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Description of Module

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Evil

1. Introduction

The concept of evil is multifarious and universally quite common, although its meaning, connotations, impact and symbolism differ from culture to culture and have continued to evolve over time. Whether evil is given form as *rakshasas*, Satan, Lucifer or the devil, or is conceived as profound suffering or *dukkha*, the challenge that it poses for philosophers has been longstanding and has provoked a great deal of argument and debate. This lesson will introduce many of the problems that evil has presented to philosophers over the ages and across cultures. However, its focus will be on salient aspects of the Western philosophical tradition, since academic philosophy in Indian colleges and universities unfortunately continues to take its lead from Anglo-American interests and produces very little original work beyond this paradigm.

Evil, from the philosophersø perspective, is a deeply contested concept. However, a basic dictionary definition will help us begin. Evil is defined as profound immorality, wickedness, and depravity, especially as a supernatural force; it is used to describe actions that are deeply immoral and malevolent. Some classic examples of evil include genocides such as the *shoah* (the Nazi holocaust) or natural calamities such as the tsunami of 2004, which wreaked great havoc and killed nearly a quarter of a million people. These examples illustrate that evil can be seen in at least two distinct ways: as human, caused by the actions of persons; and as natural, caused by events that are geological (earthquakes, floods), biological (cancer, epidemics) and so on. Another distinction to be noted, though it is far more artificial than the human-natural distinction, is the fact that evil poses peculiar sets of problems from a religious-theological perspective as well as from an ethical-philosophical one. We shall first briefly discuss the former and then move on to spend the rest of the lesson on the latter.

2. The Theology of Evil

In terms of theology, within the monotheistic Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the problem of evil refers to the conundrum of reconciling the existence of evil in the world with the existence of a God who is fully good and omnipotent. The attempt to reconcile these two ideas is referred to as *theodicy,* an activity historically bordering on both philosophy and theology. However, prior to theodicy, or the justification that there is an all-powerful and all-good God in the face of undeniable evil, other solutions to this problem present themselves. For example, we can simply deny the omnipotence of God; or we can deny the omnibenevolence (perfect goodness) of God; or, finally, we can deny the existence of evil. All of these pre-theodicies have been given thought to in the history of philosophy and religion.

One must remember that this peculiar conundrum is poignant only for Abrahamic religions. For Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers, God was hardly conceived of as all-powerful. Two thousand years after them, early 20th-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead developed a process-philosophical conception of God that also removed omnipotence from amongst Godøs inherent qualities.

The denial of evil has also had a long history. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), known as St. Augustine, developed a brilliant argument absolving God from any responsibility for evil. He explained that God did not create evil; rather, evil ó in itself nothing but the privation of good ó was a consequence of human free will. Augustineøs attribution of evil to human beings has been seen as an influential solution to the problem of evil, and has been adopted in various ways throughout the history of Christian theology by Thomas Aquinas (13th century) and John Calvin (16th century), right up to contemporary American philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga.

For non-Abrahamic religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, evil does not necessarily present itself as a logical problem serving to incriminate the Godhead ó however, it still poses a problem. Within what is

generically referred to as õHinduismö (a highly problematic amalgam of various scriptural texts and ritual practices *ex post facto* weaved together into the framework of õreligionö in an attempt to bring it into structural parity with the Abrahamic religions), at least in its highly abstract and Brahmanised rendition, evil deeds (*paapa karma*) or events can be understood by way of *karma*. Evil and consequent suffering should therefore not be seen as unfair, since this consists of the proportionate retribution of oneøs own acts.[1] Within Buddhism, the notion of *dukkha* draws parallels in some decisive ways with what we mean by evil, especially the aspect we call *suffering*. Buddhism thus acknowledges evil inclinations and attitudes, and it is one of the primary motives of Buddhist teachings to guide man to overcome these evils and to end *dukkha*.

3.1. The Philosophy of Evil: Leibniz and Spinoza

As mentioned above, the theology of evil and the philosophy of evil overlaps in the practice of theodicy. The term õtheodicyö was first used by German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646ó1716) in his 1710 book, *Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil.* Evil and theodicy were such a preoccupation for Leibniz and his immediate precursors, like Descartes (1596ó1650), as well as his contemporaries, like Spinoza (1632ó1677) and Pierre Bayle (1647ó1706), that one recent commentator has asserted that õin some form or other, the problem of evil is the root from which modern philosophy springsö (Neiman 2004, 13). Spinoza's *Ethics*, his most influential writing during the modern era, puts forward the proposition that neither good nor evil are intrinsically real. Rather they are the result of our judgment. In this respect, he inaugurates a long tradition of the subjectivization of evil; that is, regarding evil as an idea rather than some outside, substantial thing. Despite the profound and long-felt influence of both Leibniz and Spinoza, by far the most important and well-known philosophical discussion of evil in the modern era comes from Immanuel Kant (1724ó1804), to which we now turn.

3.2. The Philosophy of Evil: Immanuel Kant

Kant, in a book written towards the end of his life, argued that evil does not have its roots in the limitations of human nature, but in the immortal aspirations of our freedom. In this sense, evil is a positive phenomenon and not a deprivation or a deficiency (contrary to what Augustine argued). Indeed, Kant refers to evil as the inescapable and ineradicable õknotö at the heart of freedom, exposing weaknesses in our moral constitution. He states that we are weak and tend to be evil in at least three ways: (1) we are frail, by which he means that we often fail knowingly to act in a morally upright manner; (2) we are impure, meaning that we often act morally only when it suits our self-interest to do so; and, (3) we are depraved, meaning that we often act in a way that is the precise opposite of what we know is the right thing to do. In these three ways our moral constitution freely chooses immoral acts over moral ones. Thus, it can be said that there is something evil in our nature, despite Kantøs emphatic admiration of our rationality and ability to apprehend the moral law within. For this reason, many philosophers have found it difficult to reconcile Kantøs moral philosophy as found in *Groundwork* and his second work *Critique*, with his later writings on evil and religion.

3.3. The Philosophy of Evil: G.W.F. Hegel

G.W.F. Hegel (1770ó1831) does not hold the pessimistic viewpoint articulated by Kant and solved the problem of human propensity toward evil by sublimating all human action in history towards incrementally higher goals, higher goods, the substantial realisation of human freedom and wisdom. As he wrote in the opening passages of his *Philosophy of History*:

> õThe world is governed by God, and world history is the content of his government and the execution of his plans. To comprehend this is the task of the philosophy of world history, and its

1 For a comprehensive look at the mythology of evil in relation to Hindu texts and the development and formation of Hinduism, see the excellent book by Sanjay Palshikar, *Evil and the Philosophy of Retribution: Modern Commentaries on the Bhagavad-Gita*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2014.

> initial assumption is that the ideal is fulfilled and that only that which corresponds to the ideal possesses reality... The aim of philosophy is to defend reality against its detractors.ö

What is peculiarly interesting about Hegelø work is that the problem of evil is solved historically and not just logically or theologically, or even by means of mere appeal to human free will. However, there do exist traces of all these aspects within Hegelø unique way of theodicy.

3.4. The Philosophy of Evil: Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844ó1900) also wrote a great deal about evil, but his approach was nothing like a theodicy or a Kantian ascription of evil ó like the Christian original sin concept ó onto basic human nature. Instead, his preference was to shun Christianity, sweep aside the idea of sin and forget about restrictive concepts like õevilö. Nietzsche undertook wholesale attacks upon morality as we know it, and chief among these is the denial of the substantive opposition of good and evil upon which so much of our conception of morality rests: õBetween good and evil actions there is no difference in kind, but at the most one of degree. Good actions are sublimated evil ones; evil actions are coarsened, brutalised good ones.ö Indeed, far from being something that morality should eschew, evil is a necessity and is ineliminable:

> õThere is a personal necessity for misfortune; that terror, want, impoverishment, midnight watches, adventures, hazards and mistakes are as necessary to me and to you as their opposites [. . .] for happiness and misfortune are brother and sister, twins, who grows tall together....ö

Another attack on the idea of morality is present in Nietzscheø apparent denial of free will. He believes that if moral agents do not act freely, they cannot be held morally culpable for their actions. Although there is a great deal of debate on whether Nietzsche is truly committed to determinism, it is fairly clear that he regards man as essentially primitive and animalistic and as part of the natural world, where morality plays no role.

Nietzsche thus suggests that from time immemorial, we have been fooled by a long line of moral philosophers and theologians, who have all attempted theodicies to justify the goodness of God and moralities to prevent the evils of men. He calls out for the few who can brush this aside and can transcend the concepts of good and evil. He warns us that his teaching about morality is dangerous; however it is full of danger because life itself is full of danger. Thus, as much as we may like to repress danger in life, refer to it as evil and try to maintain order (that is, adhere to the good and flee from evil), in doing so we also repress the possibilities of the future. Nietzscheø critique of evil, therefore, seeks to tear apart the prejudices of the present and to let the man of the future leap out; he calls this man the *Overman* (in some translations the term *Superman* is used). Nietzsche criticises values as evil in order to õtrans-valuateö them; that is, to overcome and surpass them with the new, incoming values expressed by and for the Overman, the man who thinks beyond good and evil and is not bound to the history and limitations of previous morality. However, even in this attempt to positively contribute to a truer form of morality, we find perhaps the most devastating critique of morality that Nietzsche has made: because if we are indeed oriented toward the future, then it would seem to be a cowardly complacency and a sacrifice of the great promise of the future for the sake of a staid and comfortable past, for us to adhere to the moralities we have inherited. In view of the need to experiment, to free ourselves for innovation, to slough off dogma and to seek new truths, it would almost be wrong to avoid arbitrarily evil acts.

3.5. The Philosophy of Evil: Hannah Arendt

One of the most profound, innovative and influential philosophies of evil was developed by Hannah Arendt (1906ó1975) in response to what is widely regarded as one of the most evil acts perpetrated by human beings: the *shoah*, that is, the Nazi attempt at genocide of the Jews. While reporting on the trial of a Nazi functionary, Arendt had the audacity to suggest that often, evil deeds are not perpetrated by sadistic persons who have an aim and will to do so, but by seemingly ordinary people who value conformity and seek their own self-interest over the welfare of others. She captured this fact through the now-often quoted phrase, õthe banality of evilö.

As discussed in section 4.1 below, Arendtøs approach has been adopted and developed upon within the psychology of evil. However, at the time that Arendt proposed her ideas, it was regarded as highly controversial to minimise the demonic depiction of the Nazis and to suggest that, in some way, others might have committed the evils that the Nazis had if they (others) had found themselves in the same position and situation at the time. Thus, she stated that human beingsø routine thoughtlessness, combined with the inopportune circumstances, could have turned normally good people into Nazis.

3.6. The Philosophy of Evil: John Rawls

The American political philosopher John Rawls (1921ó2002) has never been regarded as having made a contribution to the understanding of human evil. Indeed, to the contrary, Rawls himself has written: õAccounts of human nature we put aside and rely on a political conception of persons as citizens insteadö (*The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, 800). Following mainstream literature, we can call this a typical Rawlsian *thin* conception: the political (as opposed to metaphysical) idea of human nature. By this political conception is understood what is an abstraction from the typical characteristics of a person as incarnate. Instead, Rawls provides a minimalistic account of human nature, or the political nature of humans:

> õWe think of persons as reasonable and rational, as free and equal citizens, with the two moral powers [-- the capacity for a conception of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good--] and having, at any given moment, a determinate conception of the good, which may change over timeö *(ibid).*

In this account of the person, there is no mention of evil, not even a hint. However, the earlier we go back in Rawlsø thought, the more prominent is his consideration of human nature, at least with respect to bad and evil persons. There is an interesting and totally neglected passage from the end of *A Theory of Justice* (1971) on the distinctions between the unjust, the bad and the evil man. Rawls stated, õwhat moves the evil man is the love of injustice: he delights in the impotence and humiliation of those subject to him and he relishes being recognised by them as the wilful author of their degradationö (386). This discussion is not unique in Rawlsø writings ó at least, not in his early writings. In his senior thesis from 1942, entitled a *Brief Inquiry Into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, the term õevilö appears no less than 76 times. From the 11 appearances of the word õevilö in *A Theory of Justice*, we go down to only 4 in his later work *Political Liberalism* (1993). In the latter, Rawls mentions õevilö twice in speaking of American slavery and the Civil War, which resulted in the death and destruction of many lives in the young nation, and then twice in speaking of Hitler and the *shoah*. Finally, in his last book, *The Law of Peoples* (1999), we find only 3 appearances of the term: with reference to the Holocaust, the Luftwaffe of the Third Reich, and Jewish ghettos in the 16th century.

Thus, in his later works, evil is seen as radical, a thing of the past and a shadow cast upon our hope. However, we have no justification for being without hope. This is because the idea of evil, so prominent in early Rawls, has totally disappeared from the scene as a historical moment of no contemporary consequence in relation to his discovery of the minimalistic, political conception of the person as citizen ó that is, as being fully reasonable and rational rather than tending toward misdeeds.

4.1. Typologies of Evil

Amongst the many philosophical approaches that we have discussed with respect to moral evil (that is, evil resulting from voluntary human action), we are able to sketch a typology that distills the variations down to four main types. These are: (1) sadistic or demonic evil; (2) evil as a means to an end; (3) ideological evil; and (4) banal evil. Sadistic evil refers to the commission of evil acts precisely because they are evil. Despite the fact that this is Rawlsø account of evil, it is doubtful that much of the evil that we either suffer or introduce into the world is a result of persons engaging in evil for eviløs sake. At the same time, there have been known advocates of such practices, in either explicit ways, such as the Marquis de Sade (1740ó1814), or by implication, such as in some of Nietzscheøs writings. It is also true that psychoanalytic theories ó both Freudian and post-Freudian

suggest that all of us harbor such motivations deep within ourselves.

The second type, evil as a means to an end, is likely to be more prevalent. This would seem to overlap with much of Kantøs assessment about the evil in human will. We can find ourselves in a situation where, in order to achieve a desirable or possibly even a good and noble result, an evil act is required as a means to achieve that end. In this case, evil is merely instrumental and would be immediately abandoned if there were other options that could substitute it. Obviously then, a lot of our philosophical debate and moral introspection turns on the issue of whether the means can justify the ends.

The third type of evil is probably the one that we immediately recognise, since it motivates so many of the brazen and horrific evil acts that we see around us ó in the media and so on. That is, ideological evil is the evil that is perpetrated by agents who believe that they are actually doing something good, or acting in a way that is bringing about ideals and representing the side of the good (against the evil). Terrorist acts are a suitable example of this type. It is possible some terrorist acts fit more within the second type, where violence is used as an (evil) means to bring about a good end; however, what really characterises ideological evil is that the moral agents ó in this case the terrorists ó subscribe to the ideology that they belong on the side of the good and they are fighting a just war (with just means) against evil. They believe that they are not using evil, but are fighting against it.

Finally, the fourth type of evil is the banal evil introduced through the work of Hannah Arendt. This insight has been augmented by the psychology of evil, and through numerous experiments, has been demonstrated as having a great deal of explanatory power. For example, starting in 1960, Stanley Milgrim began conducting a series of experiments related to obedience to authority, finding that obedience ó which is banal in the sense that an evil deed is not willed for its own sake ó can lead to acts we would rightly characterise as evil. Along these lines, Philip Zimbardo has also conducted several experiments (the most famous of which is known as the Stanford prison experiment) to explain õhow good people turn evil.ö He has recently written a masterpiece in the psychology of evil (*The Lucifer Effect*) after studying the horrific events perpetrated by the American military at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where several insights made by Arendtøs earlier study were corroborated and further developed.

5. To Conclude

As the history of modernity unfolded, politics slowly secularised, laboriously wrenching itself and especially its reflective self-awareness (e.g., in moral and political philosophy) away from theology. Since then, theodicy has theologised itself, evolving into an internalist and specialist endeavour that is freer than ever from moral-philosophical implications. Of course, it is arguable that moral philosophy has failed to remove the palimpsest of the theological concepts whence it arose. Just the same, theodicy ó even in its loftiest metaphysical developments ó has never fully purified itself from its imbrication with fundamental ethico-political questions. Both theodicy and moral philosophy have always concerned themselves with the scope and significance of human freedom, with the relations between man and man as circumscribed by the nature of man. The same applies to the relation between man and nature as circumscribed by the nature of man and the nature of nature.

The question of evil and the problem of evil therefore did not only spawn theodicy, it also catalysed the permutations and paradigmatic developments of philosophy. Leaving aside the obvious theologised early philosophy of Leibniz, think of high-enlightenment and post-enlightenment work, from Kantøs notion of radical evil and Hegeløs history as theodicy (wherein through some õcunningö and evil deeds and the õslaughter benchö of history are transformed into the basis of freedom and perhaps even a kind of redemption), right up to Nietzscheøs polemics against these positions, as they appear in his work *Beyond Good and Evil*.

In our own era, or its formative proximate past, we are still debating the contested Arendtian notion of the õbanality of evilö, along with its impact within hard-core psychology, such as Stanley Milgrimøs concept of obedience to authority and Zimbardoøs Stanford experiments and recent writings on Abu Ghraib prison. Does the contemporary resurgence of the visibility of evil uncover once more the silent partnership of theodicy and moral philosophy ó is it that after a century of parallel divergence, these lines have crossed again?

Component III: e-Tutorials: Video (to be added)

The following reading material is recommended

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