Is Evil Necessary?

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Introduction

In Jewish mystical writings, evil is viewed as a necessity because without it, there would be no free will for choosing goodness rather than evil, and from earliest times in the Christian church, the victory over evil through the resurrection has been proclaimed by the deacon at the Holy Saturday liturgy. It probably dates from the middle Ages and is sung to one of the finest chants in the Latin liturgy. It contains the words:

> *O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam,*
> *Which gained for us so great a Redeemer!*
> *The power of this holy night*
> *Dispels all evil, washes guilt away,*
> *Restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy.*
> *Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth*
> *And man is reconciled with God.*

O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam. It would seem that Christians have often regarded evil as necessary because it allows the goodness, forgiveness and redeeming love of God to be demonstrated. St. Paul takes a similar line in his letter to the Romans (6:1). He sees the free gift of forgiveness and justification as the way in which God shows us his glory. The logic is, of course, that we should go on sinning in order to continue to receive God's amazing grace! But Paul spots this and writes, *'what then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?'* 'By no means', he answers; and yet many have come to know God through evil done by them or to them. Early preaching about Mary Magdalene taught that she could not have loved her Lord so much if she had not been forgiven so much, but she could not have been forgiven so much if she had not sinned so much.

At a somewhat cynical level, we know that if we lived in a perfect world without evil or pain, we would be in heaven and not on earth, or if we were on earth without any evil, we would all be out of jobs! Whether evil is necessary or not, people have come to accept it as part of living in the real world; but it does present problems for those who accept some sort of metaphysics which finds supreme goodness at the heart of all things.

The Problem of Evil

Evil, is of course a problem for all people, religious and agnostic alike, in that it touches us all. People have been led to try to define it, investigate its source, view it as a problem or as a mystery, and to find ways of avoiding it and dealing with it.

One way of dealing with the problem is to think of God as a finite or limited Being, so that God is known to be good in his nature and intent but limited in what he is able to achieve.

The absentee landlord God is another solution. He has arranged the world and its laws, provided the solutions for us to discover, and waits in heaven for those

pilgrims who have made satisfactory progress. Until then, you're on your own. But neither of these fits well with the Christian revelation of a personal God.

Plato and Thomas Aquinas shared similar views of evil as non-being. They saw God as all-perfection and complete Being and below him there is a scale of things that are less real and therefore less perfect (shades of Aristotle's gradation from Form to Matter). At one end of the scale there is God who is absolute reality and perfection and at the other end is evil and non-being. Evil is thus an absence of good and is either an illusion or simply necessary in order that good may be seen by way of contrast. There are variations on this theme of tackling the problem of theodicy and saying, for example, that you have to have dark colours in a painting or you wouldn't be able to appreciate the bright colours, so life has to have both evil and good to appreciate the good.

Augustine dealt with the problem by means of a metaphysical dualism. He said there were two primal and opposing principles of good and evil, with roughly the same ontological status. He believed that God is necessarily good, so the search for the cause of evil must begin elsewhere and he located it in the freewill of human beings.   And he defined evil as a corruption of the good and developed a controversial metaphysical doctrine of privation. Although he saw evil as a privation, he nevertheless saw it as real. He believed that even so, a good God can use that evil for his own ends that are always good.

St. Thomas Aquinas built on the theodicy of Augustine although for Aquinas, the arguments for the existence of God were separate from the problem of evil. He believed that the proofs for the existence of God were convincing [*] and that evil was not consistent with such a God; there had to be a solution to the problem, though he couldn't provide it.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Scientists, had a scale with God and Truth at one end and Evil and Falsehood at the other. She wrote, *'both sin and sickness are error, and Truth is their remedy'* (Bowker 1997:218). For her, health, happiness and holiness are restored not by going to doctors or psychiatrists but by applying the rules of divine harmony. She wrote, *'all reality is in God and his creation, harmonious and eternal. That which he creates is good, and he makes all that is made. Therefore the only reality of sin, sickness or death is the awful fact that unrealities seem real to human, erring belief, until God strips off their disguise'*. Truth is thus the remedy for evil because evil isn't real; it's an illusion.

John Hick, who wrote *Evil and the God of Love* (1968) sees Christianity as being 'mythologically true', by which I assume that he does not believe it as an historical truth but as a means of what he calls 'soul-making'. He sees humans as having an autonomy and independence from God so that they are able to enter into a relationship with him. He says it is this independence and free will that can get us into trouble and evil but by so doing, we show moral effort, which directs us back to God and his ultimate good purposes. If there were no evil we would not be able to make moral choices and would therefore be incapable of moral growth and development. In other words, Hick sees life as a 'vale of soul-making' because there is some future good that makes acceptable all the pain and evil that has been necessary to achieve it. In other words there must be some ultimate meaning in the evil we encounter but we cannot know it yet.

Dualism, monism and despotism are the Eastern ways of coping with evil and certain of these beliefs are reflected in some Jewish and Christian cosmologies and

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[*] Aquinas' five ways for pointing to the existence of God, about which he writes in the First Book of his *Summa Theologica*, are (i) the argument from movement (or change), (ii) the argument from efficient causality (known as the aetiological argument), (iii) the argument from contingency (known as the cosmological argument), (iv) the argument from degrees of being, (v) the argument from purpose or design (also known as the teleological argument).

theologies. Whilst Zoroastrianism has a dualistic world-view, it nevertheless believes that good will triumph over evil. Monism believes that the world is composed of one sort of stuff, the fundamental nature of which is neither mental nor physical. Monistic religions, such as Advaita Vedanta, teach that there is only one underlying substance, so that despite the multiplicity of appearances, good and evil are in effect one. Some religions seek to achieve this as a spiritual reality. For example, in Zen the ultimate aim is to experience the ordinary objects and events of this world with similar wonder and delight so that all distinctions, good and evil, pleasure and pain, life and death are transcended in an all-embracing oneness.

Some Christians would see this as pure escapism, a desperate attempt to find oblivion by which heart and mind are spared the reality of evil. But for psychologists of religion, Zen has a particular interest. The state of *satori* represents an intensification of consciousness, that is a deeper self-realisation and a search for self-redemption. In other words, this not an escape from pain but an entering into it.

The events of 11th September have led many to have another look at the nature of evil, particularly when carried out by religious adherents who are prepared to die for what they believe is a fight against evil. The inevitable backlash in the media is to try and exclude religious belief from civil life, whether politics or education. The result is to push religion to the margins where it is in danger of becoming even more extreme and dangerous, rather than trying to integrate it, and its mainstream humanitarian and spiritual values into civil life.

Evil is a particular problem for those who belong to a monotheistic religion. How can there be evil in the world if there is a good and loving God? Or as people ask, *'why does God allow it?'* If God is omnipotent (that is, able to do anything logically possible) and omniscient (that is, able to know everything logically possible to know) and perfectly good, then could he not, if he chose, prevent evil, because an omniscient God would know how to and a good God would choose to do so. These are clearly serious objections to belief in a loving God and many have rejected faith after finding no satisfactory answer to the problem; others have wrestled with theodicy and Christians in particular have found something of the answer in the cross and a suffering God.

I now want to move from the philosophers to the psychologists.

Eduard Spranger (1882-1963)

The German psychologist and educationalist Eduard Spranger attempted to discern certain patterns in the way in which young people grow in religious faith (Spranger 1924). Looking at those from a moderate religious background, he observed that it is in the second decade of life that an inner life begins to emerge. Spranger saw three stages of development.

1. *The first stage is marked by newness, when long-familiar objects and ideas seem to take on a new depth of meaning and significance.* This usually comes about through the discovery of a truly, living religious tradition.

2. This stage is followed by the second when this *newfound experience is often followed by denial and unease.* It may result in a rejection of the family's religious tradition in an attempt to be faithful to the new personal religious experience.

This new found religious experience may also be followed by disappointment with the deeply moving transforming experience not being sustained. Carl Jung describes this in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. He is tortured by the thought that he had committed some terrible sin – possibly the

unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost, following his disappointment with his confirmation. In others, the inner turmoil is between heart and heart, when the newfound personal experience is in conflict with scientific and positivistic values, as with miracles and the contradictions in the faith. Finally, there is the problem of theodicy; how can we live with the paradox of a personal God and the experience of evil? It becomes a crossroads, and may lead to disassociation or the ability to live with the paradox.

3. Spranger saw the second stage as essential preparation for the third stage, *the establishment of a personal and relatively enduring perspective.* The Christian youths who were Spranger's subjects ended up in different places. Some became indifferent to religion (although Spranger suspected that there was an underlying faith of some sort); others broke from traditional Christianity into a personal religiosity of an entirely different kind and others into a reconstructed Christian faith by either returning to the faith of their youth or combining it with their own selections and reinterpretations. In all three groups, Spranger found a conviction that they had found the truth for themselves.

Unfortunately, Spranger doesn't look much at his *fourth stage of maturity* and how those who have embraced the Christian faith manage to live with the problem of evil. He does say, however, that while new themes that challenge faith are rare, new depths are discovered, although '*in the religious realm, a final state of equilibrium is almost never reached*'.

William James (1842-1910)

William James, the American psychologist and philosopher, took the view that the way we deal with evil depends on our temperamental disposition. Like those who believe you can divide the world into two types – those who would like to be millionaires and those who are – James saw people as either healthy-minded or as sick souls. The healthy-minded, he said, saw the world as fundamentally good and in the religious sphere they respond with grateful admiration and a desire for union with the divine. In contrast, the sick souls are peculiarly sensitive to life's' ills. Struck by the precariousness of existence, the problem of suffering and the inevitability of death, they actually find evil to be a dimly lit clue to the meaning of life. What James says, is that for people of that kind who are purely naturalistic, life is bound to end in sadness if not also anxious trembling; but when suffering is seen to have an immortal significance, the soul beaks through its melancholy with new found zest or even ecstatic rapture.

Of the healthy-minded, James that they have an incapacity for suffering and therefore deal with evil by ignoring it. He says that we all do this to some extent, because if we could really grasp the scale of the world's suffering or even think of the pain of the slaughterhouse we would not be able to eat and live.

James has a soft spot for the sick souls; although they may be neurotic to a degree, they are able to embrace the broader range of experience, incorporating the genuinely evil aspects of reality and thereby being open to the deepest levels of truth. James cites St Augustine, John Bunyan and Tolstoy as examples of sick-souls.

James saw the healthy-minded and the sick souls as being on either side of the pain threshold, the healthy-minded '*on the sunny side of their misery line*' (James 1902:115) and the sick souls '*in darkness and apprehension*'. He went on to suggest that they needed different kinds of religion. Adapting a term used by Cardinal Newman's younger brother Francis, William James describes the healthy-minded as 'once-born', for whom the world has one story only. The sick souls he describes as 'twice-born' because the world is a *'double-sided mystery'*. For them, life appears a

deception and a cheat until there is a conversion or realisation of new truths and the gloriousness of God, so that evil is no longer a stumbling block, since they have overcome the pain within themselves and found joy.

Carl Jung (1875-1961)

Jung (1956) deals not so much with cosmic evil but with personal evil that may be represented as negative experiences in childhood, qualities we wish to deny, animal tendencies inherited from our infrahuman ancestors and shielded from view by the persona we are expected to present to others.

For Jung, the first step towards self-realisation or individuation consists in acknowledging and integrating the shadow, which consists not just of all the reprehensible qualities that the person wishes to deny but also qualities that have not been developed and which may indeed turn out to be good. The shadow begins at our feet but we have to recognise it because the more that it is disassociated from conscious life, the more it will display a compensatory demonic dynamism to be projected upon others. The image of the devil and the serpent, as well as the doctrine of original sin, represents variants of the shadow archetype.

In Jung's other archetypes there are religious symbols of darkness or evil. The anima has occult connections with mysteries, with the world of darkness and can appear as a serpent. The mother archetype can be symbolised as the witch or the dragon and the Wise Old Man is capable of working for evil as well as good. Jung rejects the orthodox teaching about the Trinity because it lacks evil and the feminine (although theologians have suggested that the Holy Spirit is feminine). He says that the church has cast out Satan and so there is no opposition to be confronted from the shadow within.

Although Jung tends to go beyond the interface to cross the boundaries of psychology and theology (to the annoyance of both psychologists and theologians), he does provide us with valuable insights in confronting and integrating evil. The concept of the shadow enables the individual to face the darker side of themselves and it has wider implications. The idea of the collective shadow gives us insights into how groups and societies can work and affect our political and social lives. For Jung, evil is a matter of imbalance and not *privatio boni* (the privation of good) because good can only have meaning when it can be contrasted with its opposite. Jung believed that evil distorts the process of individuation and that whilst it is a relative thing, it is still very real.

Gordon Allport (1897-1967)

Allport represents the American humanistic tradition in the psychology of religion and owes much to the work of William James and to a lesser degree to Eduard Spranger (Allport 1978). He criticised his fellow psychologists for the shallowness and youthful arrogance that he said was evident in their neglect of religion and in his own writings tried to demonstrate, *'the autonomous and unifying character of the religious sentiment in personality and the essential dependence of all human life upon faith'*.

Most of Allport's research involved Harvard or other university students as subjects and he uses the term *sentiment* and defines it as *'a comprehensive attitude whose function is to relate the individual meaningfully to the whole of Being'*. Although his subjects were mainly young adults he recognises that religious maturity is rarely found in adults of any age. According to his analysis, Allport sees the mature sentiment as well differentiated, dynamic, directive, comprehensive, integral and fundamentally heuristic (searching).

He sees the need to cope with evil as part of achieving integration. For the mature religious person, there is the need to be differentiated and comprehensive, that is, to be able to embrace a variety of experiences, objects and interests with a

tolerance that seeks truth from a variety of sources. At the same time the mature person needs to be well integrated, holding all these things in a harmonious whole. Allport describes this sentiment as the most comprehensive because it '*holds everything in place at once, and gives equal meaning to suffering and to joy, to death and to life*'. This is not to say that all are experienced equally but that all are given equal meaning, and are experienced and not denied.

Erik Erikson (1902-1988)

Erik Erikson (1963) sees evil as necessary for human development. For the infant, the first real experience of pain is teething. The mouth, until then a source of pleasure, becomes the locus of pain. The nursing child may even bite the mother to alleviate the pain, only to be quickly withdrawn and rejected. Erikson likens this experience to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. He writes, '*this earliest catastrophe is probably the ontogenetic contribution to the biblical saga of paradise, where the first people on earth forfeited forever the right to pluck without effort what had been put at their disposal; they bit into the forbidden apple, and made God angry*'.

Erickson says that this early experience of evil and rejection can be survived without too much psychological damage providing that the earlier bonding experiences have been good and any change is made gradually. This stage of infancy he sees as being resolved through hope, which he says is not just the first of the vital ego strengths but also the most basic and everlasting. Hope and its mature derivative, he acknowledges, comes from faith, which is often fostered by religion.

Later in adolescence, Erikson describes the conflict that arises in the formation of identity whose cornerstone is the virtue of fidelity, '*the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems*'. Fidelity is sustained by an ideology and the need to be a ritually confirmed member of a tribe or tradition that represents a larger family with coherence, a creed and a definition of what is evil. The adolescent British Muslim is easy prey for extreme groups who will confirm their identity and win their fidelity for an ideology that states forcefully what is good and what is evil.

The Religious Traditions

Religions with a linear concept of time tend to see the defeat of evil as taking place at the end of time; religions with a cyclical concept of time tend to see evil as inevitable at the end of each cycle. So for example, in Hinduism we are in *kali-yuga* the fourth and final age in the present world cycle when disease, despair and conflict dominate, while in Buddhism, *mappo* describes the period of decadence and decline at the end of a cycle. All religions hold that good eventually triumphs over evil.

The implication of God in suffering varies from religion to religion. For example, in Jainism and Buddhism, there is not a God who is responsible for creation and in Hinduism, whilst there is a deity involved in the conquest of evil (Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita) there is also the doctrine of karma and the caste system that gives further rationalisation to the problem of suffering. However, in Islam, the control of God in creation is strongly affirmed and in the Koran, suffering is viewed as a punishment for sin and a test of faith and is therefore part of the purpose of God.

In Judaism, the opening chapters of the Hebrew Scriptures recall the myth of Adam and Eve and the punishment they receive for their disobedience. Nevertheless, both Abraham and Job question God about the injustice of undeserved suffering. The Jewish understanding is to see such suffering as a means of purification, or as receiving a reward in the next life, or else simply to accept it as part of life being bittersweet. A rabbi friend of mine told me the story of a group of Jewish lawyers who were in a concentration camp and they decided to put God on trial. They found God guilty and sentenced him to death. When they had realised what they had

done, they were silent. Silent, that is, until it came the time to pray and one of them began to chant in Hebrew and the others joined in. My rabbi friend said that is the Jewish understanding of suffering.

Christians, like Jews and Muslims, see evil as the result of human sin though not entirely, because of the distinction between moral and natural evil. The New Testament writers portray the ministry of Jesus as bringing him into conflict with the powers of evil and he faces evil in various ways. The biblical teaching about evil could be summed up as follows: evil is to be hated, but it must not be repaid or avenged personally, that it is to be punished, and that it is to be overcome with good. Sometimes, as in the wilderness temptations, Jesus resists evil; sometimes, he names it for what it is and even exorcises it and sometimes he suffers it and integrates it, as we see in the passion narratives. The Christian understanding is centred on the cross and a loving God who suffers with and for his people. It does not answer the question of evil, but it offers an invitation to enter into the mystery of death and resurrection.

Moral and Natural Evil

In Christianity, modern treatments of the problem of evil tend to distinguish between moral and natural (or physical evil). Moral evil is something for which reasoning human beings have to be responsible and accountable. The argument goes that if God created us and gave us freedom, and bestowed upon us the maturity and dignity of choice, then he also had to allow us to commit evil. It is not contrary to his omnipotence to encompass the contradictory. God could not make us free and then guarantee that we would not use that freedom. Thus the facts of moral evil are reconcilable with the goodness and power of God. Moral evil can be the result of deliberate acts of wrong but some is also due to ignorance, selfishness and folly.

Then there is the difficult question of natural evil. It is argued that evil can ennoble the character and allows people to exercise charity. It enables us to become more human by sharing one another's burdens. We all know that evil and pain can also destroy people's lives. Theologians like Austin Farrer (1966), tackling the problem of theodicy, have suggested that the pain and suffering of this life will be taken into the next and transformed.

Response to Evil

In his book *Suffering Man: Loving God,* James Martin (1969) wrote, '*the real problem of suffering is not the why, but the how of it, not the finding of a satisfactory explanation but the finding of the means to meet it without being crushe*d'. Victor Frankl (1964) said something similar: '*it is not that we have a problem with suffering; we have a problem about suffering without meaning. People strive for meaning in the evil they have done or the evil they have suffered. We all – priests and psychiatrists – deal with those who ask 'why me?' and the paranoid personality who says, 'It has to be me' and those who say, 'It must be my fault*'. We deal with people who have endured terrible evil and are at peace in themselves, who have forgiven earth for not being heaven and through their suffering have found joy. Equally, we have met those who are bitter, angry, vengeful and destroyed. Perhaps it is not so much that we have to find meaning in suffering but that we have to find a way of facing it.

When a priest reaches out to someone in pain and tells him that God suffers with him, it may bring comfort, or he may be told that when you fall down a well, you don't want someone to come down and sit with you, you want someone who will pull you out! If we tell people to read the psalms, it is because they express every form of human emotion. The result of pain may be to reject God or to recognise that there is nowhere else to go.

Jurgen Moltmann (1974) said, *'anyone who suffers without cause first thinks that he has been forsaken by God. God seems to be the mysterious, incomprehensible God who destroys the good fortune that he gave. But anyone who cries out to God in his suffering echoes the death-cry of the dying Christ, the Son of God. In that case, God is not a hidden someone set over against him, to whom he cries, but in a profound sense the human God, who cries with him and intercedes for him with his cross, where man in his torment is silent.'*

Different religions will approach evil in different ways – in meditation before the Buddha, crossed legged with his eyes closed and contemplating release from the wheel of life, or before the figure of Christ on the cross of a suffering God. When we wrote the *'A Time to Heal Report'* (Chelmsford 2000), we were criticised for not having attempted to solve the problem of suffering and it was true that we didn't. We were aware that the great Christian philosophers had tried but had not been totally convincing. If we could solve the problem of suffering, we would have solved the riddle of life itself. For Christians, suffering remains a mystery, but a mystery into which God has also entered and in which we can find God.

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