion that evil is the privation of, or turning away from, the good.

If evil can only exist within time, and good can exist both in time and outside of time, then we have to ask what “properties” enable this difference. What other concepts share this distinction, where A exists only within time, while its opposite, B, can exist both within and without of time? Aristotle’s mentor Plato serves up a solid response to this, in dialogues like the *Laches* and *Charmides*, where the participants try (and mostly fail) to define concepts like courage and temperance. When discussing these themes, the default state most people desire is the good. For example, we want all soldiers who go into battle to display courage in theatre. When confronted with a choice— should I face my enemy and engage, or should I turn and run away in fear?— the ideal position would be to engage, and thus show courage, which helps orient towards the good. Thus, we might argue that the idea of courage alone can exist as a form outside of time, while cowardice only emerges when someone, within time, is forced to choose between courage and cowardice.

This brings us to a common theme in both Plato and Aristotle, the distinction between being and becoming. Returning to our quote from the *Physics*, we should ask what is meant by “present properties.” Where did these properties come from? If we are in the initial stage of our choice sequence, the present properties were those which existed before the choice. And if our proposal that the serpent represents time is correct, then the serpent also represents becoming, which means that the state of nature as display by the Garden of Eden is the state of being, not becoming. And if this is true, it opens up a whole lot of new implications for us.

For example: if morality can only exist within time as a product of choice, then, when we step outside of time, morality cannot exist. When we follow this reasoning to its logical conclusion, the result is that good – Plato’s form of the Good— can exist alone outside of time in the realm of the being, while in the time-bound world of becoming, the physical world, good coexists with evil. But if that’s true, then the entire material world is adulterated with the possibility of evil, which might

⁶ Aristotle’s *Physics* Book IV 221b1 (tr. Robin Waterfield)

explain why Socrates was so focused on the “soul” as a link to the world of being, and why he was so willing to drink the hemlock to escape becoming. Still, we must remember that we speak only of the *possibility* of evil in the world of becoming, not a guarantee.

This interpretation also adds texture to Plato’s *Parmenides*, in which young Socrates is grilled by the old and wise Parmenides. Note how the dialogue plays with time: not only is there a massive age difference between the two main interlocutors, but the dialogue itself was delivered by Antiphon, who “can recite from memory the discussion that Socrates and Zeno and Parmenides once had⁷” many years in the past. We could argue that each retelling is a particular of the original, the Eden-like state when the discussion actually took place. If the first occasion serves to represent the one in the realm of being, then each retelling, with deviations and imperfect replications of that first occasion, becomes a particular, having a partial degree of participation in the totality of the form of the one.

Next, we should look at this through a phenomenological lens. When we are young children, an hour seems like a very long time. As adults, that same hour, and even a full day, seems to pass by very quickly. As our lived experience and how we relate to the world matures, so in turn does our understanding of and perception of time. In other words, while time itself is objective and constant, the way in which we perceive it is not.

This would have been true for Eve. If the serpent was not simply an encounter with time, but her *first* encounter, then her choice, *the* first choice, would also represent the first existential dilemma. Notice how when the serpent asks her what God had commanded, her restatement of what she claims God said does not actually match what He said. We could view this as man falling short of understanding the divine, but we could also view this as Eve simply *forgetting* what God said, because time has passed and human memory is imperfect. Is faulty memory an artifact of Aristotle’s “destruction?”

Earlier, we asked whether free will could be evil. Although this is not the case— free will is our agency to choose between good and evil— can free will exist *without* evil? Assuming that both free will and evil can only exist within time, the answer seems to be no. We might further suggest that the purpose of free will is to allow us to choose evil, which would then imply, as previously argued, that free will exists only to lead us to evil. This lines up with the Socratic paradox which states that no one knowingly does wrong, and this paradox would likely be correct, were choices made outside of time. But, as our choices exist within time, they rely on an understanding of morality, which improves with time and experience from past choices. This understanding informs future choices and ideally helps us align more often with good than with evil.

Thus, knowledge of good and evil can only exist through time: we cannot have this knowledge without agency, and agency cannot exist without time. Why was time present in the Garden? If God saw time itself as good, perhaps it was to teach us that agency is better than mindless obedience, and that to knowingly choose good requires us to recognise that the good exists.

⁷ Parmenides 126b, tr. Gill and Ryan