

Editorial: The Problem of Evil

by *M. Ali Lakhani*

Without evil the All would be incomplete.

Plotinus

It must needs be that offences come;
but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

Matthew: 18, 7

In order to overcome evil one must stand wholly outside it,
on the firm solid ground of unadulterated Good.

Mahatma Gandhi

The problem of evil challenges the conception of a deity that combines the attributes of Omnipotence and Goodness: either attribute alone is compatible with the existence of evil, but the combination of the two is not. And yet it is precisely this combination of attributes that is claimed by the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions, giving rise thereby to the problem of theodicy—the conundrum of evil.

To approach this problem one can begin by examining what one means by the term “evil”. On closer inspection it will be found that the term refers to two categories of experience: the afflictions that are suffered either by virtue of the “conditions of existence” or of the “abuses of free will”. The conditions of existence: privation, transience, imperfection. The abuses of free will: disorientation, temptation, usurpation. From these factors comes what we call “evil”. One could refer to these as “suffering” and “sinfulness”, respectively. It is for this reason that religions consider evil either as illusion or ignorance—for example,

in the case of Hinduism or Buddhism, which focus on its manifestation as suffering from the conditions of existence—or as transgression and rebellion—for example, the Abrahamic religions, which focus on its manifestation as the sinful abuses of free will.

“The world is afflicted with death and decay, therefore the wise do not grieve, knowing the terms of the world” (*Buddhaghosa*). There are two questions this raises: first, are the “terms of the world” or the “conditions of existence” evidence against the Omnipotence and Goodness of God?; and, second, how can the afflictions they cause be transcended?

The answer to the first question is that creation, if perceived as a theophany, is good (“And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold it was very good”—*Genesis*: 1, 31), and is therefore not contrary to the Divine Attributes. But from the perspective of the relatively real, the world is an admixture of good and evil. Thus creation does not appear as good (or theophanic) when perceived as *samsara* (or *maya* in its lower sense), that is, when experienced in an illusory mode by a purely human perspective that is ensnared in the limiting conditions of existence. While paradisaic vision was unitive, perceiving only the Tree of Life—that is, the whole of creation as connected—nevertheless, when mankind heeded the serpentine temptation (to “be as gods, knowing good and evil”—*Genesis*: 3, 5), its vision became separative, emblemized by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). The fact of existence—though it entails “death and decay”—does not therefore, in and of itself, entail suffering at any level other than that of the relatively real because the privative conditions of existence can in fact be transcended by the detachment from illusion that pertains to knowledge.

Evil is metaphysically necessary, because existence is relatively real insofar as it is separation from the Origin. Frithjof Schuon explains: “The question: ‘Why does evil exist?’ really comes down to the question of knowing why there is existence: the serpent is found in Paradise because Paradise exists. Paradise without the serpent would be God.” Thus, according to a *hadith* of the Holy Prophet of Islam: “There is no sin greater than that of existence itself”—by which is meant that “to exist means to be other than God, and so to be bad” (*Schuon*). To exist is to be a creature, distinct from the creator, and in this disjunction lies the privative distance (or “ontological distance”, as Schuon terms it) that we experience as suffering.

Existence—insofar as it pertains to the quality of All-Possibility inherent within the Infinite nature of God—is an aspect of God’s Omnipotence, and—insofar as it pertains to the universality of the Divine Substance inherent within the Absolute nature of God—is an aspect of God’s Goodness. As spiritual beings—insofar as we are created in the image of God, and thereby reflect both His Omnipotence and His Goodness—we possess both the paradisaical vision or intellect to transcend our ignorance and to perceive creation in unitive terms as a theophany—as good, and also the free will to be detached from the imperfections of existence and thereby ourselves open to the goodness inherent within our own spiritual substance.

The answer to the second question is that, though death and decay are the conditions of existence—and the suffering we feel as creatures is undoubtedly experienced by us, at its own level, as ‘real’—, nevertheless the suffering caused by these conditions can be transcended through spiritual growth. To live in the world is to experience misfortune, suffering and death; yet one’s response to these is not dependent on the conditions of existence. For some, an outwardly minor misfortune may be experienced inwardly as calamitous, while for others an apparently major affliction may be borne with ease. Much depends on one’s attitude and this in turn depends on one’s perspective. A deprivation is only experienced as a suffering to the extent that it reflects an attachment and is felt as such. Schuon writes: “Man is the author of his misfortune insofar as it is felt as a suffering; the world is the author of it insofar as his misfortune endeavours to keep him in a cosmic illusion.” The illusoriness of existence reflects the illusoriness of the ego that experiences the cosmic illusion as real. From a metaphysical perspective, “the ego is both the one deluded and the illusion”, and therefore to transcend suffering entails detachment from the ego. It is only by detachment from the ego that the Spirit can transcend the conditions of existence and the ego’s own limited perceptions.

There are thus two components to detachment: first, detachment from the things of the world (“being in the world, not of it”), and, second, detachment from the egoic self (“no reality but the Real”). With regard to the first component, detachment lies in the awareness of the contingent aspect of creation (which accounts for its evanescence and imperfection), the realization that existence is a dreamlike state, “a glory that

vanishes”, and that wakefulness is the awareness of the Absolute Reality, “the glory that never vanishes” and that is Present within existence itself. With regard to the second component, detachment lies in the awareness that “I” am not, only God is. From this perspective, suffering—or *ascesis*—is a purification, a means of transcending the conditions of existence through spiritual growth. As Shakespeare reminds us:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

Spiritual trials are the means of detachment both from the privative conditions of existence that are experienced ordinarily as suffering, and from the egoic delusion that the individual self is Real. Some are tested by want, others by plenty. It is instructive also to recall the scriptural reminder that “Allah does not test a soul beyond its capacity” (*Qur’an*: 2, 286). This is another reason that “the wise do not grieve” for they have faith that trials are, in their own way, mercies, and that existence is a pathway to salvation: “Whom best I love I cross.” Or, in the words of a *hadith* attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib: “Whom I love, him I slay. Whom I slay, him must I requite. Whom I must requite, Myself am his Requitall”. In each moment, the Sustainer remakes us, and each moment is thereby an opportunity for us to rededicate ourselves to Him. In each act of this rededication is a little death, where, by hazarding all that we have, we are reborn spiritually: “Look now, here is a bargain: give one life and receive a hundred!” (*Rumi*). Only by the annihilation of the egoic drop into the Ocean of the Real (*fana-fi-‘Llah*) can the egoic mirage be replaced by the Spirit’s perception of its Self-same Substance and Selfhood (*baqa-bi-‘Llah*) as the theophanic Presence. Thus it is that by lighting the Lamp within, we can shine a Light upon the world. And it is by shining this Light—by perceiving the Divine Face as Present within existence—that our detachment from the relatively real is transmuted into compassion and love for the Presence of the Real.

Evil as sin: “Whatever of good befalleth thee, it is from Allah, and whatever of ill befalleth thee, it is from thyself” (*Qur’an*: 4, 79). We have already seen how this statement can be understood in terms of our limited perception of reality as suffering. But there is a second sense in which this statement can be understood, as alluded to earlier, and

that is evil as the product of sin. This raises two questions that we will consider here: first, what is sin, particularly in relation to the gift of free will?; and, second, what is the antidote to sinfulness?

“All sins are contained in this one category, that one turns away from things divine and truly enduring, and turns towards those which are mutable and uncertain” (*St. Augustine*). The “immutable Good” (transcending any dualistic concept of good and evil) is the Divine Spirit enduring within the heart of man, which acts according to its spiritual nature, and not according to those changing precepts and norms of morality which imply a consciousness of post-paradise distinctions of relative reality, of the “mutable and uncertain good” which exists only in a relational sense as part of the duality of good and evil. Sinfulness is thus rooted in disorientation. It is marked by the turning away, centrifugally, from the paradisaic vision of the Divine Presence of the immutable Good towards the seductions of the world. “The man who has sinned has, in the first place, allowed himself to be seduced; and in the second place has ceased to be what he was before” (*Schubert*). In the extreme case, this turning away constitutes a mortal sin: “Mortal sin in metaphysics is the conviction or assertion of independent self-subsistence, as in Satan’s case” (*Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*). But in more ordinary cases, sinfulness is the forgetfulness of one’s spiritual nature in the face of the seductions of the world and the flesh. It is marked by the pursuit of worldly desires, the gratification of the passions, and attachment to the material world. The sinner in the ordinary sense is the one “who maketh his desire his god” (*Qur’an*: 45, 23), forgetting that desire exists only for the sake of Perfection, and that all contingent desires are insatiable because they do not seek to quench their thirst from the Fount of Perfection.

Is the transgressive character of human free will indicative of the lack of Divine Omnipotence and Goodness? We have read the scriptural admonition that evil cannot come from God, who is all Goodness, but comes from ourselves alone. Yet, it might be objected that God permits sinful transgressions and wickedness, and thereby belies His Benevolence, if not His Power. Man, of all His creatures, was endowed with free will as a mercy, to be able of his own volition to surrender himself to the mystery of his Maker in an act of absolute intimacy. Freedom is therefore the emptying of self-will so that whatever remains is goodwill—that is, the grace of God acting through man. “All the activity of

man in the works of self-denial has no good in itself, but is only to open an entrance for the one only Good, the light of God, to operate on us” (*William Law*). It is in this sense that all Good is from God alone, man’s role being limited to surrendering to the operation of that Goodness by becoming “the void made for the passage of God” (*Schuon*).

As sinfulness is a turning away from God, so the antidote to sinfulness is a reorientation towards the Divine. This involves repentance or *metanoia*, the turning away from the mutable to the Immutable, from illusion to Reality, from the snares of the material world to the transcendent Face of the Divine Presence in all things. And this in turn requires the repentant to undergo rites of purification and prayer by which the spells and seductions of the illusory world can be broken and resisted, and the permanence of the Divine Presence can, by the grace of God, be summoned to abide within the faithful Heart through Invocation and Sacred Remembrance. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you” (*James: 4, 7-8*). It is the desire for God that must replace all worldly desires, and by strengthening this desire through prayer, the eyes of faith are thereby opened, acquiring, by the grace of divine alchemy, the certainty of the vision of the spiritual Reality that underlies and transcends the whole of existence. For man was born to transcend his ordinary existence, the world of suffering and sin, and so to find Peace in the intimate embrace of Divine Mystery.