

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 7: Theology](#) > [Lesson 70: Good and Evil in the Cosmos](#) > The Secret of the Evils of the Cosmos

Lesson 70: Good and Evil in the Cosmos

Introduction

In Lessons Sixty–Seven and Sixty–Eight, it was stated that due to their possession of perfections and goodness, the entities of the world are objects of divine love and will, and divine providence requires that the cosmos be brought into existence with the best order and utmost goodness and perfection.

Given this, the question may be raised as to what is the source of the evils and imperfections in the world. Would it not be better if the cosmos were free of all evil and imperfection, both the evils which are the effects of the natural elements, such as earthquakes, floods, illnesses and plagues, and the evils which are brought into existence by human malefactors, such as the various kinds of injustice and crime?

It is here that some polytheistic religions hold that there are two sources of the cosmos: one the source of its goods, and the other the source of its evils. There is also a group of those who imagine that the existence of evil shows that there is no wise ordering of the cosmos, and they have tumbled into the valley of disbelief and atheism. It is for this reason that divine philosophers have paid particular heed to the problem of good and evil and have reduced evil to an aspect of nothingness.

In order to solve this problem, it is necessary first to explain something about the ordinary concepts of good and evil, and then to provide a philosophical analysis of them.

The Concepts of Good and Evil

In order to discover the meaning of good and evil in ordinary language, it is profitable to be precise about the common features among their obvious instances. For example, health, knowledge and security are obvious instances of good, while illness, ignorance and insecurity are counted among the obvious instances of evil.

Undoubtedly, this is because man considers something for himself to be good or evil according to its

desirability or undesirability, that is, whatever is found to be in agreement with his own innate desires, man considers to be good, and whatever is opposed to his innate desires, he calls evil.

In other words, in order to abstract the concepts of good and evil, first of all one compares one's own desires with things, and wherever a positive relation exists to that thing, it is considered good, and wherever the relation is negative, the thing is considered evil.

Secondly, the characteristics of man are omitted from one side of the relation and the relations among all conscious entities which possess desires and inclinations to other things are considered, and in this way, good will be equivalent to desirability for all conscious entities and evil will be equivalent to undesirability for all conscious entities.

Here the problem may be raised that sometimes something is desirable for one kind of conscious existent and undesirable for another. Should we consider such a thing good or evil?

The answer to this question is easy. The given thing is good for the first thing and evil for the second. This multiplicity of aspects is true in the case of two individuals of a kind, and even in the case of two faculties of an individual. For example, it is possible for a kind of food to be desirable for one individual and undesirable for another, or for it to be good for one faculty of a body and evil for another.

Thirdly, the characteristic of consciousness is also omitted as a term of the relation or comparison, and, for example, greenness, freshness and fruitfulness are considered to be good for a tree, and wilting, dryness and unfruitfulness to be evil for it.

Here, some people have imagined that such generalizations of the concepts of good and evil originate in a kind of anthropomorphism applied to nature, and others have imagined that its standard is human benefit or harm, e.g., the fruitfulness of a tree is, in fact, good for man, not for the tree. But we think that there is another point to this generalization which will be indicated.

The application of good and evil in ordinary language is not limited to essences and entities; rather it is applied in the case of actions, as well. Some actions are considered to be good and others evil. In this way, the concepts of good and evil are presented in the fields of ethics and values.

There has been some controversy among philosophers of ethics about how to explain value concepts and how to determine the standards of moral goodness and evil. In Lesson Thirty-One, we discussed this problem to the extent appropriate for this work, and more details must be sought in philosophical ethics.

A Philosophical Analysis of Good and Evil

In order to provide a detailed analysis of good and evil from a philosophical point of view, several issues must be taken into consideration.

1. From one perspective, the cases to which good and evil are attributed may be divided into two groups: one group is of those things whose goodness or evil is not causally dependent on anything else, such as the goodness of life and the evil of death, and the other group is of those things whose goodness or evil is causally dependent on other things, such as the goodness of those things on which the continuation of life depends, and the evil of that which causes death.

In reality, the goodness of actions is also of this second type, because their desirability is subordinate to the desirability of their ends and results. If their ends are also means for the realization of higher purposes, the relation to the final purposes will be judged according to the relation between the action and its results.

2. All innate inclinations and desires are subsidiary and respectival to the love of self; and since all conscious existents love themselves, their own survival, and their perfections, they have inclinations toward the things which effect their survival and perfection, in other words, toward the things which satisfy their physical and psychic needs.

In fact, these inclinations and desires are the means which the Creator has placed in the nature of every conscious existent to lead it toward the things it needs. Therefore, the most fundamental object of desire is the self, and then come the survival and perfection of the self. The desirability of other things is due to their effects on providing these basic desirable things.

Likewise, that which is fundamentally hateful is the destruction and imperfection of the existence of the self, and other things are hateful because of their effects on the fundamentally hateful things.

In this manner, a clear way is obtained to generalize good and evil to perfection and imperfection, and then to existence and nothingness. That is, by replacing these terms with the instances of desirable and undesirable things (perfection and imperfection of existence) in one side of the relation, and by omitting the characteristics of conscious entities and their inclinations from the other side of the relation, generalization to perfection and imperfection is achieved.

Then, given that the desirability of the perfection of existence is subordinate to the desirability of existence itself, and that the perfection of everything is merely a level of its existence, it may be concluded that the most basic good for every existent is its existence, and the most basic evil for every existent is its non-existence.

From a philosophical point of view, this generalization is not only correct, but necessary, even if it does not correspond to the general view of the matter, for in philosophy the truth of the case itself is at issue, regardless of whether or not it is desired or the object of anyone's inclination.

3. If the perfection of an existent is conditioned on an absence (absence of an obstacle), this absence, in one sense, can be considered to be a part of the complete cause for obtaining the given perfection. In this respect, it will be considered good for such an existent; and conversely, whenever an imperfection of

an existent is an effect of the interference of another existent, the interfering existent may be considered evil for the other existent.

However, from a precise philosophical perspective, the attribution of non-being to good and likewise the attribution of existence to evil is accidental, because good is attributed to an absence insofar as the perfection of another existent somehow depends upon it, and likewise, evil is attributed to an existence insofar as the imperfection of another existent depends on it. So essential goodness is the same as existential perfection, and essential evil is the same as privative imperfection.

For example, health is essentially good, and the non-being of disease-causing microbes is accidentally good. Weakness and illness are essentially evil, while poisons and microbes are accidentally evil.

4. In existents possessing different dimensions and aspects, or numerous parts and faculties, it is possible for there to be interference among their perfections or the means of acquiring perfections (although, interference may be assumed only in the case of material things). In this case, the perfection of every part or faculty is good in relation to itself, and it is evil in respect of its interference with the perfection of another faculty.

The resultant of the perfections and imperfections of the parts and faculties will be considered to be good or evil for the existent itself. This explanation may also be applied to the entire material universe, which includes interfering existents; that is, the goodness of the entire universe depends on whether it possesses the most and highest perfections on the whole, even if some existents do not attain their required perfections.

Likewise, the evil of the entire universe depends on whether it is quantitatively or qualitatively dominated by the aspects of imperfection and privation.

Given the above points, it may be concluded that, firstly, good and evil are secondary philosophical intelligibles, and just as there is no entified existent whose whatness is a cause or effect, no entified existent is found whose essence is good or evil.

Second, just as causation and other philosophical concepts are not derived from entified objects, but are meanings abstracted from specific existences by the intellect from certain perspectives, good and evil are also only meanings whose source of abstraction should be sought in the external world, but not in any entified instances.

Third, there is no existent whose existence is evil for itself and, similarly, the survival and perfection of every existent is good for itself, and the being evil of an existent for another is accidental. Hence no existent is evil in respect of its whatness nor can it be considered an essential source for abstraction of the concept of evil.

Therefore, that which is considered to be the essential source of evil is an aspect of imperfection

pertaining to an existent capable of possessing perfection contrasting with it. In other words, an essential evil is privation of a good, such as deafness, blindness, illness, ignorance, and weakness, which contrast with hearing, sight, health, knowledge and ability.

Therefore, the imperfection of any completely immaterial thing in relation to a higher immaterial entity, or the absence of perfection in immaterial things of the same level in relation to the perfections of other things, cannot be considered to be evil, because they are not capable of possessing that perfection.

It may be concluded that there is no existent to whose existence evil is essentially attributed. Therefore, evil does not need any origin or creator, for creation and being brought into existence are restricted to existence. This is the answer to the first question presented in the introduction to this lesson.

The Secret of the Evils of the Cosmos

Another question is why the world was created in such a way that it contains so much evil and imperfection. This question may be raised even after it is accepted that the source of the abstraction of evil is nothingness, for it may be asked why the cosmos has not been created in such a way that existence replaced nothingness.

The answer to this question is obtained by focusing on the essential characteristics of the natural world. In explanation it may be said that the reciprocal actions and reactions of material existents, change, alteration, conflict, and interference are essential characteristics of the material world. If these characteristics did not exist, there would be no material world.

In other words, the specific causal system of material existents is an essential system required by the very nature of material existents. Therefore, the material world must either come into existence with this system or it would not come into existence at all.

However, in addition to the fact that absolute divine grace necessitates its creation, it is contrary to wisdom to abandon its coming into existence, for its goodness is much more than its accidental evil; and even the ontological perfections of perfect men alone are sufficient to outweigh all the evil of the cosmos.

On the one hand, the appearance of a new phenomenon depends on the destruction of an earlier phenomenon; likewise, the survival of living existents is due to nourishment from vegetables or other animals. On the other hand, perfections of the souls of men are obtained only in the shadow of difficulties and misfortunes borne by them. The existence of calamities and disasters leads man to dispel his negligence, to discover the real essence of this world and to take lessons from events.

Thinking about the scheme of human life will be enough to discover the wisdom of this system. Even thinking about a single aspect of this order, e.g., human life and death, will suffice us, for if there were no death, not only could man attain no heavenly felicity, but also, no man would take warning from the

death of others, and basically, not even worldly comfort would be possible.

For example, if all earlier people survived, today, the earth could not provide sufficient dwellings for man, let alone food and other necessities of life. Therefore, such evils are necessary for goods of these kinds to occur.

It may be concluded that, first, evils and imperfections of this cosmos are necessities which are inseparable from its causal system, and its evil aspects, which originate in aspects of nothingness, are not essentially objects of divine love and will. They can only be considered to be objects of Divine Will, creation, decree and destiny accidentally.

Second, the goodness of the cosmos overweighs these accidental evils, and it is contrary to wisdom and purposefulness to abandon excessive goodness for the sake of preventing the appearance of limited evils.

Third, even these limited relational accidental evils have many advantages, some of which were indicated. The more human knowledge develops, the more does man discover the secrets of the cosmos and the wisdom that underlies them.

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**Lord, increase our knowledge, faith and love with respect to You and those beloved by You, and let us be true followers of the last of Your chosen prophets and his pure household, and let us be included in the graces of Your great friend, the present Imam, may his emergence be hastened, and grant that we may be successful in thanking You for Your blessings and in performing the best deeds which are pleasing to You with perfect sincerity. And may Your salutations be sent without end for Muhammad and the Family of Muhammad, salutations whose blessings may overflow to include the rest of Your creation.**

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