

In our Time Programme 83  
*Evil*

**Melvyn Bragg** : Hello. In "Beyond Good and Evil", Nietzsche constructed an argument against what he called "the herd morality of Christianity". He complained quote "Everything that elevates the individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbour is henceforth called 'evil'". Nietzsche believed that it was a dangerous idea that distorted human nature, that evil was invented by a church which worshipped the weak and was a completely alien concept to the ideas of the noble philosophers of the ancient world. Was he right then, did Christianity really invent the idea of evil, and has the idea ever meant anything more than excessively bad.

With me to discuss the place of evil in Western philosophy is Jones Irwin, lecturer in philosophy at the University of Limerick, Stephen Mulholland tutor in philosophy at New College Oxford University, and Margaret Atkins, lecturer in theology at Trinity and All St's College at the University of Leeds.

Jones Irwin, Plato used the term - how do you pronounce it - Kakon?

**Jones Irwin** : Ka-kon.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Kakon, in the Republic, what did he mean by this, and how close is this to a classical definition of evil?

**Jones Irwin** : Well I think there is a question as to whether the concept of evil arrives until Christianity as to whether there really is a Greek conception of evil at all, because in Plato there are some paradoxes with regard to his conception of evil. He seems to regard evil as a privation, an absence of being and defines good as being, and therefore evil as by definition non-being. So in one sense evil doesn't strictly speaking exist at all, it's a privation of good. But on the other hand evil seems to play a part in his text in terms of the characters he describes. So for example if we take the Republic we have a figure like Thymocritus, who is very much a character of evil. So Plato from a metaphysical point of view is saying that evil is a privation, on the other hand he's saying it plays a very great part in the lives of people, and is a very powerful force that needs to be negated and worked against and I think this paradox in terms of the description of evil both seeing it as powerful but also as denying it any real status metaphysically, is a paradox which is going to continue right the way through the history of philosophy.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can you just unravel that a bit more? How did he arrive at the idea that it was a privation? What was the basis for his assertion...belief that it was a privation? Maybe belief's the wrong word here?

**Jones Irwin** : Yes..I..

**Melvyn Bragg** : Conclusion.

**Jones Irwin** : I think this is to do with the Greek optimism, that is shared both by Plato and Aristotle, and the view that being is good, that human beings naturally are good, and therefore that evil is a distortion or dysfunction, and so from that point of view evil isn't really natural, it's unnatural, and that's what leads Plato to say it doesn't really exist, other than as a dysfunction of what does exist, so it has a parasitic existence but not a real formidable existence, a primary existence, it's existence is secondary, something derivative, and this also leads Plato to say that no one would consciously or willingly, knowingly choose evil. One can only knowingly choose good, and therefore any choice of evil is the result of ignorance, the result of a lack of self-knowledge,

because if you know the good, if you know yourself, you will always choose the good and that's very much characteristic I think of the Greek optimism.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Is that something that he thought to be the case, or is it a programme that he wanted to be the case? Was it a teaching idea or was it a real insight, d'you think?

**Jones Irwin** : Yes. I think if we take the Republic, we can see it as a pedagogical device perhaps. We can see it in context as an attempt by Plato to posit a utopianism, so that his optimism, so that his optimism is based on what human beings *can* be and he wants to present human beings as ultimately naturally good, because he wants us to

think that we are good, so it is a pedagogical device I think to inspire us to be good. To say that really we're not really evil, we're really good, and the condition of evil which we're under is something we can transform, and change.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Margaret Atkins, for Plato all Earthbound qualities had their perfect counterpart as I understand it, in some other realm, but there's no form for bad or evil in Plato's theory of forms, and Aristotle a student of Plato abandoned this theory of forms. Why did he do that and where did he place good in his philosophical system?

**Margaret Atkins** : It's not quite true that Plato never mentions the form of good or a form of injustice, he mentions them briefly but doesn't really explore...

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well where's that? Could you tell us that?

**Margaret Atkins** : In the Republic he just touches on the possibility - he talks about the form of good and evil -the form of justice and injustice and then goes on, and that doesn't really get explored by Plato himself, but leads...leaves later people the possibility of asking that question, but you were asking really about Aristotle. It seems to me that the quite interesting thing about Aristotle is how uninterested he is in evil, maybe for some of the reasons that Jones was talking about, but I think ...because he's the person who really takes up goodness as an explanatory tool right across his philosophy, because Aristotle's writing and teaching about a whole range of subjects, much broader than Plato, metaphysics, biology, ethics, and in each one of these, goodness is the explanatory tool. You understand by understanding what the good thing is. You understand the world by understanding the unmoved mover who's equated with God and goodness, who generates the movement and existence of the rest of the world. You understand biology by understanding what a good specimen of something is, so he's not very interested in distorted monstrous specimens. He's interested in the good specimen, which actually leads him very interestingly to be able to explore and examine the types of animals that people before that had despised. He says at the beginning of his parts of animals , "There are gods here too, you can...there's something wonderful even in the worms and the insects", and the sorts of things people hadn't wanted to talk about before. Because you can understand what it is to be a good beetle, or a good rabbit or whatever. Where I think perhaps the weakness is, and this would be an interesting comparison with Plato, is that his ethics is so concentrated on the good person, what it is to be the virtuous person, that he can't really deal with seriously bad people, in the way that Plato can. Notably in the Republic, Plato gives us a interesting description of the tyrant, the tyrannical man, and a story as to how he became that, Aristotle can't really do that.

**Melvyn Bragg** : You mention....you used the phrase the unmoved mover. Can you just develop that a bit in terms of Aristotle's philosophy there?

**Margaret Atkins** : He's interested in the question of how existence as we know it - the changing world comes into being and he decides that there must be a source - there must be one source that changes other things, so moves other things but isn't moved itself, and he thinks that then will create what he thinks of as perfect movement, which is the circular motion of the heavenly bodies.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Did he describe this source? Was it a being? Was it a....what was it?

**Margaret Atkins** : It's God reflecting on God's self, God thinking about God's self.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Does he use that phrase, it is translated in that way?

**Margaret Atkins** : Yeah.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Yes. Stephen Mulholland - Aristotle wrote the ethics as a guide to virtuous behaviour as I believe, who did he think was capable of virtuous behaviour and why did he think that virtue as he described it was so desirable?

**Stephen Mulholland** : Well, in order to answer that question you need to see that he connects the ethics to the politics in his thinking, and one short answer to the question is to say that he thinks that it is members of the polis, it's members of the political community who are capable of attaining a kind of human flourishing that he saw as the ultimate purpose or point of ethics. So that means that people who aren't members of the polis don't count as

candidates for this kind of flourishing....

**Melvyn Bragg** : So that's women, slaves...

**Stephen Mulhole** : ...women, slaves, and of course any other human beings who aren't part of the Greek city state. So he has a very exclusive sense of who the candidates are. But once you as it were, take that for granted in the background, then he has a very strong sense that this possibility of attaining the kind of end state of human flourishing is available to everyone, given the right kind of circumstances, which for him meant I think primarily the right kind of education. His view was that although human beings don't as it were, come into the world innately virtuous, what they do come into the world with is the capacity to become virtuous, but you're not going to get there unless you have the right kind of teachers, unless you attain the right kind of relationship to the more mature wiser members of the community who can as it were inculcate the right kind of habits or character traits, what he meant by "virtues" in you. You need to grow up in the right kind of way.

**Melvyn Bragg** : He almost talked about it serving an apprenticeship didn't he? You need to serve an apprenticeship with a virtuous man - we're talking solely about men here - in order to grow up as a virtuous man yourself?

**Stephen Mulhole** : That's right and it means that he has a very specific understanding of what kind of knowledge is being transmitted there. It's not the kind of knowledge that you can summarise in a rule book. You couldn't as it were present it in the form of propositions that could then be as it were disseminated universally without any need for a particular kind of relationship with a particular virtuous man. It's the example of the virtuous man as much as anything in particular that the virtuous man says or could say to you, that will give you what you need to know in order to achieve this kind of flourishing.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Are the virtues of the virtuous man both individual and social?

**Stephen Mulhole** : They are, in several kinds of ways. I mean the first point is that you can't attain the virtues by and large on Aristotle's view except in a social context, that's why you need the relationship with the teacher and the context of the polis, but also it - as it were - partly follows from that, that some of the virtues that you have to acquire and some that he thought were the most fundamental of these virtues, are ones that sustain social life. Part of what it is to flourish as an individual is to inculcate the traits of characteristics that are needed to preserve the community, to maintain the kind of collective project of trying to flourish as human beings.

**Melvyn Bragg** : We've already in a short time, we've only been discussing this for about ten minutes or so, we've already moved quite a long way from the idea of evil, Jones Irwin, is this because it ...are we going back to the idea that it figured so...so lightly, so slightly in Plato, Aristotle, in classical philosophy? And if so why? Because people can't have been any less bad than they are now.

**Jones Irwin** : Sure, well I think say in terms of Aristotle's philosophy, with regard to the description that Stephen's just made there of how one acquires virtue, one also can acquire vice, and Aristotle uses the same term as Plato - *Kakon*. So one can build up a disposition of vice based on habit, and if one builds up that disposition of vice, Aristotle says it's nearly insurmountable, so the person who is evil if you like is really almost incapable of overcoming that, and that will have been built up in terms of habitually doing bad actions. Now that person is still responsible Aristotle says, and that's an important move I think away from Plato, because Aristotle says that person is still culpable because they have made an initial choice. But if they have built up that habit it is almost nearly insurmountable.

Now in terms of Plato, I think there's also a sense in Plato's later work that evil becomes more important in the same way that Aristotle gives a substantive description of the life of vice in the ethics, also in the laws Plato actually says that evil maybe an equal ontological principle with good. So he seems to have in his last texts, written on his deathbed Plato, to the view that even...there may even be a cosmic principle - which of course is going to be a very great influence on post-Greek philosophy, on Christian philosophy in particular.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Sorry Stephen...? Stephen Mulhole.

**Stephen Mulhole** : Even accepting...accepting that point, I mean one can try and motivate a bit more the thought

that good is a very very strong notion in both Plato and Aristotle, I mean when you get philosophers who find themselves in the position of claiming for example that it's better to suffer injustice than to do it, then what you get is a very strong sense that achieving good and flourishing is such a substantial good for the individual concerned that part of the difficulty they might be having with the thought that people could, as it were, knowingly do evil, is it depends on the idea that doing evil is a matter of damaging yourself as well as damaging other people, and I think that's a less familiar thought in a kind of more modern context but I think a very attractive thought in many ways.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Is...Margaret Atkins, is that anything to do with the idea of Acrasia- is that how you pronounce it? The Greek Acrasia - Aristotle's idea that the ...that not being virtuous was what we would call nowadays "diminished responsibility"?

**Margaret Atkins** : Well that's one form of not being virtuous, you can be vicious which is not getting it right about what you should do, and having the emotions that get it wrong. You can be acratia or weak, the sense that you know what you should do but you fail to do it because your emotions overcome. And he also has another form called "brutishness" - which I think is quite revealing. The brutish person is the person who hasn't really got the reason at all, and somebody who functions like an animal.

And again picking up my point I made earlier, where I have a very strong sense that Plato could explain an evil person- we would call an evil person - in a way that Aristotle couldn't. When Aristotle's talking about the brutish person, he lumps together in the same paragraph somebody who - a woman who wants to go round ripping open other pregnant women and eating their embryos, with someone who chews their fingernails! (giggles erupt) As if all these forms of bizarre behaviour are somehow completely inexplicable, and can be put in the same category.

When Plato's talking about the tyrant, he has a much more plausible story - it's a story I'd want to criticise in some detail - but an elaborate story about how one of your desires - he has a divided soul - the reasoned part - the spirited part - and the desires - one of the desires can get out of control and can be so grown and developed and become a great passion that it can lead you on from eating too much to stealing to murder to ...and so on and so on and so on. He's got a story about it, and that person is a wicked -an extremely wicked person, whether or not you want to buy his story is another question, but I don't think Aristotle's even got a story about that.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Stephen Mulhole, would it be - before we move on to the Christian idea of evil - I just want to come to..well conclude this particular bit on classical evil - would it be true to say there's perhaps as much, if not more, about evil as *we* understand it, as we have a general notion of it - in the drama, in the dramatic works of the time? And in the philosophy, and are we talking about - we're not so much talking about the individual...the choices that the individual makes - but almost the choices that are made for him - I mean Oedipus is in a terrible moral mess and yet we would say "it wasn't my fault" I didn't know it was my father - I didn't know it was my mother - it wasn't my fault - but he is condemned as a bad person. Could you...?

**Stephen Mulhole** : That's right and there is a sense in which that is an alien thought from the context of modern moral philosophy. Someone like Kant for example who sees the as it were the fundamental locus of value in the orientation of your will, and hence in the context of intention, is going to find this idea that, as it were, factors are entirely outside of your control could affect your moral status completely unintelligible. Whereas it does seem absolutely clear in the Greek dramas that they have a very strong sense of what you might call moral luck, that as it were, you can never tell whether someone's had a good life until they're dead, because at any moment some incredibly powerful force, that is outside the control of their will could intervene in their life, with potentially catastrophic effects.

**Melvyn Bragg** : So what does that say to you about their appreciation of the idea of doing bad or being bad?

**Stephen Mulhole** : It doesn't say very much directly I think, because the kind of as it were, evil they're talking about there, is what you might call "natural evil" - it's as it were the sense of evil suffered - it's plainly a bad thing, if you're fate is such that these kinds of things are going to happen to you, that because of the way things work out in the world you end up killing your father and marrying your mother, but as it were, what they're very clear about is that that means that your life - understood as an ethical whole - has been deeply shattered, and that's a thought that modern moral philosophy has some difficulty coping with insofar as it sticks with that kind of Kantian emphasis on the will.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well just a final dot - would you...before we move on to Christian ideas of evil, where the word evil does figure in - would you say that the word evil is useful in - I'm asking you Jones Irwin - is a useful...is excessively bad would be better for classical ideas of what we're talking about?

**Jones Irwin** : I think in terms of the way we describe evil now, we do have a very Christianised view of evil, if you like - our culture has the sense of evil that has really come from the medieval period. So I think it can be misleading to refer to the Greek view as evil, and to that extent I would agree with that. I think that we're probably best to stick with an idea of bad for the Greeks and really see the conception of evil as beginning in the early medieval period with Christianity.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Well let's talk about Christian evil and start with Augustine...St Augustine of Hippo, writing at the beginning of the 5th century, and he faced up to the notion of evil that's been a real philosophical dilemma for the Christian church, which is at its crudest, that if God is omnipotent, all-knowing and perfectly good, those three things, then how can you account for the existence of evil? How did St Augustine tackle this Margaret Atkins?

**Margaret Atkins** : Can I just start by making a point about language if you don't mind? Augustine and the Western Christian writers after him were writing in Latin, which doesn't actually have a different word for bad and evil, so we mustn't be too easy to say "Ah this is a Christian concept" - it's actually quite a...it would actually be quite difficult for Augustine to make that distinction, which in some ways I think helps him and us maybe think more clearly, because I'm not sure that in conventional language people really know what they mean when they talk about evil - it brings together a whole mishmash of ideas, which perhaps can get clarified if we avoid the word and say, "let's think about the things".

But Augustine himself - the first thing always to say about Augustine is he's incredibly restless and incredibly fertile thinker - his thoughts always moving on - he's always dealing with a different dispute, and so he doesn't have one answer to the problem of evil. Evil was probably the thing that preoccupied him almost more than anything else throughout his life. He has maybe five or six different answers, some more important than the others. Where he started was as a Mannaquee, for ten years he was a follower of a religious group, which was actually a world religion, it went on to the 16th century from Africa to China, a huge important religion, which was really designed to give an answer to the problem of evil and the answer was....

**Melvyn Bragg** : And it was led by a heretic, then called a heretic called Manny?

**Margaret Atkins** : ..called Manny yes...

**Melvyn Bragg** : And light and dark and...

**Margaret Atkins** : Exactly, the answer is that there are two principles, not one. Jones mentioned that briefly talking about Plato, and Augustine was very drawn to this, because he thought "this is the answer", why are there nasty things in the world? Because there's an evil principle from which they come, and the Mannaquees had some marvellous arguments. One of the arguments was maggots, and scorpions. Riley(?) says at one point "Put a scorpion in your hand and tell me there isn't an evil creator" (chuckles) . When Augustine became disillusioned with the Mannaquees, basically because he didn't believe that their mythology stood up to scientific examination, he...that was in a sense the beginning of his Christian wrestling with the problem and it just carried on and on, but after that always the one thing you can say about his answers is they can't be Mannaquee. The answer to the question about the scorpion, it's almost a contemporary answer really, is you're seeing it from the wrong perspective.

**Melvyn Bragg** : *His* answer yeah.

**Margaret Atkins** : His answer. The poison, it might be a bad thing for you, but it's jolly good for the scorpion. So a sense of the order of creation and of each thing in there having its own purpose.

And he also in that context picks up the Platonist argument about evil being an absence of good and he develops that.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Jones..Jones Irwin can we talk about how he explained the disasters that were befalling so many people of the empire at the time of his writing, and he seemed to say that these were sent to test and to prove, the disasters were a *good* warning for Christians, they were a good thing - I mean I'm obviously simplifying - but you will more complicate I hope!

**Jones Irwin** : I don't know about that, but I think that the reading of Augustine has to take into account that there are many discontinuities as Margaret has said in his thought, and I would argue that in particular his later work - I'm thinking here of the City of God, primarily - there's a sense in which the Mannaquee in some of his early work, kind of resurfaces and I would say that very much under also the influence of stoicism , there is nearly a cult of suffering, which is another word for evil if you like in the later Augustine suffering in something like the City of God that that to some extent there's a sense that there's a great harmonious order in the universe, but there's also I think a sense of great turmoil and torment and doubt in the later Augustine that at times comes close to agnosticism I think, in the face of all this, you know , he talks about perseverance, hope without hope, so one hopes but one hopes without hope, and I think to that extent that Augustine has lost some of the earlier harmony that he had in works like the Confessions, where everything kind of worked out in a dialectical way, that you would have evil and suffering but it all made sense in the end.I think by the end of his work it's making less sense, it's stopped making sense.

And the evil and the suffering have really almost become all encompassing and the love and the beauty have really departed from the scene. Now I think perhaps that's to do with the fact that one can trace this from biographical details like the vandals knocking his doors down and also he's on his death bed, but I think it is important to know that the later Augustine who was a great influence on people like Calvin and Luther, and on history generally was really the Augustine who was emphasising evil, suffering, pain as I think irresolvable and as genuinely disharmonious.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Sorry Stephen, you were nodding, can you tell us...can you link Augustine's view of human behaviour, how it differs from that of we briefly discussed of Aristotle and Plato - say what you were going to say, and then....

**Stephen Mulhole** : What I was going to say in effect is that one way of seeing, as it were the depth of Augustine's sense of the reality of evil is as it were the preoccupation he has with the original sinfulness, and in a way of seeing the difference between that specifically Christian doctrine and the thoughts of Aristotle and Plato is to go back tot he idea of the acratia person, because.....

**Melvyn Bragg** : The acratia person, the person who's the falling away, the lapse into....

**Stephen Mulhole** : The weak willed...

**Melvyn Bragg** : ..yes, the non-being yeah.

**Stephen Mulhole** : ..person.But this is someone who as it were who knows what the good is and then proceeds to go and do the reverse of it.And I mean an old teacher of mine did a kind of informal survey of students of his about what they thought about this problem, and as it were it was interesting. Roughly 50% of the students thought that it was obviously the case that human beings could know what was good and go ahead and so the reverse, the other 50% thought it was absolutely impossible.How could you really genuinely know what the good is, and not be attracted to act in accordance with it?If you as it were, go the other way that must be because you don't really see that as the genuinely good thing.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Augustine taught you cannot choose evil knowingly, didn't he?

**Stephen Mulhole** : Well that's the Aristotelian thought, that's what allows you to see that there's a problem with the notion of Acrasia - the notion of weakness of will - there must be a failure of knowledge if you go and do the bad thing, right, it can't be the case that you really fully properly comprehend that it's good and yet fail do it, that's the difficulty.Whereas for someone like Augustine it seems an almost self evident fact about human nature that there's a certain kind of perversity in the will.That it's perfectly possible and indeed a very familiar human phenomenon to see the good clearly and yet not head towards it.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Can we...? I'm sorry to do this leap with you all, but can we move on - as of several hundred years to Aquinas and how he tackled - can I start with you Stephen Mulhole? How he tackled the problem of evil - we're in the 13th century - are we talking about the problem of evil then is that phrase relevant to what Aquinas is setting himself up to do?

**Stephen Mulhole** : Yes, I think so just as much as it is in certain ways for Augustine. I think what Aquinas does is make a relatively familiar distinction in the tradition between what you might call natural evil and moral evil, a distinction between as it were evil suffered and evil done. I mean there are various ways in which the natural phenomena of the world creates suffering, pain, death and so on and sometimes inflict that on human beings.

**Melvyn Bragg** : So you'd call storms and earthquakes evil?

**Stephen Mulhole** : Volcanoes erupting, lions devouring lambs, that would be...those would be forms of natural evil. But then on the other hand there's the evil that's actually done by human beings both to the world and to and to other human beings, and he has a different as it were response to evil in those two different forms. In the case of natural evil he has the kind of thought that Margaret was saying Augustine helps himself to - the thought that as it were, you cannot conceive of a natural order which didn't contain natural evil, suffering of various kinds, because if you're going to create a material animate being, like say a lion, precisely because it's finite, it's going to be dependent on it's environment for sustenance, for reproduction and so on. You can't have a lion doing what a lion is supposed to do without it devouring lambs. So that although obviously from the lamb's point of view it's bad thing, from the point of view of the lion, it's just the lion doing what lions are supposed to do.

So if God is going to create a material world all, it's not going to be possible for him to create entities who are capable of flourishing and as it were fully manifesting their nature, without that manifestation having what we would think of as deleterious impacts on the nature of other elements of the natural order. So if you want nature at all, then you're going to have a nature that involves a modicum, maybe even a relatively large amount of suffering. The alternative is not to create a natural order in which that modicum becomes almost vanishingly present, the alternative is to have God not create a world at all.

**Melvyn Bragg** : We've..I've gone from one Christian thinker to another, and covered from the early 5th century to the 13th century, in between obviously - were Jewish philosophers influential in...on this question, because they came into Aquinas's thinking didn't they?

**Jones Irwin** : Yes I think this is often overlooked that Jewish and Islamic philosophy were responsible for bringing Aristotle into the West, and if you look say...if you trace this from Augustine's City of God where you have the idea that the human being is completely determined by original sin and that it's only through God's grace that the human being can overcome that, I think what one has in Islamic and Jewish philosophy is a greater idea of human autonomy, that the human being actually has to perfect itself. Now it's this view of moral autonomy which I think is influential on Aquinas, and particularly the Islamic figure Avicenna, the Jewish figure Maimonides, these figures posited an idea of human autonomy, moral autonomy where the human being was capable of, and responsible for overcoming evil itself. This view I think is crucial for Aquinas, and it distinguishes him fundamentally from Augustine, and ironically or paradoxically it makes him much closer...makes later Christianity much closer to Islamic and Jewish Aristotelianism than it does to earlier Christian philosophy.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Margaret Atkins, d'you think that by...uncover...bringing these things together Aquinas is getting nearer to the idea than other ....than the previous thinkers we've been talking about, that the idea was there, and he's sort of focusing on it much more clearly or do you see a development there?

**Margaret Atkins** : Clarity is always a good word to use. I think he's taking over a whole range of different arguments and particularly making the distinction between moral and natural that Stephen's already talked about. But then even say within the moral - analysing the whole range of virtues and vices - analysing interestingly the seven deadly sins - which gives you an extra richness on top of the Aristotelian scheme of the virtues. So I think he has enormous number more explanatory resources than earlier thinkers did. He doesn't reject entirely the doctrine of original sin, so he's not entirely optimistic. But he modifies it - analyses it - asks innumerable questions about it - makes lots of clarifications - makes it less pessimistic than Augustine.

I don't think it's true to say that we're simply free to do good for Aquinas, in the way that possibly would be more true of Aristotle, because we are...our nature is still flawed as a result of original sin. So there is some sense of that moral struggle which he interestingly explores at some points by the motion of demonic temptation, again making lots and lots of distinctions between different kinds of temptation. So I think clarity and analysis of a whole range of different explanatory issues would be a hallmark of this thinking about evil.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Jones Irwin, did Christians invent...did Christianity invent the notion of evil as Nietzsche claimed?

**Jones Irwin** : Well certainly in terms of Nietzsche's analysis, I think that the way that Christians talked about evil linked itself in more with his critique of the concept of evil. So his critique of evil was really a critique of Christian conceptions of evil. Whether they invented it or not is another question, because I think we've pointed to the fact that there were substantive ideas of evil in the Greek period. But certainly from Nietzsche's perspective - I'm thinking here particularly of *On the Genealogy of Morals* - the idea of evil in Christianity is based on a reactive psychology. The Christian morality has nothing to do with good, it has everything to do with condemning an accusing evil. So it's negative - it's reactive, and for Nietzsche therefore the idea of evil as well as the idea of good, must be transcended, we need to move to quote another title of one of his texts "*Beyond Good and Evil*".

**Melvyn Bragg** : Stephen Mulhole can I ask you why did Nietzsche associate the notion of evil so closely with what he called the slave morality of Christianity?

**Stephen Mulhole** : Well in part it's because as Jones was saying it's...he attributes a reactive psychology to Christians. But it's also that he sees the Christian moral code as having a very specific kind of historical origin, and as serving a very particular kind of purpose for those who espouse it. The point about good and evil as Christians understand it, is that what gets categorised as evil are precisely the kinds of capacities and forces in human life that Nietzsche regards as essentially life affirming or life enhancing.

The capacity as it were to exercise your will on the world to remake it in your image, to simply do what you want and do it successfully. All of these things Christianity condemns with a kind of visceral hatred, Nietzsche thinks, and what they regard as good is pity, compassion, succour for the weak, and of course what Nietzsche asks is, not so much what does this mean, but what use is that kind of code, and his answer is it serves the interests of the weak. It's the most successful strategy the weak could adopt to ensure that they survive and dominate a society.

To inculcate a moral code in which as it were it is regarded as good for people to act in ways which help the weak, and it's regarded as bad or evil for them to simply exercise their own capacity to impose themselves on reality. So what Nietzsche reads into Christianity is in effect a hatred of life, and he thinks of that as having a kind of sadistic and a masochistic component. It's sadistic in the sense that it's punitive. I think the point about the Christian moral code is to punish those who the best, most healthy, most flourishing examples of life.

It's masochistic because it's an essential part of Christianity that one as it were construct a conscience in which one scourges one's own actions and interior life and try to root out those same evil tendencies in oneself. And that in effect is to try to eradicate those aspects of one's life that are most life affirming.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I thought that was brilliant actually!

Would you like to comment on that from the point of view of the Catholic reaction as it were to Nietzsche's view?

**Margaret Atkins** : I am not sure I could comment authoritatively on the general Catholic reaction. I think I could say what the Christian tradition might say in response. I think one thing to say about Nietzsche is that sometimes he presents himself as someone who's rejecting morality, but he's actually doing it in the name of his own very definite set of values and virtues, of which perhaps courage and truthfulness are two, and life are three that he wants to promote. But he sees them as being exemplified above all by the hunter, the lion, the eagle, aggression. I think the Christianity that he thinks he's attacking is a Christianity with bits missing, because of course the affirmation of courage, the affirmation of truth, the affirmation of life have been central to Christian morality. The difference is that they've very often been exemplified precisely in compassion and also in the courage of being honest about one's own evil, and I think courage and truthfulness above all are required for the kind of self examination that Augustine for instance was able to undertake, and that quite a lot of us would be quite afraid to undertake. But the Christian answer would be that there is a purpose beyond that, and the purpose would be precisely the compassion and the concern for each individual that Nietzsche - rejecting the herd - wants to reject.



**Melvyn Bragg** : Stephen Mulhole.

**Stephen Mulhole** : I agree with that, and I think also it's important to see that Nietzsche's attitude to Christianity is actually deeply ambivalent. I mean I think there are good reasons for him to be actually struck with awe when he looks at Christianity, I think you can see this in his writing, and also that he also has a very strong sense of indebtedness to it. I mean the awe comes from the fact that if he is right in thinking that the most fundamentally life affirming aspect of reality, metaphysically speaking is the will to power, the capacity to sort of make the world in your own image - then Christianity is the most successful exercise of the will to power in the history of the human race.

It is the most incredibly successful strategy for the weak to impose themselves on the world and to remake it in their own image. So as well as being as it were incredibly sensitive to what he finds repellent in Christianity, he's also very sensitive to the fact that in a certain sense this life denying code has an incredibly life affirming function, for those who do cleave to it. And the sense of indebtedness comes from the fact that Nietzsche sees Christianity as giving Western culture some of its most fundamental ideas.

I mean the first one is the very idea of individuality . The sort of master...the masters who invent a master morality that he thinks of Christianity as overcoming are in effect on Nietzsche's description of them - animals. They have no interior life at all. It's only when Christianity invents the idea of conscience as a means of self examination that the idea of an individual as having an interior life begins. It's not that conscience is introduced into this space that human animals already have, it's that the introduction of conscience actually constitutes the notion of a human, inner life.

And also as Margaret was saying a little earlier, Nietzsche connects the Christian exercise of the will to power with what he calls the will to truth, with a very strong desire to discover a reality that relies all appearance , and of course Nietzsche himself presents his own analysis of Christianity as the turning of the will to truth upon its source. So Nietzsche has to think of himself as late inheritor of the Christian tradition, and hence the critical stance he adopts in relation to Christianity is in a certain sense Christian through and through.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Jones Irwin.

**Jones Irwin** : Yeah I was just going to say that in terms of Nietzsche's analysis of Christianity, he treats Christianity as if it was a monolith as well - you know, this is an important point - that - I think he does this polemically - that really what he is talking about is a certain brand of extreme Augustinian Lutheran Christianity and that he doesn't really make any distinctions between various kinds of Christianity and their different attitudes towards evil, the kind of different analogies we've described today.

So I think that he was too intelligent to have done that stupidly- I think he was doing that as a polemical device to really attack what he regarded as the weakest aspects of Christianity. But as Stephen well says he also had a paradoxical admiration for this aspect of Christianity, precisely because of its extremism and its emphasis on weakness, which was a weakness that ultimately was so sophisticated that it was going to take over the world. It was going to defeat the strong despite its weakness.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Is it ..Margaret Atkins, is the question...does it make sense to have a notion of evil without God, is that a question that's worth asking?

**Margaret Atkins** : (long pause) I'm not sure that God is *so* important for defi...for understanding there's a difference between good and bad. If you ask do you need the notion of *evil*, I'm still - despite the discussion of Nietzsche, puzzled as to how we divide off the evil from the very bad, which was one of your earlier questions, and I think I'm actually concerned about our...the ease with which we leap for the label evil, which usually perhaps - I am drawing on Nietzsche here - which usually means "them- not us" - *we* might be bad - but *they* are evil .And I would say precisely one of the contributions of Christianity - Augustine though I think picking up something in Plato - is the sense that we've *all* got a potential to be very, very bad, which takes a tremendous amount of courage I think to face, so that we shouldn't divide evil into them and bad...them who are evil and bad us, but accept that it's a potential that's there, very mysterious and difficult to explain, but a potential that's there in every one.

**Melvyn Bragg** : Briefly Stephen Mulhole.

**Stephen Mulhole** : It's worth emphasising that for Nietzsche the connection between God and the code of good and evil isn't tight. Becoming an atheist doesn't get you away from slave morality in Nietzsche's view. If you still have a moral code in which you take altruism, compassion, sympathy for the weak seriously and yet you deny the existence of God, you're still very much within the centre of gravity of herd morality. And in that sense for Nietzsche, as it were getting beyond good and evil is something that he thinks will take a great deal longer than the last 100 years.

**Melvyn Bragg** : I'm sorry, now we haven't time it's a pity isn't it? But there we are sorry" Thank you to Jones Irwin, Stephen Mulhole and Margaret Atkins - I wish we'd had more time, but there we are thanks for listening.