Religion and Spirituality

The Origin of Evil

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If there is a just and loving God, why does He allow evil?

Over the many centuries of human endeavor, theologians and philosophers have puzzled over the origin of evil. Without appropriate knowledge, the very fact of the existence of evil causes doubt about the existence of God.

The world of philosophy terms this frustrating conundrum "the problem of evil." Accordingly, the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Penguin, 1999) tells us that "there is evil in the world: bad things happen to people, and people do bad things." Furthermore, there is "a disproportion between virtue and happiness, between vice and misery: an evil exemplified when the wicked prosper and good people meet a grim fate."

The problem was perhaps most famously summed up by philosopher David Hume, an 18th-century neoskeptic. He wrote, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X, 1779).

Can we know the origin of evil? Does the presence of evil in this world really negate the existence of God? Is it possible to accommodate both the existence of God and the existence of evil within a coherent explanation of life? There could hardly be more fundamental and perplexing questions.

Most would agree that the greatest outbreak of evil in the 20th century found expression in one man—Adolf Hitler. There have, of course, been other terrifying examples, among them Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Pol Pot in Cambodia. More recently we have seen tribal genocide between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in Iraq and the Balkans. How does one explain outbursts of such profound evil?

Emil Fackenheim is considered by some to be the foremost theologian of the Holocaust. He distinguishes between the "ordinary" evil of human nature and what he calls the "radical evil" of Hitler's nature. To Fackenheim, even the best explanations of Hitler (and there have been quite a few) are doomed to failure. In the end, "only God can account for such radical evil, and he's not talking" (quoted by Ron Rosenbaum in *Explaining Hitler*, Macmillan, London, 1998, p. 279).

Fackenheim believes that the evil of Hitler is off the scale and lies beyond rational attempts to understand it, "that no amount of biographical and psychological data about a difficult childhood, a dysfunctional family, no concatenation of trauma and deformation, no combination of bad character and evil ideology, could add up to *enough*. Enough to explain the magnitude of Hitler's crimes." He believes Hitler's badness was "something else again entirely . . . the meaning of which we need to

search for not in psychology but in theology. The explanation for which, if there is one, can be known or fathomed only by God" (p. xvi).

Indeed, the answers to this question of evil do lie in the theological realm. The Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings—which together we call the Holy Bible—comprise the Word of God. Together they provide a record of God's words, including His explanation of both the origin and the development of evil. If we are willing to look to this source we will find the answers to the question of evil.

ROOTS OF EVIL

In Genesis 3 we find the account of a being in the form of a serpent who deceived the first woman into disobeying God. Here is the initial account of an evil being who is capable of deceiving the whole world and who is the very embodiment of malevolence throughout the entire Bible—the inspirer of evil in countless persons and situations across all of human history.

Despite the breadth of such awful influence, however, this is by no means the whole answer to the origin of evil or its existence. The Bible's explanation of the origin of evil must be pieced together by carefully analyzing numerous scriptures. For example, the previous chapter of Genesis provides us with additional insight into evil's existence and function in the world. We may deepen our understanding of evil by studying the account about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

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Genesis tells us that along with all the other trees, God placed two special trees in humanity's original habitat, the Garden of Eden. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, could freely eat of the tree of life, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they were not to eat lest they die (Genesis 2:9, 16–17).

These two trees represent two very different kinds of knowledge—two distinct types of thinking and ways of living. The tree of life, as is mentioned from Genesis to Revelation, represents the way to eternal life. It is God's revealed way of successful human living, with thinking and action that is good as defined by God Himself. It is a reflection of His character, in which there is no place for evil—only truth, good and love. Implicitly, this is the way founded on obedience to God's wisdom and way. It is both a mode of behaving and an outcome that God desires for all of humanity. We might call it *God's way*.

In contrast, however, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents a mixed way of thinking and acting—a combination of some good and some evil—the cumulative effect of which leads to death. This second tree represents the way of *humanity's self-discovery*—working out for oneself what is good and what is evil. Relying on one's own devices and taking to oneself one of God's prerogatives—that is, to decide what is right and what is wrong. We might call this *man's way*.

God grants humans the freedom to choose between these contrasting ways of living. He wants us to accept him at His word and choose the way of life he designed us to live. But He allows us to elect the alternative, even though He would prefer to spare us the outcome of such a decision. God grants free choice because, above all, He is interested in the formation of our character, which results from the choices we make.

The book of Genesis teaches that Adam and Eve were seduced into making the wrong choice: "Then the LORD God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of

Us, to know [to distinguish between] good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever . . .'" (Genesis 3:22). Adam and Eve were driven from the garden and thereby prevented from accessing the tree of life (verses 23–24).

DECISION TIME

Thus, from the very beginning of human history, the existence of evil is shown to result from choices that aim to gratify the self. The Genesis account records that when Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). In other words, their desire for self-gratification was stronger than their desire to obey God.

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Once they had made that choice, a merciful God could not allow them to live forever following a way of life that would bring evil and unhappiness. All humanity since that time has been cut off from access to the tree of life, condemned to learn the lesson that deciding for self in matters of morality and ethics is the wrong choice to make.

The Bible explains that this same kind of choice between two opposite and contrasting ways of living was later offered to the nation of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. There is a similarity between Adam and Eve and the children of Israel. God said to the ancient Israelites, "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. . . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). As the Scriptures record, the nation of Israel also chose wrongly, merely continuing down the same path that Adam and Eve had chosen. They reaped the same evil bounty and paid dearly over time for their choice.

From these accounts we may conclude that from the very beginning humankind brought evil upon itself by the wrong spiritual choices made in respect of a way of living. But, if you think about it, this very fact presupposes something even more profound. Who is responsible for these contrasting ways of life and the blessings or curses associated with each? The answer is almost dumbfounding and represents the ultimate answer to the question of evil.

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Within 10 generations after Adam and Eve, human beings, perpetuating the wrong choices made by their first parents, had almost completely corrupted themselves; they were totally evil. "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:5–6).

And so God brought about the Flood in order to deal with the problem of evil which humans had brought upon themselves by the *choices* they had made and continued to make. Even after the Flood their nature remained the same: "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. . . ." (Genesis 8:21).

OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

All this begs another crucial question. By what standards or criteria did God judge the people at that time as evil? The definition of right and wrong, as the Western world came to know it through the Ten Commandments, had not yet been given. The great Flood occurred long before the nation of Israel even existed. This description of human nature's tendency toward evil presupposes something supremely important: there are *universal moral laws*, intended to regulate the conduct of men and women, that reflect the mind and character of God Himself.

How can we explain God's character? He is "good." He defines goodness, love and truth—all that is right. And just as a person's character is defined by what he rejects as much as by what he accepts as right, so God also defines that which is evil and therefore to be rejected. Among other characteristics, the way of evil consists of selfishness, hostility, hatred and lies. It is the opposite of all that God stands for and is. God's character runs completely counter to the way of evil. And this fundamental differentiation between good and evil, embodied within the character of God Himself—both that which is His character and that which He has rejected—existed from the very beginning. We may grope for the exact terminology to describe this spiritual reality, but in essence, by defining that which is good, we also define the opposite way of evil.

Perhaps this explanation helps us make sense of a remarkable scripture that acknowledges the true source of evil. "I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me. . . . I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:5, 7, King James Version). In what sense does God create evil? Many other scriptures show that God is prepared to bring evil upon those who forsake His ways (for example, Jeremiah 18:8, 11–12). But the meaning goes even deeper. He is the author of the hidden spiritual truths about good and evil that govern everything. This scripture claims that the ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil rests with *God Himself*. But how can this be—and for what purpose?

Both Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 record that God existed "in the beginning." The Bible reveals that this was long ago, before the existence of the observable universe, before the creation of the angelic kingdom, before the creation of the earth with its teeming life forms and the very pinnacle of God's creation—humankind, uniquely created in His image and likeness.

ULTIMATE PURPOSE IN LIFE

God has created all this for a supreme purpose. God wants us to freely choose to take on His character and way of life and to reject the opposite—the way of evil. So God created the scheme of things whereby humanity may choose between two alternatives and learn by experience which is the better way to live. Rather surprisingly, in the sense of choice between the two opposites, the concept of evil is revealed as going back to God Himself and the universal spiritual laws He has set in motion.

This background, then, makes sense of what happened to the angelic being who became God's implacable enemy, the devil. The Bible reveals that God created a class of spirit beings called angels. But it also records that one third of these angels sinned (2 Peter 2:4; Revelation 12:4), including their leader, a mighty angel who exalted himself against God (Isaiah 14:12–14). This being's decision to gratify his craving for power, authority and dominion introduced evil into the angelic realm. He

thus became Satan—the devil, the great adversary of God and, therefore, of mankind. It is apparent that God created these angels with the same free moral agency and capacity to choose as He later created in humankind. Both sinned (1 John 3:8; Romans 3:23); both made a wrong choice; both opted to embrace a way of thinking and an approach to life that rejected not only God's character but also obedience to Him.

The result was perversion and every possible evil. Satan was the first to embody all that was inimical to God's character: he was devoid of truth, motivated by wrong thinking, a murderer, and the father of lies (John 8:44). He became the very epitome of evil, the archenemy of God and humanity (1 Peter 5:8). Satan chose a direction of thinking and action opposite to God's way of life. His character became depraved and corrupt (Isaiah 14:12–14; Ezekiel 28:13–17).

But vital to our understanding is that it was God Himself who set in motion the laws that define and allow evil. He did this by establishing a righteous standard and then allowing His created beings, angelic and human, the freedom to accept or reject that righteous standard. Evil stems from wrong choices—the rejection of what is right.

God has created all things and is working out a supreme purpose that requires us to make a choice between two ways of life. Just as Satan, Adam and Eve made the wrong choice, so has much of humanity ever since. Satan is the invisible ruler of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4), "who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9) and whose spirit "now works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2). He and his cohorts are orchestrating ever more evil and projecting humankind along the spiritual pathway toward oblivion. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

The "radical evil" of Hitler and other despots therefore becomes explicable. It is an evil that results from personal choices made under the sway and influence of the devil and his fallen followers. "Normal" human nature also becomes explicable. It is a nature that hates God. "The carnal [fleshly, worldly] mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). The human heart, or inner being, is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

These thoughts, of course, run completely counter to prevailing popular notions of human nature, yet we should remember that they are the profound words of the One who created us and who knows all things. These words describe every human heart, whether we care to accept it or not. "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart," Jesus said, "and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man. . . ." (Matthew 15:18–20). They stem from those spiritual influences that control "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4) and from the individual choices each of us makes in life.

DEALING WITH EVIL

To all this, the skeptic may answer: "That still does not deal with the multitude of injustices that so disfigure this world. You may have explained evil, but you have not *dealt* with evil." If God is just and powerful, how will perfect justice be done and how will evil be dealt with?

The answer has to do with another aspect of biblical teaching that is best discussed more fully on a future occasion. The Bible teaches about <u>a coming resurrection—a return to life</u>—of *all* who have ever lived. "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth. . ." (John 5:28–29). A time is coming when perfect justice and judgment will be fulfilled and evil will be banished for all time. A just and perfect God will deal with Hitler's hideous catalog of satanically inspired genocide.

In the meantime, that leaves a pivotal question: What choices will each of *us* make in life?

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