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Is Satan Evil?

Understanding Satan as a character requires the introduction of a *context* in which the character operates. Our search for Satan's dwelling place takes us to different areas of definition and interpretation, but the most fundamental question at this point is the relationship between Satan and evil. The question of whether the character of Satan is evil or not cannot be answered readily, since the problem is twofold: like any character, Satan has many layers and describing him as evil is an over-simplification. At the same time, the abstract concept of evil depends on contextual circumstances. The best approach seems the one applied to the description of God in the methodology of *via negativa:* Evil is the absence of Good, the absence of relation, the absence of personhood. Still, Satan is traditionally associated with evil; in fact, Satan is commonly mentioned in the context of the origin of sin, he is described as evil incarnate, and as the facilitator of evil acts. And his attraction as a character lies in his dark nature. As a character, Satan mostly has human features; he functions as an anthropomorphization of evil. It also seems as if the abstract concept of evil finds one form of expression through some attributes that we observe in the character of Satan. In particular the observation that evil generally has a face—we encounter it through persons and in relationships. The following provides an overview of the problem of evil in relation to the character of Satan, trying to identify what factors underlie our understanding of him.

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The Dilemma

Evil is an existential reality of human life. The definitions of evil depend on their context: moral, social, theological, psychological, or legal. Most definitions, however, would agree that evil is anything that causes suffering, pain, and destruction and that is usually connected with wrongdoing and overstepping boundaries. Evil can be the violation of a society's rule of conduct (morality), but it can also be understood as the violation of a universal principle, beyond social customs. The phenomenon of evil is universal and ubiquitous in its experience, although the term is generally used in the context of religion, (social) philosophy, and ethical debates. The questions of what constitutes evil and why it exists are two of the big questions of humanity and are approached repeatedly because of the impossibility of answering them satisfactorily.

Since the rise of the social sciences—psychology, sociology, and psychoanalysis—the explanation for evil has been increasingly sought in the human psyche or in human relationships and social realities, turning away from metaphysical causes for evil. It was Immanuel Kant who marked a paradigm shift in the discussion around evil that influenced all further discussions on that topic. His work determined a shift in the history of ideas from ontology to ontic, from metaphysics to phenomenology. His philosophy of reason initiated a philosophical movement that turned towards the rational understanding of the world and put the human mind and its ability to think and understand in the center of every model of thought. Kant's ideas have to be seen in the context of the development of the natural sciences in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century: the success of the physical sciences called attention to their method and "new" sciences like psychology and sociology, but also the traditional sciences such as philosophy and theology, had to prove their legitimacy by defining their methods. Evil, however, was for Kant beyond pure reason; it was, like the existence of God, something that cannot be known. He did not abandon the metaphysical argument completely; for Kant, the existence of transcendence was not questionable, since it was beyond the influence of human reason. Kant's thoughts on evil were influential for the contemporary debate in several aspects: Kant understood evil as an immanent problem and focused therefore on the question of evil as a *moral* problem instead of a transcendent and metaphysical issue. He also located the source of evil in the *human will*, defining the term positively, and not merely as a privation of good. For him, evil is a real possibility. In that context, Kant emphasized the role of the subjectivity and the power of the individual's will.[1]

1. Cf. Hoeffe, "Ein Thema wiedergewinnen," 11–34, and Sasso, "The Fragmented

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German idealist Georg Friedrich Hegel developed Kant's thoughts further and contributed to the development of the modern understanding of the self and the idea that expression is inseparable from being. Hegel was the first to give a secular formulation of the problem of evil. He distinguished three forms of evil: natural evil, moral evil, and metaphysical evil. He related the universal aspect of human life with its social and historical phenomena to the progress of human spirit in history. For him, passions, private interests, and the satisfaction of selfish impulses are the most potent force in people. The Hegelian idea of progress in history is reflected in the *developmental* aspect towards life: Hegel sees in the narrative of the fall more than a myth; he understands it as the awakening of human consciousness from a purely animal-like state. Evil is part of God's creation and the contradiction between good and evil is the driving force of all movement and development. The pain of the fall is necessary for the birth of humanity. In theological words, we could refer to it as the *felix culpa*, the fortunate fall—an expression used by Augustine and still present today in the Exsultet in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil. Hegel states that "The hour when man leaves the path of mere natural being marks the difference between him, a self-conscious agent, and the natural world."[2]

This is a more developmental and teleological attempt to understand evil: humankind is in process of becoming the perfect beings God intended us to be, and not the fallen creatures of sin. John Hick refers to it as the Irenaean type of theodicy, going back to the theology of St Irenaeus of Lyon, who set out a theology that would be distinguished from that of the Latin fathers as the Greek theodicy and formed the groundwork for a Christian alternative to the Augustinian concept.[3] There is not, however, a distinct Eastern Orthodox theodicy compared to a Western theodicy, influenced by Augustine. The Irenaean theodicy forms a framework for later theologians who could not agree with the Augustinian definition of the fall. Irenaeus understands human beings as immature and imperfect beings that need to undergo development in order to reach the state that the creator has intended for them. This is both an individual and a communal development, that is, both human beings and humankind undergo the process of development. Irenaeus regarded Paul's teaching as authoritative and therefore accepted the concept of the fall of humankind and the Pauline interpretation of Genesis that it was through Adam that sin entered the world. For him, however, the fall was not the one event that corrupted God's

Will," 2

2. Hegel, *Logic*, §24 addition.

3. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 372.

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plan with humankind, but more the expression of the weakness and immaturity of humanity, possibly even necessary for the future development of humankind towards maturity and understanding. Humanity was created as personal beings in the image of God, but more as "working material" than as "end products." That also means that creation is not complete, but is still developing. The experience of evil in the world then can be interpreted as necessary for the process of that development: evil is inevitable, because it will make human beings the perfect creatures that God intended them to be. The world we experience is therefore a place of soul making.

Friedrich Schleiermacher created a similar approach to the question of evil. He saw humankind in the process of acquiring God-consciousness in the environment of the creation. Ultimately, evil and sin serve God's purpose.

The Irenaean theodicy is attractive for modern thinkers, since it avoids question of predestination and the dilemma of God creating free beings who turn away from him and therefore face damnation. The Irenaean theodicy also has a stronger emphasis on the personal relationship between creator and creature.

The problem we face with an Irenaean (i.e., teleological) approach to the existence of evil is the question of how to see the "greater good" in the very reality of pain and suffering. Generally, evil is experienced as something alien, as something that threatens human coexistence from outside. Evil has regularly been associated with an external force responsible for evil actions. But equally, there has always been an awareness of the inherent human ability to act contrary to what seems good and right. Evil is always connected with an ethical judgement. In philosophical terms, these two approaches can be characterized as the metaphysical and the ethical approach to the question of evil. Today we recognize a difference between *existential evil* (such as illness, natural disasters, and accidents) and *human or personal evil*. Most people in the modern Western world would not even attribute the adjective "evil" to natural disasters or accidents, but would rather speak of catastrophes, tragedies, or epidemics. But until the dawn of the modern world the assumption that moral and natural evils are causally linked had not been challenged for centuries and stands in the tradition of the concept of original sin. The fall has historically been considered as an explanation of why human life and our world is not what it should be. The relationship between sin and suffering was regarded as causal; natural evils were regarded as punishment for the sinful actions of the human species. With the Enlightenment and the rise of empirical sciences, natural disasters and illnesses were not associated with sin anymore, but could be explained with natural laws and medicine. Generally, we do not ask anymore why the

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earthquake, the tsunami, or cholera epidemic happened, but instead we ask how we can prevent it from happening again and how we can ensure that we have the appropriate measures to limit the damage by securing buildings and providing good infrastructures, warning systems, and vaccinations. Evil in our understanding is the willful act of destruction of the self or the other.

Whenever we use the term "evil" to describe a deed or a person, it is usually because we cannot understand the motives behind someone's action. The transgression of the boundaries of a society or humanity in general is considered evil. I want to argue here that the best way, if not the only way, to deal with the existence of evil in our world is *to approach it through its expressions, not through its being.* We encounter the limits of an ontological definition of evil in the very fact that we struggle to define what we mean by saying someone is evil. We may describe their actions as evil, but referring to a human being as evil usually involves a certain inability to understand their actions. Any ontological approach to the question entails a reference to a metaphysical existence or at least to a framework of definitions that lies outside the human realm of ethical decisions. Etymologically, the word "evil" is related to the German word *übel*; both are considered to come from a Proto-German and Proto-Indo-European root, related to the modern English word "over" and modern German *über*, expressing the idea of transgression.[4] In that context, Satan would certainly qualify as evil: transgression is his nature—he challenges, oversteps boundaries, tempts, misleads.

When the world is not the way it should be, we begin to ask why:

> Behind the principle of sufficient reason itself is the assumption that the *is* and the *ought* should coincide. . . . Metaphysics is the drive to make very general sense of the world in face of the fact that things go intolerably wrong. . . . The urge to unite *is* and *ought* stands behind every creative endeavour.[5]

If we try to approach the problem of evil, we find ourselves faced with two different problems: There is the issue of the existence of evil in the world and there is our problem of dealing with the issue.

The traditional theological concept is metaphysical and has, since Gottfried Leibniz,[6] been connected with the term *theodicy*. The main point of any theodical discussion is to find reasons why a just, loving, and omnipotent being would allow suffering and pain. Theodicy is the systematic

4. Onions, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.
5. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 322.
6. Leibniz, *Die Theodicee*.

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attempt to understand suffering in the presence of a good God. While Leibniz is responsible for the terminology, the problem itself goes back to the scriptural roots of this theological thought system: the speeches of Job's friends in the book of Job are the oldest account for theodicy in the Bible. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar try to find justification for Job's suffering by arguing that Job must have sinned in order to deserve divine punishment. God's reaction condemns the attempt to justify the suffering and makes clear that the causal connection between human sin and divine punishment is not the truth: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."[7] But what is the truth that Job has spoken? It is not a justification of his suffering or a systematic approach to it, but rather lament and accusation. It is the reaction of a human being towards suffering, a way of dealing with it without giving in to despair. This is probably the most basic reason for any theodicy—the need to challenge suffering, deal with the existence of evil, and not to give up despite the fact that not one explanation so far has been satisfying. The question of why there is evil rather than good becomes more pressing in a theistic worldview, since it challenges the motives of the deity, but the question of why evil exists is not solely theological. It is the realization that the world is not the way it should be, and the continuous process of asking why, even though the answers may never be found and we may never be able to understand the motive behind evil. Even then, we must still ask why God permits it.

Whether we discuss the problem of evil in theological or secular terms, the fundamental issue stays the same—the intelligibility of the world as a whole,[8] as Susan Neiman puts it. According to her, it is precisely this attempt to understand that characterizes humanity:

> If you cannot understand why children are tortured, nothing else you understand really matters. But the very attempt to understand it, requires at least accepting it as part of the world that must be investigated. . . . To abandon the attempt to comprehend evil is to abandon every basis for confronting it, in thought as in practice. The thinkers who returned to the problem of evil while knowing the limits of any discussion of it were driven by moral demands. For creatures endowed with reason, love of the world cannot be blind. The intellectual struggle is more important than any particular results that emerge from it.[9]

7. Job 42:7.
8. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 7–8.
9. Ibid., 324.

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For this purpose, the context for our discussion will be that of Christian theology. The problem of evil does not apply to any concept of deity. The issue is more problematic in academic terms for a religion that worships a deity who is equally good and almighty. This is the case for Christianity, which has followed the monotheism of its Jewish roots and generally attributes infinite goodness and omnipotence to God.[10]

The issue has been brought into focus by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume in his work *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion (*1779*)*. Hume refers to the dilemma that was supposedly first formulated by Epicurus (341–270 BCE) and was quoted by Lactantius:

> Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he 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?[11]

In Christian theology, the figure of Satan has been introduced to solve this contradiction. He has taken on the role of a scapegoat; he is the one who bridges the gap between God's omnipotence and benevolence and the experience of pain in the world.[12]

To return to the story of Job, it is Satan who inflicts Job with unspeakable pain and suffering as a result of a wager with God. But where are the limits of his powers? Is it not a wager with God that stands behind Job's suffering? And is Satan not restricted by God's command to spare Job's life? Satan cannot be the explanation of why evil exists, and after taking a closer look, he also is not evil personified. His character, however, allows us to investigate the phenomenon of evil by putting it in the context of narrative and myth.

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Who Takes the Blame?

The perception of Satan as God's adversary, in the sense of being his equal but opposite, comes from a dualist worldview. Christian theology rejects dualism and therefore the existence of two independent principles or substances. Satan, however, has secured himself a role in Christian

10. There have always been streams of thoughts in the history of Christian theology that tried to offer different solutions to the problem, such as the dualism of the Manichees or the Albigenses, but mainstream Christian theology acknowledges God as the all-good and all-powerful being and is therefore confronted with the reality of evil.

11. Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Part X.

12. We will later see that this attempt has only been partially successful and immediately raises new questions about the extent of God's power over Satan.

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theology, avoiding clear positioning in the system. Our world is either an ultimately harmonious unity and evil is eventually part of the greater good, or it is determined by the irreconcilable realities of good and evil. Neither of the two thought models is essentially compatible with Christian theology, but elements of both are found in Christian thought. John Hick picked up on that problem with the title of his standard work *Evil and the God of Love*.[13] We will see later how this dilemma of bringing together a benevolent God and the experience of evil in the world has become most prevalent after the European Enlightenment and the rise of modern Western thought. But most theologians in all traditions have had to deal with the existence of evil in some way, and Hick's work identifies the main attempts to explain the existence of evil in the world in the Christian tradition. The ultimate monotheism of Christianity suggests a monistic approach to reality: if God alone is powerful and good then there is no possibility for any rival or contrary reality. Evil then can only be seen as existing in God's realm and under the influence of God's will and purpose: "Evil can thus be domesticated within the divine household and seen as a servant instead of a deadly enemy: and then the theodicist finds himself calling evil good and preaching peace where there is no peace."[14]

Against this approach stands not only the human experience of evil as something that challenges the harmony of creation, but also the Christian message through Scripture and revelation that condemns evil and sees it as the enemy of God and humankind. The concept of monism regarding the question of evil does not sufficiently acknowledge the human experience of evil as destructive and painful. John Hick regards Spinoza (1632–77) as the philosopher who expressed monism in Western thought in its purest form. Spinoza, rationalist and determinist, believed in the perfection of reality. The created world is perfect and thus an expression of the eternal and infinite perfection of God or Nature. Good and evil have no reality or meaning of their own; they are only relative concepts and experiences for the individual. Everything happens by absolute necessity and exists in its own right as an expression of the divine perfection. Spinoza's monism is a logical thought construct, something that is impossible to realize in a practical approach to life. The approach cannot justify evil, since it denies its reality: "In showing that the evils that we human beings experience are the illusory products of confused and inadequate ideas Spinoza has not made those evils any less dreadful and oppressive. For they are illusions only in a

13. First published in 1968, this work is still a useful overview for this topic.

14. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 16.

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highly sophisticated sense. . . . Pain, cruelty, and grief are still actual experiences, and they still hurt."[15]

Spinoza's philosophy is a radical and logical approach to the idea of monism in Christianity; most other thinkers who support a monistic understanding of the Christian deity acknowledge that sin, pain, and suffering are real and universally conceivable. The idea of evil as privative and negative, or the perception of evil as nothingness, however, is very strong in Christian theology and is ultimately devoted to the idea of monism. It is not surprising that it was Augustine who first formulated the idea of evil as *privatio boni*. He himself was a follower of Manichaeism before his conversion to Christianity and in his theology he critiques the idea of dualism and the existence of two Godheads, responsible for good and evil in the world.

The most extreme dualistic approach to reality suggests the existence of a benevolent and a malevolent deity, both equally powerful and responsible for their respective spheres.[16] Dualism in some form has been a way for other Western thinkers, also more recently, to approach the problem of evil. Generally this approach refers to Plato's philosophy and his attempt to find the responsibility for evil outside the deity:

> He is responsible for a few things that happen to men, but for many he is not, for the good things we enjoy are much fewer than the evil. The former we must attribute to none else but God; but for the evil we must find some other causes, not God.[17]

Plato introduced the idea of the *Demiurge*, the creator of the physical world who forged it from existing chaotic material. The *Demiurge* is benevolent and tried to create the world as good as possible but had to work with the material given, and that is the source of evil:

> Identical with the matter that imprisons us as embodied beings, clogging and weighing down the soul and impeding it in its search for goodness and truth, so that the philosopher must aim so far as possible at a detachment from the body and its distractions.[18]

15. Ibid., 23.

16. Followers of Zoroastrianism (after 600 BCE in Persia) believed in two rival Gods: *Ahura Mazda* is the source of good and *Angra Mainyu* responsible for evil. Zoroastrianism equally influenced Western and Eastern religion and is reflected in early Christianity in the teachings of Mani (b. *ca*. 215 CE) and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the beliefs of the Albigenses or Cathars in the south of France.

17. Plato, *Republic*, 379 C, quoted in Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 26.

18. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love,* 27. This idea has strongly influenced Neoplatonism and Gnosticism.

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Plato's idea has influenced dualistic attempts among Western thinkers who promote the idea of a single, good God whose sovereignty is limited by the matter and therefore the "material" he is working with. Evil therefore would be a consequence of the matter, the energy, or the laws of nature that God has no influence over. The idea of dualism not only contradicts the Christian concept of a God who is an infinite and eternal creator—a concept deeply rooted in the Bible and the traditions of Christian theology—but it is also "metaphysically unsatisfying."[19] Who stands behind the creator and creation if neither is ultimate and self-existent?

Against this external dualism, some thinkers have suggested an internal dualism that sees the opposition to good within the divine nature itself.[20] The limitations of the deity can lie in the self-limitation of God (either when it comes to doing the logically impossible or to dealing with the free will of his creation) but it can also go beyond this by stating that the source of evil is God himself. This, of course, causes great difficulty by creating a "schizophrenic" God who is partly good and partly evil. It also is no proper alternative to the idea of God in any monistic thought model: God alone is the source of everything, the sole creator and omnipotent, and therefore ultimately the source of all things created—good and evil.

Neither monism nor dualism is a satisfying approach to the problem of evil in Christianity. Simply put, a purely monistic explanation would question God's goodness, while a purely dualistic approach cannot sustain God's omnipotence. But both thought models have influenced debates around evil and have served as landmarks for the discussion. The Christian Satan is not a malevolent deity; despite dualistic tendencies and influences in Christian thought, Satan is a creature and therefore dependent on God for its existence. But the story of his successful promotion from a minor member of the divine court into the "dark lord" shows that he was a welcome figure in the development of the early church and its attempts to create a coherent theology around the belief in the *one* God.

19. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 29.

20. This is the case for example in *Process Theology*, following A. N. Whitehead and E. S. Brightman.

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