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A CASE FOR THE DRAGONS OF HEAVEN

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INTRODUCTION

Few are the words capable of evoking so powerful a knee-jerk response in the listener as the term “dragon.” Its mere utterance calls to mind images of a great and terrible creature. Tolkien, in the words of the villainous dragon Smaug, provides one of the best distillations of what one is: “My armour is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!”¹

While Tolkien’s work is fiction, he taps into something that is very real. For much of recorded history, the dragon has represented a portentous, insurmountable, and inscrutable force of nature. It remains to this day the model of an ultimate adversary. This study explores the question: with the concept of the dragon seeming so intertwined with the notion of a dreadful opponent, is it wrongheaded to consider the dragon in a positive light?

DRAGONS:

ARE THEY REAL?

WHAT ARE THEY?

Dragons are mythical creatures, and yet they are more real than dinosaurs. No one alive today has seen one or the other. That said, no matter the time, place, or culture, just about anyone can identify a creature as a dragon when shown a picture of one. The same cannot be said of other mythical creatures – the manticore, the kappa, the kelpie, the cockatrice, and so on. Nor can the same be said of dinosaurs. Aside from experts and the occasional dinosaur-obsessed six-year-old, few can accurately identify a particular type of dinosaur by its depiction. The observation that dragons are not often confused for dinosaurs supports the notion that they are not the same.

Theories on what constitutes a species of dinosaur have evolved along with changes in the ways experts approach the fossil evidence. Thus, dinosaurs are best-guesses reconstructed from their remains. To their credit, paleontologists make reasoned suppositions based on the evidence at hand, but what they deem the “most correct” rendition of a dinosaur species can and has changed in the history of the profession.

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, LLC, 2011.

Consider the Brontosaurus (*Brontosaurus excelsus*). Its fossils were discovered in 1874. In 1903, the opinion that the Brontosaurus was its own species of creature fell out of vogue when it was reclassified as a type of Apatosaurus. All Brontosauruses came to be thought of as Apatosauruses, and so the Brontosaurus was written out of existence. It was not until 2015 that the Brontosaurus was again distinguished from Apatosaurus. Moreover, renditions of several agreed-upon dinosaur species once believed to have scales are today depicted as covered in feathers. Hence, what constitutes a dinosaur has always been open to reinterpretation.

In contrast, the idea of the dragon has remained consistent. In the most basic sense, a dragon is thought of as a large, four-legged, serpentine creature. In Eastern cultures they are shown as wingless but are understood to be capable of flight. In the West, this capacity for flight is advertised by rendering them with wings, or in the case of Central American cultures, feathers, as seen in the Quetzalcoatl. The West also attributes hazardous exhalations to them. Ancient Greeks believed dragons could expel toxic fumes. By the High Middle Ages, this changed to their being able to breathe fire. While it is conceded that ideas about dragons have shifted since antiquity, the core concept has remained largely the same. Judging by how more people can agree on what a dragon is than what a dinosaur is, dragons are more real than dinosaurs.

Detractors of this theory might insist upon physical proof of dragons before accepting they are real. Granted, no such evidence exists; however, dragons are no less real for a want of fossilized remains. The material expression of a thing is not what determines its existence. Truth is a thing that exists notwithstanding that it cannot be grasped in the hand, and yet anyone can tell an apparent truth from a blatant falsehood. The fact that dragons are real can be distinguished from the manner in which they are real. Showing the manner in which they are real demonstrates their existence.

Thinking about a thing brings it into being within a person's subjective internal experience. This is as true for dragons as it is about anything else. The fact that one can think about a topic denotes that the topic exists aside from thinker. The thinker is not his thoughts; what he thinks is not what he is. Except in cases where the thinker conceives of something that never before existed, his thoughts will be the products of his past sensory experiences or combinations thereof. Thus, a child who visits the city zoo might later conceive of an imaginary chimera made up of parts from all the animals he saw that day—an elephant's head on a giraffe's body, for instance.

Dragons are different. The basics of what constitutes a dragon are not continually redefined ad hoc; rather, they are largely settled. What is more, the essential concept of a dragon is ancient, coherent, and ubiquitous.

To illustrate: two artists, working independently, are instructed to sketch a lifelike rendition of what each considers a dragon to be. Neither is given a visual reference. Their finished drawings both show dragons, except the two look quite different. The first artist, inspired by Eastern traditions, sketches a long-bodied creature with large whiskers and no wings. The second artist, following the Western mode, draws a winged creature that breathes fire.

Clearly, neither artist invented the concept of a dragon on the spot in the same manner as the child invented his chimera after his day at the zoo. In order to produce their sketches, the artists must already have had some pre-existing notion of what a dragon is, and yet they did not simply construct a dragon using parts from other animals they may have seen in the past. This occurred because the dragon as a concept is integral. At one time the concept may have depended upon reference to other creatures in order for it to make sense, but now that concept has become sufficiently differentiated from its contributing factors as to stand on its own.

Thus, a dragon, in and of itself, can be defined without reference to other creatures with which it may bear a resemblance. A dragon may have scales *like* a fish's and wings *like* an eagle's, but not *actually* fish's scales or *actually* eagle's wings, because the dragon's scales and wings are proper to itself. The fact that both artists' drawings are recognizable as dragons demonstrates a common baseline of understanding as to what constitutes a dragon per se. The differences between the drawings point out that nonessential attributes are open to interpretation.

In his article, *The Dragons that Almost Exist*, iconographer Jonathan Pageau asks: "What if the way a dragon exists has less to do with the difference between a tiger and a rabbit and more to do with the difference between a friend and a stranger?"² Tigers and rabbits are quantifiable, real things in the world that one can point to and identify. Friends and strangers are also real. One can tell a friend from a stranger, notwithstanding that the same individual can simultaneously be one or the other to different people. The difference is a matter of relation.

In a like manner, for a dragon to be real, it must be correlated with something else known to exist. Power is a thing known to exist. It is a real thing, defined as the capacity to implement change. The use of power brings about observable effects—some immediate and material, others gradual and subtle. What the dragon denotes most strongly is power. By this association, the dragon is real; by its degree of association with power, it is all the more real.

And then there is the phenomenon of ubiquity, which begs an important question: is a dragon real conceptually because everyone can agree on what it is, or does the fact that everyone can agree on what it is originate with some factor external to ourselves?

Anthropologist David E. Jones posits that creatures can evolve an instinctual fear of their predators which is then passed to their offspring. Thus, he claims, the dragon is what results from humanity's fear of dangerous animals coupled with thousands of years of biological development.³ This view is not generally accepted,⁴ but it is nonetheless a valid recognition of dragons' ubiquity. For the moment it suffices simply to acknowledge this phenomenon, so to draw comparisons to another, similarly universal creature about which the same question has been asked: angels.

² Pageau, Jonathan. "The Dragons that Almost Exist." *Orthodox Arts Journal*.
<https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/dragons-almost-exist>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.

³ Jones, David E. *An Instinct for Dragons*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁴ Jordan-Smith, Paul. *Western Folklore*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2002, pp. 123-124. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1500302. Accessed 14 Aug. 2021.

HOW ARE DRAGONS LIKE ANGELS?

Dragons are strikingly similar to angels. So much so, in fact, that it might not be a coincidence that the most dreadful of the evil angels has been compared to a dragon.

Angels, like dragons, are ubiquitous. In nearly every corner of the world there can be found a belief in tutelary spirits – incorporeal entities that serve as protectors, patrons, or guardians of specific persons or places. Hinduism features *devas*. The ancient Chinese believed in *chenghuangshen*. The Romans, borrowing from the Greeks, prayed to the *genii* of harvests to ensure good yields. Jews, Muslims, and Christians believe in angels. By the same token, dragons have featured in practically every society on the planet since antiquity.

Angels, like dragons, are thought of as being immensely old and intelligent. Scripture provides that angels were the first intelligent creatures to inhabit the universe. They existed before the creation of man. With the benefit of eons during which to consider existence, they have amassed a wealth of experiential knowledge. This is to say nothing of their expansive natural capacity for intellectual pursuits. Likewise, dragons are often thought of as ancient creatures. Depending on their role in the narrative in which they are encountered, they have been portrayed as either beneficent and wise, or wickedly cunning.

Angels, like dragons, are unlike humans. In the Catholic worldview, angels are a superior form of being. They are more like God than man is.⁵ By virtue of this fact, they exhibit an otherness that distinguishes them from the mundane.

As far as dragons are concerned, nowhere is this seen more poignantly than in China. The Chinese emperor reigned by the mandate of heaven. Owing his authority to the supreme will of the universe, the emperor was considered semi-divine. Since the dragon stood for both the emperor and his blissful reign,⁶ dragon symbolism fostered the emperor's cult of personality: "The emperor's most reverential title was "The True Dragon," and in harmony with that idea the word "dragon" in the adjectival sense was used in names of all that had to do with his life and position."⁷ What better way to foster otherness in the person of the monarch than by affiliating him with a creature steeped in power and mystique?

The ancient Near-East held dragons in a similar regard:

In the earliest records from Egypt and Babylonia it is customary to portray a king's beneficence by representing him initiating irrigation works. In course of time he came to be regarded, not merely as the giver of the water which made the desert fertile, but as himself the personification and giver of the vital powers of water... The original dragon was a beneficent creature, the personification of water, and was identified with kings and gods.⁸

In the West, the "oldest definite traces of the dragon in Europe are in the Greek legend [of Cadmus], preserved by Homer and Hesiod..."⁹ The dragon's otherness is manifested in the form of chaotic, often destructive power. It is not a mere beast – it is a force of nature. As such, it is a formidable opponent.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, Psalm 8:5-6.

⁶ de Visser, Marinus Willem. *The Dragon in China and Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1913.

⁷ Hayes, L. Newton. *The Chinese Dragon*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, Limited, 1923.

⁸ Smith, Elliot G. *The Evolution of the Dragon*. Manchester: The University Press, 1919.

⁹ Ingersoll, Ernest. *Dragons and Dragon Lore*. New York: Payson & Clark, Limited, 1928.

Since courage and strength of arms can only be proven through adversity, the dragon is the creature against which a hero's valor is measured.¹⁰ As mighty as a hero may be, he is always the underdog when pitted against the dragon. The dragon is therefore the worthiest of adversaries, because its defeat signifies victory over an impossible foe.

Building on this point: angels, like dragons, inspire awe. It is wrong to think of angels as vapid do-gooders that eke out an insipid existence. It is likewise wrong to think of them as *putti*, those winged babies Renaissance artists seemed to love to paint. Catholic tradition makes angels out to be ministers of God – powerful and awe-inspiring like their Creator – “mighty in strength... [who] execute his word, hearkening to the voice of his orders.”¹¹

Angels have been appointed to pass judgment upon entire human communities.¹² An angel's countenance is so fearsome that it has been described as appearing like lightning.¹³ Two Roman legionnaires – members of the most disciplined and fearsome fighting force of the era – who stood under an angel's gaze fainted “like dead men.”¹⁴ It is little wonder, therefore, why in almost every instance where an angel appears before mankind in Scripture, he reassures the viewer with the phrase: “Fear not!”¹⁵

A creature's natural power is a source of awe in those who behold it. One cannot help but marvel at watching a cheetah run down a gazelle, at the drama of the chase ended with a precise bite for the jugular. The leopard's speed and ferocity exceed human capacity by far. Its power advertises that it is a dangerous creature, one that must be afforded its due of respect, else it turn that power against oneself.

Likewise, the qualities of a dragon advertise its power: fangs like a wolf's, talons like a lion's, wings like an eagle's, cunning like a snake's, and an armored body like a crocodile's. And yet the dragon is more than the sum of its parts. A dragon-slayer does not achieve larger than life status by vanquishing some mere anomaly of nature. What elevates him to legendary status is his defeat of an exceptional foe. Thus, like the angel, the dragon must be thought of as “extra” and “other” for the awe its power affords it.

DRAGONS AS PRESENTED IN THE BIBLE

Scripture tends to cast serpents in an unfavorable light. The same appears to hold true for dragons. For the purposes of this discussion, however, attributes that describe only serpents and not dragons have been culled, so that what follows may provide a clearer picture of how the Bible portrays dragons.

¹⁰ O'Brien, Michael D. *A Landscape with Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998.

¹¹ Psalms 102:20.

¹² 2 Samuel 24:15-17; Revelation 15:1.

¹³ Matthew 28:2.

¹⁴ Matthew 28:4.

¹⁵ Luke 1:13; Luke 2:20.

The dragon is spoken of as being a mortal¹⁶ beast subject to God.¹⁷ It is fearsome; its wrath similar to that of a lion.¹⁸ Some live in oceans¹⁹ while others live in deserts.²⁰ Its presence in a locale is associated with devastation,²¹ or to put it another way, the place where it lives is unsuitable or undesirable for humans to inhabit.²² It is odious to be around.²³ It is voracious²⁴ and obstinate.²⁵ Despite this, it is a creature of dignity;²⁶ in fact, such dignity that it became an object of improper worship, as witnessed by the prophet Daniel.²⁷

These references aside, the Bible specifically describes two creatures as having the qualities of a dragon. In the Old Testament, it is the leviathan. In the New Testament, it is Satan in the form of a dragon.

Certain translations of the Bible call the leviathan a dragon, whereas others classify it as a species of whale or large fish. The latter two arise from difficulty in translating the Hebrew word "tannin."²⁸ Given the context in which the term is found, translating it as a large marine creature is reasonable. It can be inferred that the leviathan is a fish from references to pulling it out of the water with a hook²⁹ or a net,³⁰ as a fisherman might draw in his catch.

Upon taking a closer look, one is hard-pressed to think of the leviathan as a whale. The following passage from Isaiah twice refers to the leviathan as a sea serpent: "In that day the Lord with his hard, and great, and strong sword shall visit leviathan the bar serpent, and leviathan the crooked serpent, and shall slay the whale that is in the sea."³¹

Furthermore, Scripture relates it has a scaled body.³² A scaly body is something fish and reptiles exhibit, but not warm-blooded whales. Indeed, the leviathan is not likely a fish either, because Scripture states that it can breathe fire.³³ Since fish cannot breathe fire, the leviathan cannot be a fish.

¹⁶ Daniel 14:25-27.

¹⁷ Psalm 148:7, Isaiah 43:20.

¹⁸ Sirach 25:23.

¹⁹ Psalm 103:26.

²⁰ Malachi 1:3.

²¹ Isaiah 34:13.

²² Isaiah 35:7; Jeremiah 9:11; Jeremiah 49:33.

²³ Job 30:29.

²⁴ Jeremiah 51:34.

²⁵ Ezekiel 29:3.

²⁶ Ezekiel 32:2.

²⁷ Daniel 14:22.

²⁸ Ham, Ken and Tim Chaffey. "Tannin: Sea Serpent, Dinosaur, Snake, Dragon, or Jackal?" *Answers in Genesis*. <https://answersingenesis.org/dinosaurs/tannin-sea-serpent-dinosaur-snake-dragon-or-jackal>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.

²⁹ Job 40:20.

³⁰ Job 40:26.

³¹ Isaiah 27:1.

³² Job 41:6.

³³ Job 41:9-12.

It may therefore be the case that the leviathan's size is comparable to that of a large marine creature, but not its overall appearance. Thus, it is more appropriately thought of as a sea dragon.³⁴ This dovetails with the notion that the dragon stands for power. The leviathan is very strong³⁵ and frightening to behold.³⁶ Nothing on earth approximates its might.³⁷ It fears no power on earth,³⁸ and was created to fear no one.³⁹ It beholds every high thing⁴⁰ and is king over the children of pride.⁴¹

The leviathan, therefore, is a powerful adversary. God made it bigger, stronger, and more ferocious than anything in creation—or at least so it would seem from humanity's viewpoint. Its qualities, along with the fact of its existence, express the glory of God,⁴² its creator. Moreover, it is in its crushing defeat that God's glory is manifested all the more.⁴³ God reminds His people that there is no one like Himself because, as fearsome as the leviathan is, He alone possesses the might to vanquish it.

In the New Testament, Satan is compared to a dragon. One must be careful not to confuse Satan for an actual dragon because that is not what he is. Fundamentally, Satan is an angel.⁴⁴

St. Augustine teaches that angels are spirits. Not one atom of matter is to be found in their substance. Elaborating on this point, St. Thomas Aquinas posits that spirits possess only two faculties: an intellect and a will. Because these faculties are not proper to any material organ, they are proper to the spirits of rational beings—in other words, persons. Hence, the fundamental definition of an angel is given as an incorporeal, non-human person.

By virtue of his being an angel, Satan's default state is imperceptible to human senses, because the senses are ordered toward capturing information at the level of material creation. Therefore, once it is established that Satan is an angelic person without a material body, the definition leaves no room to think of him as literally a dragon, because dragons are creatures with material bodies. As a result, dragons are dragons and angels are angels, and Satan is an angel who has been compared to a dragon.

Having said as much, Satan can change his appearance to suit his motives.⁴⁵ It should be safe to presume he can take the form of a dragon, similar to how the archangel Raphael took on a human likeness when he journeyed with Tobias.⁴⁶ Here, Aquinas sheds light on the subject by observing that things are received in the mode of the recipient.⁴⁷ In other words, how one perceives an angel depends upon one's own internal disposition. Thus, when St. John perceived Satan in the form of a dragon, that specific form might have been the closest his intellect could come to parsing the essence of an immensely powerful but otherwise invisible angelic person.

³⁴ Psalm 103:26.

³⁵ Job 41:13-15.

³⁶ Job 41:16.

³⁷ Job 41:24.

³⁸ Id.

³⁹ Id.

⁴⁰ Job 41:25.

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² Psalm 148:7.

⁴³ Psalm 73:13-14.

⁴⁴ Ezekiel 28:14.

⁴⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:14.

⁴⁶ Tobit 5:18.

⁴⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, I-I, Q. 75, Art. 5.

It should be noted, however, that changing one's appearance does not alter what one is, akin to how a woman remains a woman regardless of the cut and color of her dress. As to what Satan is, Scripture provides: he is the murderer from the beginning.⁴⁸ He is prideful,⁴⁹ cunning,⁵⁰ and deceitful.⁵¹ Those under his command speak "as a dragon" might, which is to say, they are insidious as he is.⁵² He is a creature of great power⁵³ and natural dignity: the ruler of this world,⁵⁴ the god of this world,⁵⁵ and the prince of the power of the air,⁵⁶ having been created in a state of natural perfection.⁵⁷ He inspires awe.⁵⁸ In addition to being called a dragon he is identified as the old serpent,⁵⁹ the creature in the Garden of Eden that prompted mankind's fall from grace.⁶⁰ As such, he is the primordial enemy of man.

Satan as a dragon is red in color, has seven heads, seven diadems, and ten horns.⁶¹ He also has a tail.⁶² He is gargantuan, capable of sweeping a third of the stars from the sky with his tail alone.⁶³ He can produce harmful exhalations from his mouth: a torrent of water like a river⁶⁴ and unclean spirits like frogs.⁶⁵

The leviathan of the Old Testament is a type for Satan in the New Testament. By this is meant that the leviathan is not Satan per se but is meant to symbolize him. The parallel goes beyond just Satan's attributes—it foretells his ultimate destiny. Formidable as Satan may be, God will defeat him utterly as He did the leviathan,⁶⁶ and the act of vanquishing Satan will demonstrate the glory of God. Thus, much of what can be said of the leviathan can also be said of Satan. But, having shown what all three of dragons, the leviathan, and Satan have in common, it is time now to consider how they might be distinguished. The critical difference between them is that Satan is evil, whereas the leviathan and dragons are not.

ARE DRAGONS EVIL?

Aquinas defines evil not as a thing in itself, but as a lack of good. Evil, therefore, is a failing. Something is evil inasmuch as it is not as good as it ought to be. He uses the term "corruptible" to describe anything capable of exhibiting evil. The presence of evil within a thing signals the fact of its corruptibility. In a perfect system, corruptibility must exist so that every type of good can be expressed in every degree possible.

⁴⁸ John 8:44.

⁴⁹ Isaiah 14:12-15.

⁵⁰ 1 Peter 5:8.

⁵¹ John 8:44.

⁵² Revelation 13:11.

⁵³ Revelation 13:2.

⁵⁴ John 12:31.

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:4.

⁵⁶ Ephesians 2:2.

⁵⁷ Ezekiel 28:15.

⁵⁸ Revelation 13:3-4.

⁵⁹ Revelation 20:2.

⁶⁰ Genesis 3:1.

⁶¹ Revelation 12:3.

⁶² Revelation 12:4.

⁶³ Id.

⁶⁴ Revelation 12:16.

⁶⁵ Revelation 16:13.

⁶⁶ Revelation 20:9-10.

To illustrate: a drinking glass is meant to hold fluids destined to be imbibed. A broken glass that empties out the bottom whenever someone tries to fill it is evil inasmuch as it cannot excel at its purpose. The hole in the bottom of the glass represents its corruptibility. The glass is no longer integral; rather, the presence of the hole denotes something is missing that should be there if the glass is to operate as well as it ought to.

If evil is a lack of good that ought to be present, then good can be said to have “heft” just as a full glass weighs more than an empty one. Therefore, “good” is a thing which exists, whereas “evil” describes the state of a thing lacking in good. It would be nonsensical to say: “Look at all that evilness in the glass” just as much as if one said: “Look at all that emptiness in the glass.”

Thus, evil is a privation, not so much an actual thing as the absence of one. By extension, evil, in relation to things that exist, is an “accident” – it is a property that describes a thing, but it does not define a thing.

The principle of the integral good posits that a thing is good if all the components that go into it are good. If any one of its constituents is evil, then the thing considered falls short of being integrally good. For the purposes of this discussion, accidents are not taken into account because they are ancillary to a thing’s fundamental essence.

Applying this principle, a dragon is integrally good if each of its necessary parts is good. Another way of expressing this is by asking: are evilness and dragon-ness fundamentally intertwined? Given all that has been said about dragons in the foregoing paragraphs, and in spite of the negative connotation surrounding them, it would appear that dragons are not inherently evil.

The concept of integral good and evil takes on an additional layer of meaning with respect to rational creatures like mankind and angels. Beings which are not inherently evil may still be considered evil if they make immoral choices.

Satan is an evil creature. Colloquially speaking, he has been called the embodiment of evil, as though evil were something that could define him fundamentally, but this language is imprecise. Satan is evil not because of what he is, but because of what he does. Evil is not the essence of Satan; rather, it is one of his accidents. He is called evil because of his wicked deeds. Although he has been compared to a dragon, he is fundamentally an angel. Just as there are good angels and bad angels, the state of being an angel does not equate to the state of being evil. Likewise, it does not follow that being evil necessarily equates to the state of being a dragon, because there could conceivably be some dragons that are good. Comparisons between him and a dragon serve as metaphors for his power – that is to say, his vast capacity to work evil.

In contrast, when the leviathan is variously called a dragon or compared to one, it is nonetheless understood that this is an animal acting upon its instincts. The same concept holds when Scripture refers to dragons as animals. An animal is not moral agent. It is incapable of reflecting upon the morality of its actions any more than a lion can when preying upon a gazelle.

The fact that dragons as animals are viewed negatively in Scripture should not lead one to presume these creatures are evil. The negative qualities ascribed to them—for instance: their temperament and ferocity—are also true of lions, which Scripture regards more kindly: “The wicked man fleeth, when no man pursueth: but the just, bold as a lion, shall be without dread.”⁶⁷ “A lion, the strongest of beasts, who hath no fear of any thing he meeteth...”⁶⁸ Christ is referred to as the Lion of Judah⁶⁹—imagery not lost on C.S. Lewis in the Christ-like character of Aslan portrayed in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And yet St. Peter evokes this same imagery to negative effect when he compares Satan to “a roaring lion [who] goeth about seeking whom he may devour.”⁷⁰

This presents a quandary. Christ and Satan are as diametrically opposed as two individuals can be. Therefore, how is it that both might share common attributes with a lion? If these opposites can be compared to a lion, then the points of comparison must be with a lion’s accidents, not its essence.

To illustrate: consider three sheets of paper, one red, one blue, and one yellow. Color is normally an accident of a thing, but assume for the sake of this discussion that each paper’s color is a defining aspect of what it is. Thus, the red paper is, of its essence, red, and so on. Assume also that no amount of one color can be found in any other. If the red and the blue sheet were compared to the yellow sheet, then color could not be a point of intersection among them. There simply is no common ground to be had in that regard. And yet one could say of the three that they are similarly rough or smooth, or made of the same material. These would be valid comparisons because they consider only the papers’ accidents, not their essences.

If the same creature (a lion) can be used to describe two opposites, then only its accidents and not its essence can be the point of intersection. If, generally, evil is an accident of a thing, then a lion cannot have the quality of evil. A lion is an animal that acts instinctually. It is therefore not capable of immoral acts. Nor is there anything inherently evil about a lion. However, the opposite is true. By virtue of it being a created thing, a lion is fundamentally good because God is the author of creation and He made all things good.⁷¹

Thus, with respect to the lion’s accidents, it is a dangerous creature that evokes power and awe. The dragon is also a dangerous creature that evokes power and awe. As with the lion, nothing that defines a dragon is inherently evil. And while the dragon does not exist in the same manner as the lion does, it is nonetheless a creature. By virtue of this, it shares in God’s creation. Even if dragons were nothing but an invention of the human mind, God is still their efficient cause. This is to say: just because human agency helped bring them into being does not change the fact that God creates and sustains all things. Because dragons exist, they are good because “every creature of God is good...”⁷²

⁶⁷ Proverbs 28:1.

⁶⁸ Proverbs 30:30.

⁶⁹ Revelation 5:5.

⁷⁰ 1 Peter 5:8.

⁷¹ Genesis 1:31.

⁷² 1 Timothy 4:4.

That dragons might be viewed as evil does not make them so. Christ draws a comparison between sinners damned to hell and goats,⁷³ but goats are neither evil nor thought to be. On the contrary, God must consider goats good, and not just because He made them. There are ample instances in Scripture where God commands that goats be sacrificed so that people's sins might be expiated.⁷⁴ Only animals without blemish were acceptable for these sacrifices.⁷⁵ It is God's prerogative to judge the worthiness of sacrifices, and Scripture provides a number of instances where God disapproved of what He was offered.⁷⁶ If proper offerings so pleased God that, in return, He forgave His people's wickedness, then it is fair to think He considered His people's sacrifices worthy. Otherwise, if goats were to be thought of as evil, how could their sacrifices count toward remission of people's sins?

As a result, if dragons are thought of as evil, then it is not because of what they are. The cause must be a factor external to dragons themselves. That factor is the attitude people adopt with respect to dragons.

"[T]he vast majority of stories, and the enduring legacy of the fight between men and dragons, comes from the European tradition."⁷⁷ As Christianity spread into pagan Europe, the dragon as a symbol developed into more than just an expression of power. Due to its affiliation with Satan, the dragon stood for all things opposed to the religion. So much so, in fact, that a number of Christianity's early saints from among the pagans are heralded as dragon-slayers, with St. George of Lydda being the archetype.⁷⁸ A similar sentiment is expressed in the account of St. Patrick banishing all the snakes from Ireland.

Thus, the dragon came to be vilified, with each successive culture tacking on further negative aspects as their narratives required. Ancient inhabitants of Northern Europe considered greed among the worst of a person's failings, and so it suited them to assign greediness to the dragon in *Beowulf*.⁷⁹ This is echoed in Fafnir in the thirteenth century Icelandic *Volsunga Saga*, the eponymous character in Richard Wagner's *Siegfried* of the eighteenth century, and by Tolkien through Smaug, who embodies in fiction all the worst a dragon is capable of.

It seems unfair to dragons that they should be associated with evil, especially considering only one instance in Scripture directly affiliates Satan with a dragon.⁸⁰ So much emphasis is placed on this negative association that Scriptural evidence for a positive view of dragons goes overlooked.

⁷³ Matthew 25:31-46.

⁷⁴ Leviticus 4:23; Numbers 7:22; Ezekiel 43:25.

⁷⁵ Leviticus 4:23.

⁷⁶ Genesis 4:4-5; 1 Kings 18:23-39.

⁷⁷ McCollough, Joseph A. *Dragonslayers: From Beowulf to St. George*. Long Island City: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2013.

⁷⁸ Knox, Ronald. *Captive Flames: On Selected Saints and Christian Legends*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001.

⁷⁹ Id.

⁸⁰ Revelation 12:19.

In the book of Esther, Mordecai receives a prophetic dream in which two dragons prepare to do battle.⁸¹ One of them represents Aman,⁸² foremost among the king's ministers, who unjustly seeks to kill all the Hebrews⁸³ because Mordecai would not prostrate himself before him.⁸⁴ Mordecai is led to understand that other dragon represents him.⁸⁵ He foils Aman's plot and saves God's people from persecution. He is by rights a hero, and here Scripture associates him with a dragon. Weighing in on the topic, Catholic apologist Jimmy Akin observes: "Regardless of what one thinks about friendly dragons, it's worth bearing in mind that there is no Church teaching on this subject... It thus seems, in view of Scripture's own usage, that dragons can be depicted as friendly, powerful allies and not simply as manifestations of evil."⁸⁶

ARE THERE DRAGONS IN HEAVEN?

It has been shown that a thing is evil to the extent it is not as good as it ought to be. Therefore, a thing reaches perfection the less it exhibits evil. It has also been shown that dragons are not inherently evil; rather, they are good. Nothing unclean enters heaven;⁸⁷ only the sinless may stand before the glory of God.⁸⁸ Might it therefore be possible that there are dragons in heaven?

Maybe.

There are only three types of beings known to exist in heaven: God, the souls of righteous humans, and angels. Neither God nor humans are dragons. Therefore, if there are dragons in heaven, they would have to be angels.

The Bible draws a comparison between Satan—who is an angel—and a dragon, which is meant to evoke a sense of his great power. To varying degrees all angels are powerful, but not all angels are evil. There are twice as many good angels than there are evil ones.⁸⁹ Mighty as Satan may be, he was expelled from heaven by another angel, Michael,⁹⁰ who is faithful to God. Thus, if a bad angel can be likened to a dragon because of his power, can the same comparison be made between a dragon and a good angel?

Maybe.

The Hebrew word "saraph" can be translated as "serpent," but it also denotes "burning" or "to burn." With this in mind, consider the following passage from Isaiah: "In a land of trouble and distress, from whence come the lioness, and the lion, the viper and the flying basilisk..."⁹¹ Here, "saraph" is rendered as "basilisk," another mythical creature variously depicted with reptilian or avian qualities. Note that the verse states this creature has the power of flight, reminiscent of a dragon.

⁸¹ Esther 11:6.

⁸² Esther 10:7.

⁸³ Esther 6:13.

⁸⁴ Esther 3:2.

⁸⁵ Esther 10:7.

⁸⁶ Akin, Jimmy. "Friendly Dragons? 10 Things to Know and Share." *JimmyAkin.com*.

<https://jimmyakin.com/2016/08/friendly-dragons-10-things-to-know-and-share.html>. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.

⁸⁷ Revelation 21:27.

⁸⁸ Isaiah 6:5-7.

⁸⁹ Revelation 12:4; 2 Kings 6:16.

⁹⁰ Revelation 12:7-9.

⁹¹ Isaiah 30:6.

Consider also: “And was thy leader in the great and terrible wilderness, wherein there was the serpent burning with his breath...”⁹² In this verse as in the prior, “saraph” stands for a reptilian creature, except here it calls to mind a fire-breathing serpent.

While the Hebrews wandered the desert for forty years, “the Lord sent among the people fiery serpents, which bit them and killed many of them.”⁹³ The expression “fiery serpents” is understood to mean that the serpents’ stings caused burning pain in their victims, not that the serpents themselves were actually on fire. Even so, the verse presents another use of “saraph” as meaning serpent with the underlying notion of “burning.”

In response to these animal attacks, God instructed Moses to: “make a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign: which when they that were bitten looked upon, they were healed.”⁹⁴ As in each of the previous instances, “saraph” is used to denote a serpent—in this case, the image of one erected as a sign of God’s healing. Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen has compared the brazen serpent to the cross of Christ.⁹⁵ In this context, the serpent is beneficent. It is the medium through which relief comes to those who suffer.

Now turn to chapter six of the book of Isaiah. During a particularly important vision, the prophet is transported to God’s throne room, where he beholds angelic creatures.⁹⁶ These beings each have a face, hands and feet, and six wings.⁹⁷ They are rational beings who converse with him.⁹⁸ Their purpose is to proclaim the holiness of God.⁹⁹ They are the angels closest to God—put another way, God permits no other angel to come as close as they to Him. These creatures appear in only one place in the Bible, and it is here, in the account of Isaiah’s vision.

The prophet calls these mysterious beings “saraph,” or collectively, “seraphim.”

The seraphim angels are the “burning ones.” Due to their proximity to the Creator, they are constantly ablaze with the light and love of God. The same word that denotes fiery characteristics is used for these angels and for serpents with fiery qualities. And yet nowhere else in Scripture does “saraph”—serpent—convey “angel.” Nowhere else does “saraph” describe a creature that can carry on a conversation with a human being. It is therefore no little wonder why the same word, “saraph,” should denote not only fiery flying serpents but also the beings closest to God, unless indeed there could be dragons in heaven.

“How great are thy works, O Lord? thou hast made all things in wisdom: the earth is filled with thy riches. So is this great sea, which stretcheth wide its arms...”¹⁰⁰ This sea dragon which thou hast formed to play therein... Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons...”¹⁰¹

END OF REPORT

⁹² Deuteronomy 8:15.

⁹³ Numbers 21:6.

⁹⁴ Numbers 21:9.

⁹⁵ Sheen, Abp. Fulton J. *The Life of Christ*. 1954. Rpt. Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2016.

⁹⁶ Isaiah 6:1.

⁹⁷ Isaiah 6:2.

⁹⁸ Isaiah 6:6-7.

⁹⁹ Isaiah 6:3.

¹⁰⁰ Psalm 103:24-26.

¹⁰¹ Psalm 148:7.