

10. EVIL

Why does evil exist? This problem has given rise to a great deal of polemic in the western world, while much less in the east.

Epicurus was the first to set forth what was to become a very popular argument. David Hume, thinking he had found the best argument against religion, summarized it in these words: “Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able *and* willing? From whence is evil?”

For Mary Midgley, the problem of evil

is often treated as the problem of why God allows evil. The enquiry then takes the form of a law-court, in which Man, appearing both as judge and accuser, arraigns God and convicts him of mismanaging his responsibilities.

Arthur Osborne writes:

Certainly one can agree that there is no anthropomorphic God of the sort that Hume envisaged, no kind old man sitting in a back room working out men’s destinies and allotting rewards and punishments. There is no God with a human scale of values, no God made in the likeness of man. To postulate such a God would mean that the object of human life is mundane happiness and that God’s job is to ensure it. [...] There are people who get through life with no great suffering—no actual hunger, no lack of clothing or shelter, reasonable security, fairly friendly relations with those around them, few long or painful illnesses, and finally death while sleeping. Is that the perfect life? If God could arrange for everyone to get by as easily as that would he have done his job? Then why did Christ tell some of his followers to give up their possessions and become mendicants? Why did he draw men to a life in which, he warned them, they would be persecuted and even killed? Obviously, he had a totally different conception of values. The question of suffering is bound up with the question of values, and this is dependent on the meaning or purpose of life.

In ancient Egyptian tradition, Osiris represents order, the good, and life, while Set stands for chaos, evil and death. However, after his victory, Osiris permits Set to continue living subordinate to him, and Set received his due of worship:

To make offerings to Set is, in effect, to “give the Devil his due.” Set does not represent evil in the narrow Christian or Judaic sense, but rather the necessary power of opposition, antagonism or resistance. Set is both the power underlying endless material proliferation and that which impedes the return to the source, the goal of every great religion. [...] So the king regularly and ritually pays homage to the divine principle of opposition. [...] Egypt’s view of evil was complex, sophisticated and cyclical. Despite the endless maledictions heaped upon Set and his cohorts, Set had his place of honor in the pantheon: his influence and power were permanent. Apopis, his serpent, had to be killed anew each night, and ultimately Set is neither banished nor destroyed, but reconciled to Horus.

According to the *Tao Te Ching*:

Everyone recognizes beauty
only because of ugliness.
Everyone recognizes virtue

only because of sin.

According to Buddhism:

The unique value of human existence is that it leads to suffering so great that we try to free ourselves from our condition, but not so crushing as to make it impossible to follow the spiritual path. [...] Apart from natural catastrophes, most human suffering is caused by malice, greed, jealousy, indifference—in fact, all the various aspects of egocentricity that stop us from thinking of others' happiness.

According to Anandamayi Ma:

One is born to experience various kinds of joys and sorrows according to one's desire. For the time being, God comes to you in the disguise of suffering. He is purifying you in this manner. The suffering is for your own best. A mother gives a slap to her beloved child for its own good, in order to keep it on the right path. When a fond mother gives her baby a bath, the child may scream desperately, yet the mother will not let the baby go until she has thoroughly washed and scrubbed him...

William Law:

What life is so much to be dreaded as a life of worldly ease and prosperity? What a misery, nay, what a curse is there in everything that gratifies and nourishes our self-love, self-esteem, and self-seeking! On the other hand, what happiness is there in all inward and outward troubles and vexations when they force us to feel and know the hell that is hidden within us and the vanity of everything without us.

Sade expounded explicitly and logically the “theoretical basis” of moral evil, a doctrine that the majority of human beings, to a greater or lesser degree, follow implicitly:

Sade has said it and repeated it in every possible way: nature made us be born alone, there is no relationship between one man and another. The only rule of conduct, then, is to prefer everything that pleasantly affects me, without taking into account the consequences such a choice might imply for the neighbour. The greatest pain of others is always less important than my own pleasure. What does it matter if I have to buy the smallest pleasure with a series of outrageous misdeeds, for I delight in pleasure, it is in me, whereas the effect of the offence does not touch me, it is outside of me.

In Christianity, Jesus clearly spoke of the necessity of evil, which does not exonerate the one who causes it: “Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” At the same time, Jesus takes on the suffering of the world through his sacrifice on the cross. “If Hinduism pretends to surpass it [suffering] and Buddhism pretends to destroy it, Christianity, tackling it head on, attempts to give it meaning: participation in the suffering of Christ.”

Buddhism is proposed as a way to bring an end to suffering. Buddha teaches:

What is it I have proclaimed? Suffering is what I have proclaimed. The origin of suffering is what I have proclaimed. The suppression of this suffering is what I have proclaimed. The path toward the suppression of suffering is what I have proclaimed.

Frithjof Schuon explains—insofar as it is possible to explain these things—how the Infinite implies Manifestation (creation seen from a metaphysical perspective), which being distinct from the Divinity, is necessarily limited, and therefore, in some way, contains the root of evil; an evil that can be contemplated from two very different angles:

Infinitude, which is an aspect of the Divine Nature, implies unlimited Possibility and consequently Relativity, Manifestation, the world. To speak of the world is to speak of separation from the Principle, and to speak of separation is to speak of the possibility—and necessity—of evil; seen from this angle, what we term evil is thus indirectly a result of Infinitude, hence of the Divine Nature; in this respect, God cannot wish to suppress it; likewise, in this respect—and only in this respect—evil ceases to be evil, being no more than an indirect and distant manifestation of a mysterious aspect of the Divine Nature, precisely that of Infinitude or of All-Possibility. [...] However, the Divine Will opposes evil inasmuch as it is contrary to the Divine Nature, which is Goodness or Perfection; in this relationship of opposition—and in this alone—evil is intrinsically evil. God fights this evil perfectly since, on all planes, it is the good that is finally victorious; evil is never more than a fragment or a transition, whether we are in a position to see this or not.

It is things as they are contemplated individually or independently that may be “bad” or “good”, but the Totality into which they integrate is always “good”. René Guénon explains it thus:

This can [...] be applied analogously to every level, whether that of a being or a world: it is always at bottom the partial point of view that is “malefic”, and the total point of view, or relatively so in relation to the first, that is “benefic”, since every possible disorder is only such insofar as it is envisaged in itself and “separately”, and since these partial disorders disappear before the total order into which they ultimately return, and then, stripped of their “negative” aspect, are constitutive elements of the same order as any other thing. There is nothing “malefic” except the limitation that necessarily conditions contingent existence, and this limitation has in reality only a purely negative existence. We spoke previously of the “benefic” and the “malefic” as if they were in some way symmetrical; but it is easy to understand that this is not the case, and that the second expresses something that is but unstable and transitory, while what the first represents is of a uniquely permanent and definitive character, so that the “benefic” aspect cannot not win in the end, and the “malefic” aspect vanishes entirely, because at bottom it was but an illusion inherent to “separativity”. Except that, in truth, one can no longer say “benefic” properly speaking, any more than “malefic”, insofar as these two terms are essentially correlative and indicate an opposition that no longer exists [...]; once that is surpassed, there is only that which is.

For Ramana Maharshi: “The cause of your misery is not in the life outside you, it is in you as the ego”; “The Plan is indeed good. The error is on our part. When we correct it in ourselves the whole scheme becomes all right.”

