

# INSIDE OUT

## HAGGAI, MATHEMATICAL DYNAMICS, AND THE NATURE OF GOOD AND EVIL

by Timothy Pennings

*On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests for a ruling: If one carries consecrated meat in the fold of one's garment, and with the fold touches bread, or stew, or wine, or oil, or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?" The priests answered, "Yes, it becomes unclean." Haggai then said, "So is it with this people, and with this nation before me," says the LORD; and so with every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean." Haggai 2:10-14*

When I was a college student, I spent three years systematically reading through the Bible for my morning devotions. One benefit of a comprehensive read-through is that passages typically overlooked by others as insignificant sometimes leap out. Such was the case when, as a mathematics student, I first came across the Old Testament prophet Haggai speaking for the Lord in Haggai 2. In this passage, Haggai uses an analogy between the purity codes and the unfaithfulness of the people. But the analogy that Haggai employs also sheds some light on the nature of the relationship between good and evil.

The doctrine of Original Sin had always seemed curious to me. It seemed disproportionate that through a single act of disobedience, so easily committed, all of humanity was stained. Furthermore, redeeming us from this required from God an elaborate plan lasting thousands of years and culminating in the death of the God-man Jesus. And even with that supreme effort, the full effect of the Fall was not cancelled. The Apostle Paul explained in Romans 8 that the whole creation is still waiting for its full redemption. Certainly the cost and effort of the remedy seem totally out of proportion with the ease of the transgression. Are the forces of evil that much more powerful than the forces of good? Why the imbalance?

This is where Haggai sheds light. The Lord instructs Haggai to ask the priests to consider their own Levitical laws concerning clean and unclean foods: What happens when something holy touches an ordinary thing? Does that thing become holy? The correct answer is, "No, clearly not. Consecrated food does not, by mere contact with unconsecrated food, make it holy." On the other hand, what happens when an unclean thing touches an ordinary thing? Here, the correct answer is, "The ordinary thing becomes contaminated by contact with an unclean thing." But why? Why should unclean things have this 'advantage'?

Since the Levitical laws were given to promote good living, perhaps uncleanness has this "advantage" in the law just because uncleanness has this advantage in the world. Indeed, this is easy to see in everyday life. A room full of healthy people will have no beneficial effect on one person with the flu, but the sick person can easily infect everyone in the vicinity. A scientist can spend days purifying a sample, but a quick snafu will contaminate it. If a two-year-old is playing with toys, and a parent is trying to straighten up the room, the two-year-old wins.

A clear example of the relationship between good and evil is of a boulder sitting precariously on the top of a hill. Whereas a mere nudge will send the boulder careening to the bottom of the canyon, it takes a Herculean effort to restore the boulder to its original position. Similarly, perfection, sinlessness, and good are by their very nature precarious states. It takes very little to contaminate or disrupt them.

In the area of dynamical systems, mathematicians refer to places where objects can sit at rest as being "fixed points." Some fixed points are stable; others are unstable. A boulder sitting in a hole at the bottom of a canyon is an example of a stable fixed point; sitting on the precipice is unstable.

So instead of goodness and evil being two opposing forces, a better understanding of their mutual relationship—as given by Haggai—may come from realizing that goodness, purity, perfection are unstable conditions by their very nature, whereas the spoilage of the same is stable. This conception not only helps explain the great cost of redemption required of God, but also can help us appreciate goodness when we see it around us. Value it, treasure it, nurture it—it's a delicate commodity. ❖

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