

THE PROGENY OF SPACE AND TIME

By David P. Bruce

In this age dominated by science and technology, it seems that the traditional questions posed by philosophy hold about as much interest for the average person as the currency exchange rates published in the *Wall Street Journal*. Which is to say, almost none whatsoever. Yet who has not given at least cursory consideration to one of the oldest problems of philosophy—the question of good and evil?

In the waning years of a century which has arguably witnessed the human race at its best and worst, it would be difficult to imagine any thoughtful person not having at some time given prolonged thought to the question of good and evil. More than any other problem of philosophy, the continuing presence of evil and its impact on the world insures that armchair philosophers have no monopoly on this discussion.

For those who have given serious thought to this problem but are mainly accustomed to Western modes of thought, a classic dilemma arises. Attempts to reconcile the undeniable existence of evil with a benevolent and all-powerful Creator quickly result in a theological impasse. If God inadvertently allowed evil to seep into His creation, then we cannot think of Him as being omnipotent or omniscient. On the other hand, if evil exists by divine decree, then we cannot think of the Deity as good or beneficent. Such a philosophical stalemate is not appealing to the religious sensibilities of most people, and it may be this basic dilemma that accounts for the general lack of interest in philosophy today.

Such an impasse does not exist within the Theosophical world view since its starting premise is fundamentally different. The universe is not seen as a one-time creation, but as an ongoing cyclical process, having neither conceivable beginning nor imaginable end. The ultimate reality, impersonal and transcendent, is said to be the source from which the cosmos emanates at the dawn of each new manvantara and into which it recedes at the commencement of pralaya. Manvantaras succeed pralayas in accordance with divine law. During a period of manifestation, or manvantara, the cosmos is pervaded by a fundamental duality, reflected in the material worlds in an infinite number of ways. Some of the older writings refer categorically to these manifold dualities as simply the “pairs of opposites.”

Good and evil, then, can be seen as one of the pairs of opposites. In an old Vedantic text the question is asked, “What is that time or that age in which the pairs of opposites do not exist for human beings?” (Nityaswarupananda, ch. 9, verse 4). So from the Theosophical perspective, good and evil exist, not because of divine incom-

petence or maliciousness, but as part and parcel of a manifested field of duality. Addressing this subject, I. K. Taimni (50–1) has this to say:

The Ultimate Reality which is the basis of the Universe is Whole, Complete and Perfectly Balanced. So in manifestation evil must counter-balance good and punishment must go side by side with reward. These pairs of opposites must exist together if the equilibrium of the perfect balance in the underlying Reality is to be maintained.

Historically, our culture has had a tendency to view good and evil as moral absolutes. This is reflected in many of our prevailing attitudes on such social issues as crime, abortion, and capital punishment. While ethical living is indeed central to the Theosophical life, good and evil are not considered as absolutes: “Esoteric philosophy admits neither good nor evil *per se*, as existing independently in nature” (Blavatsky 2:162).

This is not to say that good and evil are not part of our lives, or that we do not experience the pleasure and pain they bring, but only that they do not exist independently of each other. Good and evil exist only in relationship to each other.

For example, an average man who by all accounts leads a respectable life in his community can be considered by worldly standards to be good when compared to a ruthless drug lord who obtains his ends by fear, extortion, and extreme violence. Yet, many of the habits and tendencies of this respectable man would be considered to be evil and retrogressive if they were found in a spiritual devotee. Gossip, coarse humor, and occasional gambling may be indulged in by the “respectable” man of the community, but for a spiritual devotee such things would be entirely out of place. On the other hand, if the worst thing the drug lord did was to play poker and gossip about his rivals, this would indeed be progress! A more eloquent passage (Blavatsky 2:96) renders the idea this way:

Good and Evil are twins, the progeny of Space and Time, under the sway of Maya. Separate them, by cutting one from the other, and they will both die. Neither exists *per se*, since each has to be generated and created out of the other, in order to come into being.

Lest the reader think that this view is solely an Eastern perspective, observe what one of the West’s foremost philosophers, Benedict de Spinoza, had to say: “Good and bad are said of things only in a certain respect, so that one and the same can be called good and bad according to different respects” (Curley 5).

At this point it should be emphasized once again that ethical actions are at the very heart of spirituality. This has been known and insisted upon by all the great spiritual teachers, from Patanjali to Pythagoras, from Christ to Confucius. No genuine guru discounts the tremendous importance of right conduct on the part of his disci-

ples. That good and evil are relative terms is a fact which calls—not for a relaxation of ethical standards—but for even greater vigilance and discrimination. We should remember that heat and cold are relative terms also, but either one has the power to maim or kill, as victims of severe burns and frostbite know all too well.

As evil exists in countless forms, it has been defined in various ways. One school of thought prefers a somewhat sanitary approach by thinking of evil as simply the “absence of good.” In his book *The Conquest of Illusion*, J. J. van der Leeuw dismisses this as nothing more than a philosophical platitude. Such empty phrases may satisfy the faint of heart, but those who have come face to face with evil know from experience that it is not some vacuous and colorless neutrality. Those who have felt the breath of evil chill the spine and wrench the stomach know that it is not some innocuous translucency, but a virile force positively at odds with the good.

Another common view of evil is that there is essentially no evil but for ignorance. There is truth in this, as much of our karmic pain is brought upon ourselves as the result of our own ignorance. The laws of Nature are immutable and until we learn to live in harmony with them, we shall continue to stub our toes and suffer the consequences of our ignorance. Still, ignorance cannot account for all cases of evil. As J. J. van der Leeuw points out, ignorance does not explain the all too frequent feelings of guilt, shame, and even self-loathing that we sometimes experience after committing an evil act. The implication is that in such cases there has been a failure of the will in preventing such actions from taking place, so it was not knowledge that was lacking, but inner strength.

Still another view of evil is that it is but the exaggeration of the good (*Mahatma Letters* 10 [chronological no. 88]). Our common experience bears out the truth of this point of view. Too much rainfall becomes a devastating flood. Too much helpfulness invades the privacy of others. Too much loyalty breeds fanaticism. Too much attention to detail retards the ability to make timely decisions, and so forth.

In his book, *Modern Theosophy*, Hugh Shearman suggests a similar view. He says that evil can be Theosophically interpreted as the absence of something, such as in an imbalance of character development that results in evil actions generated by distorted motives. Few of us are perfectly balanced in our inner nature, so Shearman clarifies that it is in those cases of imbalance where the contrast between the light and dark sides of human nature is most strident and pronounced that cases of extreme evil result. History is full of examples of evil personages whose intellectual side was developed well in excess of their heart side, much to the misfortune of their contemporaries. One particularly insightful definition of evil is given by Robert Ellwood in his book *Theosophy* (146):

Fundamentally, evil blocks or prevents something from being what it is or is meant to become in accordance with its intrinsic nature. . . . On a deeper level it cuts the creature off from enjoying the unbounded fullness of life which all living things desire.

Whatever one's view of evil, it can hardly be denied that its fruits are pain and suffering. Sometimes these karmic repercussions strike with startling rapidity; at other times they build momentum slowly and steadily, only to surge forth when least expected—perhaps in another lifetime. Pain is quite an effective teacher as it has a way of grabbing our attention. Some may think this applies more to the earlier stages of our evolution, but it is said that even the Enlightened Ones feel sorrow for the world's misery.

So it becomes obvious that the question of good and evil, from the Theosophical perspective, is not a simple issue. It is a fascinating philosophical problem as well as an important practical issue. And it is unlikely that the practical side of the problem will be dealt with adequately until the philosophical side is first understood. Good and evil are not fixed absolutes, but like the currency exchange rates published in financial journals, are relative to time and place.

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