

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm is the Founding Editor of Tradition. He was the longtime President of Yeshiva University and is presently its Chancellor.

“GOOD AND VERY GOOD”: MODERATION AND EXTREMISM IN THE SCHEME OF CREATION¹

The meaning of *tov*, in Genesis, where we read at the end of every segment of the Creation, “And God saw *ki tov*, that it was good,” is tantalizingly obscure. What does goodness, a term usually associated with moral acts or psychological, even hedonic, satisfaction, have to do with the natural order? If, as some maintain, (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:30, 3:13) *tov* here denotes production of an item whose existence conforms to its purpose, or the successful execution of the divine will, then why, at the final day of the Six Days of Creation and the emergence of man (Gen. 1:31), does God declare that the creation is *tov me’od*, very good?

Is it at all relevant to speak of greater and lesser success in the implementation of the divine decision to create? The question becomes more acute when we turn to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Paradise). Before the creation of Eve, we read that Adam’s condition was *not* good: *lo tov heyot ha-adam levaddo*, “it is not good that man should be alone” (2:18). If *tov* is a moral or psychological quality, the verse is understandable, but then the *ki tov* repeated in the creation narrative in chapter 1 presents apparently insurmountable difficulties. And, if the *tov* of the first chapter refers to the full execution of the divine will, then the phrase *lo tov heyot ha-adam levaddo* is problematic, although not insuperably so.²

The question becomes more acute, however, when we turn to the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,” *ets ha-daat tov va-ra*. Man is

¹ This article was originally written in June 1992, and it has been recently updated and edited by the author.

² While one can dismiss the question by asserting that *tov* is a homonym, it is unreasonable to assume that such a key word, repeated in so dramatic and grand a manner and so central to the entire creation narrative, changes its significance in chameleon-like manner. It is far more plausible to accept the semantic consistency of the text and confront the problems as they arise.

TRADITION

warned not to eat of this tree, for “on the day that you eat thereof you will surely die” (2:17). After the creation of Eve, the serpent ensnares her and persuades her to violate the divine command. But the serpent persists and informs Eve “for God knows that on the day you eat thereof your eyes will be opened and you will be like the powerful ones who know good and evil” (3:5).³

What kind of power does this knowledge confer, and why should it be denied to the Deity’s human creatures? And if the knowledge of the distinction between good and evil, *tov va-ra*, in the moral sense is taboo to man, how can God, in the first instance, have commanded a creature who is incapable of telling right from wrong? And how just is it to punish an ethically or rationally incompetent being for failing to make such distinctions? This, indeed, is the famous question that Maimonides poses at the beginning of his *Guide* (1:2), one which he contemptuously dismisses and resolves by categorizing *tov va-ra* as esthetic rather than moral terms. This solution is less than perfect, however, if one attempts to read the first chapter of Genesis in this light. Clearly, for Maimonides esthetic judgments are conventional, or humanly subjective; are they, then, applicable to the natural order, especially before man emerged as part of Nature as an observer? The difficulty is by no means alleviated if we adopt the Maimonidean “success” definition referred to above, because this seems totally irrelevant to the Tree of Knowledge.

I propose a solution in which *tov* is examined in light of the climactic *tov me’od*, and which assumes that the word *tov* is consistent in meaning within the first three chapters of Genesis, but bears little relation to the use of the term later in the Torah and, indeed, in ordinary Hebrew usage. Whatever relation does exist is remote, and reflects a semantic evolution from the meaning it serves at the beginning of Genesis to the meaning or meanings conventionally ascribed to it.

We follow here the Maimonidean “success” definition of *tov* in the creation narrative. A slight variation, to bring it into conformity with contemporary parlance, will sharpen the focus: *tov* implies efficient functioning. The Creator saw every step in His developing universe *ki tov*, that it was functioning efficiently, carrying out the *telos* which He had assigned to it. Thus, light, land, oceans, vegetation, animal life, etc – each in its own time – is *tov*, well-functioning. However, and this is critical – it

³ Our use of “the powerful ones” follows the Aramaic translator, Onkelos, as opposed to other commentators who translate the Hebrew as “God.” That Onkelos is correct is evident from the use of the plural *yode’ei*, whereas the beginning of the verse uses the singular, *ki yode’a*.

functions well but not at maximum efficiency. Were each part of Nature to function at its maximum, exhausting its full potential, chaos would ensue as the various parts would mutually self-destruct in the competition for mastery; the developing universe would thus revert to primordial chaos, *tohu va-vohu*. Instead, *tov* denotes a functioning at less than full capacity, at a level which does not exploit its full potential. This is so because the world is an interdependent system rather than a conglomeration of independent parts, and a system requires the synergistic coordination of all its constituent elements. Only when each segment operates at a *tov* level, with restrained functionality and limited efficiency, can the entire, completed system deserve the sobriquet *tov me'od*, very good. Only when each constituent is *tov*, and not more than that, can the cohesive whole become *tov me'od*.⁴

The Sages understood this principle when they explained the derivation of the divine Name *Shaddai* as “*ani hu she-amarti le-olami ‘dai*” (*Hag.* 12a), “It is I who said to My world, ‘Enough!’” God set limits to (parts of) the world, creating land and water, for instance, but preventing the one from encroaching upon the other. (The Kabbalah too embodies this insight in asserting that the Sefirot of *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, Love and Power, are in conflict, and only in the limitation they impose upon each other do they dialectically merge into *Tiferet*, Beauty.)

If we now explore the term *tov* in the Adam narratives (chapters 2 and 3), we emerge with new and engaging insights. “It is not good that man should be alone” denotes a critical lack of “efficiency” in Adam’s life; he fails to fulfill his human destiny as a solitary creature. As long as he does not relate to a fellow human, he is less than complete and hence “not good,” *lo tov*. (And here the functional definition of *tov* begins to lead to the standard moral definition.)

We now turn to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. A perfect universe consists of imperfect parts in coordination. An efficiently functioning world requires that each part operate properly but at less than full

⁴ The relation of “good,” repeated with a flourish at the end of every segment of the creation, and “very good,” the divine seal of approval for the whole of creation at the end of the six day period, intrigued a number of the classical commentators as well as the Rabbis of the Midrash. The interpretation here offered is structurally though not substantively similar to that of Nahmanides (in his commentary to Gen.1:31), who sees the individual parts of creation as limited because they involve the existence of evil, whereas the whole is “very good” because, presumably, death and suffering contribute to the overall good of the world whose continued existence requires the change of the generations, etc. – a thesis of Maimonides (*Guide* 3:10). See too *Keli Yakar* (*ad loc.*), who suggests a fine distinction between *ki tov*, “that it was good,” and *ve-binnei tov me'od*, “behold” it was very good.

TRADITION

capacity; that it work well, but not overwork. If any one part expresses its potential to the extreme, the equilibrium of the system as a whole is wrecked. Each constituent part, therefore, must be characterized by restraint. All this is implied in the creation story, where each part is *tov* so that whole might be *tov me'od*. Such is the divine plan for the universe.

Man, however, the only creature endowed with freedom of the will, thus “imaging” his Creator, was formed with the power but without the right to upset the whole of creation by exploiting any one part at its full potential. That denial of the right to exercise the power to destroy the whole by overextending any of the parts is symbolized by the prohibition to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Man was, of course, granted the right of moral choice, a right which presupposes the gift of intellectual discrimination. Were he not able to tell right from wrong, the commandment itself – not to eat from this particular tree – would not make sense. It was not knowledge that was denied to Adam and Eve but power – power that they could, however, seize illegitimately in an act of rebellion. Should they so sin by seizing this power, eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would become like *elohim*, “the powerful ones” of the earth, and be enabled to exploit their natural environment and their developing human world as well, throwing the entire system out of kilter and thereby threatening their very own survival – “you shall surely die” (2:17).

The primal sin of man is therefore not simply the violation of a divine prohibition, “thou shalt not eat,” but one of lack of restraint or, better yet, one of extremism whereby the moderation that ensues from the imperfect but efficient functioning of the parts is abandoned as he uses his power to “know” *tov va-ra* and to push the *tov* to an extreme, thus converting the *tov* to *ra*, evil, in the moral sense. The “know” in “the Tree of Knowledge” is here meant as “know how”; it is not the knowledge of *ratio* but of *techné*. This interchangeability of good and evil is reflected in Aristotle’s theory of the Golden Mean, where good and evil are conceived as not ontologically different from each other. Rather, vice and virtue lie on the same plane, with vice(s) occupying opposite ends of the spectrum and virtue locating itself in the center; virtue is thus identified with moderation, and evil with the extremes. Vice is virtue taken to an extreme.

In Eve’s response to the serpent’s efforts to tempt her, we find a glaring example of this tendency to overstate the good and thus emerge with its opposite. She says, “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God said: you shall not eat of it, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die” (3:3). The italicized phrase is simply untrue; the divine command concerned eating the fruit, not touching it. The Talmud (*Sanh.* 29a)

comments, “Whence do we know that whoever adds detracts? From (the verse), God said, you shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it.” Despite the Talmud’s well known penchant for *seyag*, adding a safety margin around a prohibition to protect the prohibition itself, it castigates Eve. The *seyag* is commendable and advisable so long as it is understood that it is not part of the original divine command, but if the extension is presented as itself of divine provenance, it is a “detraction.”

Such seizure of power and throwing off the shackles of restraint by driving each part to exploit all its potential has large and fateful consequences. One is an addictive submission to the technological imperative.⁵ The resultant danger to man’s natural environment is inevitable as *tov* is extended beyond its limitation as the merely efficient to the extreme of perfectionism. Man’s power thus constitutes a mortal threat to the ecology of the earth.

Another significant consequence is, as mentioned, death itself, which is not a supernaturally imposed penalty but a “natural” result of the systemic flaw that obtains when the whole is neglected in favor of a part or the parts, when *tov* is thrust beyond its set limits to become *ra* such that the world as a whole no longer can be termed *tov me’od*.⁶

The “logic” of death following upon the sin of the extremism of virtue is evident if we analogize from the human organism to the world as a whole – and the ancients indeed spoke of man as a microcosm. The human body is an exquisitely balanced system such that its health and sometimes its very survival is contingent upon the parts coordinating and cooperating with each other; in other words, on each part acting as (only) *tov* in order for the whole to be *tov me’od*. Thus, for the proper functioning of his body, man’s cells must constantly reproduce; but if their growth is unchecked, he falls prey to cancer. His heart must pump if his blood is to circulate, but if it beats too fast and too hard, the hypertension can kill him. The same is true for his lungs, his glands, his liver, every part of him: the lack of restraint and physiological moderation by any one individual organ leads to the death of the whole organism.

The damage, however, is not limited to ecological ruin or man’s own physical extinction. It is also a social and moral peril. And what is true of *bios*

⁵ This plays itself out in the generation following; see, e.g., Gen. 4:8, the fratricide by Cain, interpreted by the Rabbis as a refusal by the brothers to remain satisfied with an equitable division of the earth’s riches; and 4:17, *Va-yehi [kayin] boneh ir* in The present tense, i.e., Cain “is building a city” rather than “he built a city”—Cain, the overreaching son of overreachers, cannot help but build compulsively.

⁶ This idea is implicit in the Zohar’s teaching that a “Tree of Death” inhered in the Tree of Knowledge; see too Mid. Psalms, 92.

TRADITION

is true of *psyche* as well. The disequilibrium that follows upon overreaching or overexpression within the system irreparably damages the system as a whole. And here we come to the fascinating subject of man's discovery of his sexual persona and the sudden development of a sense of shame. This is a consequence of his penchant for extremism, whether technological or personal or ideological, even if sincerely meant as an effort to pursue that which he holds to be the good and the virtuous. (How the sexual persona and development of shame is a function of extremism will be discussed shortly).

Let us now return to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Sages conjecture about the identification of the tree; some say it was a fig tree, others a grape vine, yet others that it was an *etrog* or citron, and so on. But as we read the biblical text, it appears, rather surprisingly, that not only does the Torah not give any hint as to the nature of the tree, but seems to go out of its way to emphasize its "normalcy," its lack of significant difference from any other tree. Thus, note the description of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8,9:

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And the Lord God made to grow, out of the ground, every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Later, in 3:6, the description of the tree in the story of Eve's submission to the serpent's seductive blandishments to eat specifically of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is strikingly similar to the previous description of *all* the trees in the garden:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise she took the fruit thereof and did eat...⁷

The particular choice of phrases indicates that the tree was by no means different from any other tree; it possessed no magical or supernatural qualities, and hence it is irrelevant whether it was an apple or a tomato, a fig or a grape or whatever. The only distinction it carried was that it was prohibited by divine fiat, and this very prohibition is what rankled the first humans. Like every other tree in this primordial arborium, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was good to the palate and pleasant to the

⁷ Translation is the author's.

eye. What made it stand out was the commandment to refrain from eating of it lest man thereby gain the forbidden “knowledge of good and evil.” Eve interpreted that as some sort of secret knowledge, perhaps an elementary kind of gnosis, which would make her wise and powerful – “a tree to be desired to make one wise.” In fact, however, there was nothing objectively distinctive about the forbidden fruit. It was only the very prohibition itself that made it unique. And this commandment to refrain from propelling the drive for *tov* beyond its legitimate limits, even for the purpose of attaining wisdom or beneficent power, is what made the fruit of this tree so fateful in the unfolding drama of the human race. Were this commandment respected, the *tov* in man’s environment and in his inner life would indeed remain “good” forever in its very limitedness for the sake of the greater good or perfection of the whole scheme, *tov me’od*. Its very incompleteness is what would have ensured that the whole of the garden be complete, and thus the Garden of Eden would have remained the eternal abode of humankind. But when that commandment was violated by pursuing the *tov* beyond its set limits, horrendous consequences followed.

First, the *tov*, driven beyond its borders, turns into *ra*, evil; as was mentioned, good and evil are not conceived of as two antagonistic ontological substances but as mutually transformable into one another. As long as the full potential of *tov* is left unexploited for the sake of the *tov me’od*, evil finds no place in the scheme. Only when *tov* is carried to an extreme in passionate excess does the potential of evil emerge into reality. Under such circumstances, the perfection of the whole, declared by the Deity to be *tov me’od*, disintegrates. This disintegration means that the equilibrium of existence is ruined and free rein is now given to all the constituent parts of the whole to seek their own fullness, to propel the partial good beyond its limits to what is believed to be a more complete good, until it is transformed into moral evil as the “system” reels from one blow after another.

Hence, death now enters the life of the universe, not so much as a punishment imposed from above but, as was pointed out, as a natural consequence of the chaos introduced by the overexpression of the good and the emergence of evil as the perfection of a *tov me’od* universe unravels (See Midrash Psalms 92). Aware of the tragic consequence of his foolishness – for the primal sin, according to this interpretation, is more one of stupidity than cupidity – man seeks to undo the damage he had wrought and, instead of retracing his steps and correcting the original defect, strives to ward off the consequences by attacking the symptoms: man

TRADITION

seeks directly to regain his lost immortality. Hence, a new insight into the passage in Genesis 3:22-24:

And the Lord God said, “Behold the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the Tree of Life and eat and live forever”... Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He drove out the man, and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

The divine words, dripping with sarcasm, declare that in a perfect world made imperfect by man, man was not to be permitted to grab the prize of deathlessness while the rest of existence lay in ruins. To permit this would be unjust.

Hence, another consequence of sin: exile. The Garden of Eden, paradigm of the perfect world, that of *tov me'od*, can no longer remain the abode of a creature responsible for the wrecking of that wholeness. The Garden must now fade into a collective dream of the human race, a microcosm that existed in the misty origins of the species, symbolizing that which once was and which, thanks to man's impetuous pursuit of the perfection of the parts at the expense of the *tov me'od* of the whole, is no more. His exile, like his death, is but the to-be-expected playing out of the immanent pattern of the transformed universe rather than a special and arbitrary act of vengeance by an irate Deity.

We may now understand why the human reaction to this disruption of cosmic harmony was the discovery of nakedness and shame. When the world was cumulatively *tov me'od* and all its individual parts were *tov*, i.e., limited, the relations between man and woman were likewise describable as *tov*. Their relationship was such that they achieved loving companionship for both male and female, doing away with the gnawing loneliness of Adam who had everything – an entire Paradise – yet nothing: “for it is not good that man should be alone.” The disintegration of the world immediately affected the male-female harmony. With the primal sin of overriding the limits of the *tov*, the *tov* quality of the relations between the sexes was likewise subject to overreaching, immoderation, extremism. And so, free of restraint, sexuality now became sex, and unchecked carnality entered the life of humans and, with it, certain inevitable consequences: sexual exploitation, tension and rivalry, libidinal passion directed outward promiscuously (hence the intriguing legends of the sexual adventures of both Adam and Eve as recorded in the Agadah and Midrash.) The erotic dimension of

man was now turned from a binding and bonding force to one that had the potential for rapaciousness. Once, before the tragic violation of the divine command, nakedness meant nothing at all to them – “And they were both naked... and were not ashamed” (2:25); but now, with the freedom to overstep into excess having been exploited, such naivete would leave humans helpless. Hence, “And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves girdles.” (3:7) Clothing, the covering of one’s organs of reproduction, became a necessary defense against untrammelled lust by others, and shame developed as a mechanism of self-restraint, holding in check the lack of inhibition that had been introduced into the world and into the human psyche.

An examination of the punishments meted out to the culprits in the biblical narrative reveals that, as with death and exile, they were only *pronounced* by God, but flowed “naturally” from the violation of the pattern imprinted into the world and man by Him in His creation of a perfectly balanced, *tov me’od* world.

It was the serpent who seduced Eve into the violation of the divine command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. We may take this as an expression of the sexual form of the full exploitation of *tov*. Indeed, legends abound amongst all peoples who accept Scripture concerning the tendency to mate across species. (Thus, in the Talmud, *Shabbat* 146a, we read of the serpent copulating with Eve.) Friendship amongst the various higher species, including man, a quality that is unquestionably *tov*, degenerated into perversion as *tov* was pushed to its “logical conclusion,” namely, uncontrolled sexual itinerancy. Hence, the punishment announced in 3:14 follows. The serpent, symbol of the non-human species, is forced to its logical conclusion: It was not merely going to continue as before, in a non-upright position (although one midrashic opinion, in Gen. R. 19, holds that the serpent originally walked upright, “straight as a reed”), but it would lose its limbs and be extremely prone, crawling on its very belly. It convinced Eve that the forbidden fruit was good to the palate—a *tov* within its limits—and so, in retaliation, it was condemned to eat nothing but dust for the rest of its life: the unrestrained appetite for food is to be taken to its extreme of eating everything in sight—gluttony transforms itself into eating dirt. The friendship between the serpent and man had been exploited beyond the licit, and so it would dialectically result in its opposite, hatred—even as *tov* was propelled into *its* dialectical opposite, *ra*.

The lust felt by Eve for the fruit of the tree, a lust which corrupted the human sexual urge, would now result not in pure pleasure but in pain – the pain of childbirth and the anguish in raising a family: pleasure compounded

TRADITION

by pain, often unbearable. The concord that had prevailed between man and woman – that too would be transformed into rivalry and the quest for domination, whether by brute force or by guile.

Adam's punishment, too, is expressive of the exploitation of the *tov*: He who had been placed in the Garden of Eden and commanded to “work it and keep it” (2:15) without pain and anxiety and suffering, implying a life equally free of strenuous labor and boredom, would now find that mission of work taken to an extreme: “Cursed is the ground because of thee; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee... With the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread...” (3:17-19). And, indeed, man's relation with his natural environment, once so idyllic and harmonious, has now been ravaged. Hence, “till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” (3:19).

On the verse, “And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good” (*tov me'od*) (1:31), the Midrash comments – enigmatically and paradoxically: “‘very good’—that is death.” When the individual parts, assigned the mission of *tov*, presume to the glory of the very good, of *tov me'od*, a prominence reserved by the Creator for the whole, death establishes its ominous foothold. And, as the late talmudist and kabbalist R. Joseph Engel commented: every “very” leads to death...

The biblical account of creation and the emergence of man is therefore largely a tale of virtue run amok, and thus the ideal whole – earth as Paradise – reduced to a meaner and more perilous place as a lower level of equilibrium replaces that of Genesis, an attenuated “whole” which accommodates itself to mortality and immorality, to exile and homelessness, to pain and suffering as the price for man's absurd rejection of moderation.

In the words of Ecclesiastes (7:16), “Be not righteous overmuch, neither make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself?”