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EVIL

A comparative overview

Michiel Leezenberg

Introduction

The rebirth or revival of academic philosophical interest in the problem of evil has a precise date: September 11, 2001. The terrorist assaults of that day, notably the attacks against the World Trade Center in New York, which claimed the lives of an estimated 3,000 civilians, have come to trigger, or dominate, many a subsequent philosophical discussion of evil.¹ In the Western popular imagination, contemporary evil also has a face. In the early twenty-first century, Osama bin Laden, the man generally seen as the mastermind behind the attacks, has become almost as defining of evil as Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust were for an earlier generation.

Yet, Bin Laden clearly did not think of himself, the al-Qa'ida network, or the WTC assaults as evil: although he stopped short of claiming responsibility for the assaults, he openly praised the perpetrators. From his own statements, however, it does not become clear whether he sees the attacks as primarily an act of self-defense against the Americans' allegedly attacking the *umma*, or Muslim community of the faithful; as an act of revenge for alleged American atrocities against Muslim civilians; or as a symbolic act telling America, "the head of global unbelief," that it is living in falsehood and should embrace Islam. He likewise wavers between characterizing America in religious terms of unbelief (*kufr*) and ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) or in moral terms of evil: he appears to do the latter when he blames the US for the exploiting of women, racial inequality, economic oppression, environmental pollution, drugs trafficking, sex trade, and so on. Moreover, he holds not just the US administration responsible for these evils: he goes on to claim that the American people, who have elected this government and support its policies by paying taxes, are not innocent of these crimes; hence, he implies, they are legitimate targets in this war.²

The horrors of the September 11 assaults invite philosophical reflection: they raise questions, not so much whether Bin Laden's jejune justifications have any validity, but, for example, whether such spectacular acts of mass violence are somehow qualitatively different from other, less widely publicized forms of violence; whether violence by nonstate actors is essentially less legitimate or more evil than state violence; and whether violence by non-Western actors against Western civilian targets is qualitatively different from violence by Westerners against non-Western civilians. The iconic status of these assaults, rather, than, for example, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda or the horrors of the wars in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria, also raises

questions of a more comparative character: did the assaults really reflect, or contribute to the creation of, a “clash between civilizations”? If so, then exactly what does that clash consist in? Is there anything in the Islamic value system that is qualitatively different from Western liberal values? More generally, do non-Western traditions have fundamentally different notions of, and views on, evil? If so, should we account for contemporary forms of mass violence in terms of such fundamental differences, or should we seek explanations elsewhere? Or is it perhaps possible to formulate universally acceptable characterizations of, and injunctions against, evil?

Surprisingly, however, such comparative and intercultural philosophical questions have received relatively little sustained attention from academic philosophers in the West. The present chapter cannot pretend to fill this gap, or to address these vast questions; it merely attempts to lay the groundwork for possible answers. Accordingly, it will give a bird’s eye view of the – relatively scarce – existing literature on evil in non-Western traditions, without any claim to covering new ground. Below, we will discuss some of the most influential views on evil in, respectively, the Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Judaic philosophical traditions.³ Given the vast temporal and spatial dimensions of the field covered, this can obviously be no more than a cursory, if not superficial overview, but if it persuades any reader to make further forays into any of these directions it will have served its purpose.

Concepts and problems of evil

Some of the doctrines discussed below resonate with Western ideas, in particular with Nietzsche’s claims about the ultimately arbitrary and contingent character of the (human) labels *good* and *evil*, and several studies have been devoted to these similarities and convergences;⁴ but, on the whole, the comparative and intercultural study of evil is still in its infancy. The first question to address in such comparative studies is, of course, whether representatives of different traditions are talking about the same thing. Do different traditions have a notion of evil, as qualitatively different from the morally wrong, the ritually incorrect, the legally transgressive, or even the merely practically unpleasant? Most if not all traditions speak of the inevitabilities of human life (like pain, disease, and death) as bad or evil; but what about cataclysmic events, like earthquakes, floods, and famines? Do such events merely occur as facts of nature or do they have a moral significance as well? Likewise, some traditions have no qualms about labeling even down-to-earth nuisances, like unpleasant odors, poisonous snakes and scorpions, and harmful insects, as “evil.”

Not all of these manifestations, however, are seen as equally morally or philosophically relevant. In Western philosophical discussions, one often encounters an (implicit or explicit) distinction between evil in a broad and generic sense of innocent suffering, that is, of bad things happening to good people, which raises questions about whether the natural or cosmic order is morally good, evil, or just indifferent; and evil in a narrower sense of specifically human actions and human character. In many other traditions, one does in fact encounter broadly similar distinctions between “cosmic” or “metaphysical” and “moral” or “psychological” evil. Below, we will discuss whether, in these traditions, natural forces and entities can be called evil, or whether it is only humans, and possibly superhuman beings like angels and demons, which are capable of morally evil actions. If it is humans who can be evil, or commit evil acts, exactly what is it that enables them to do so? A free will? A moral consciousness?

Such questions already suggest that conceptions of good and evil do not function in isolation: they form part of a broader network of conceptualizations and valuations. Hence, they may well be *incommensurable*, i.e., impossible to judge by neutral or universally accepted standards.

For example, concepts of evil acquire rather different contents in monotheistic, polytheistic, and atheistic traditions. It has often been observed that the problem of evil poses an especially serious challenge for monotheistic religions: if one believes that the world has been created, and is governed, by a single omnipotent and benevolent divinity, the problem of theodicy, or the existence and justification of evil in the world, becomes a major philosophical or theological challenge. It is widely accepted that Buddhist, Confucianist, and Hindu traditions do not have a notion of a single and omnipotent supreme creator deity; hence, they do not appear to face a similarly serious challenge. One might even ask if, in these traditions, one can meaningfully formulate a question of theodicy at all. Likewise, the philosophical problem of radical evil rests on an idea of man as free, autonomous, and responsible, an idea that seems unique to the Western philosophical tradition since Kant. Yet, almost all religious and philosophical traditions have *some* awareness that human suffering may be, or seems to be, undeserved. Hence, questions of incommensurability will not detain us below, but it should be kept in mind that they have nontrivial implications for intercultural (moral) encounters.

A related question that will have to await another occasion is whether moral traditions, or civilizations, are essentially coherent and continuous over time, or instead may involve radical ruptures or discontinuities. This question is of particular relevance for discussions of present-day moral and political problems and conflicts; witness, for example, the various attempts to explain the September 11 assaults as resulting from a generic “Islam” or from a monolithic “Islamic tradition.” Can we understand, and should we judge, such and other acts only in terms of the traditions from which they arise, or is there any common ground or neutral and/or universally applicable moral standard from which we can proceed?

China: Confucianism and Daoism

Unlike Near Eastern monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Indian and Chinese traditions tend to see evil as a feature of human actions, characters, or conceptualizations, rather than a part of the cosmic order or of cosmic processes. In discussing China, I will limit myself to the currents or “schools” of Confucianism (usually labeled *Ru* in Chinese) and Daoism, which emerged during the final years of the Zhou dynasty (c.1046–256 BCE), during the so-called Warring States period (475–221 BCE).⁵ The breakdown of Zhou rule was marked not only by the disappearance of social peace and relative prosperity but also by the decline of the so-called “mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming*). This was not so much a cosmic moral principle valid for all humans but rather a Zhou rationalization or explanation of successful worldly rule. Perkins argues that, in pre-Han China, the philosophical problem of evil arose with the Zhou dynasty collapse, and was symbolized by prominent evil individuals (like usurpers and war lords), rather than natural or manmade disasters (that is, events seen in isolation from any possible actors), like the Lisbon earthquake or possibly the Holocaust.⁶ Thus, Chinese philosophers attach less moral significance to natural disasters than to the ruler’s ability to cope with them.

This focus on human action rather than cosmic processes is already apparent in Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE). Not even in the *Analects*, however, do we find a substantial moral notion of evil as distinct from the ethical notion of wickedness, from the ritual notion of incorrectness, and from the legal notion of crime. Underlying reasons for this absence may be, first, the fact that Heaven (*tian*) plays no major moral role in Confucius’s thinking, which prevents him from developing a notion or doctrine of cosmic evil; and, second, the fact that he hardly if at all speaks of human nature (*xing*), which prevents him from developing a notion of *human* evil. This is not necessarily to say that Confucius was an agnostic, let alone an atheist, in matters

religious. Rather, cosmological or eschatological considerations play no role in his practical philosophy. Perkins (2014: 48–51) argues that Confucius *does* recognize a problem of evil, in the generic sense of bad things happening to good people; but, as he himself already acknowledges, the subordinate – and ambiguous – role of Heaven (*tian*) in the *Analects* makes even such claims debatable. A substantial moral problem of *human* evil arises for Confucianists only if one interprets the crucial concept of *de* as denoting moral virtue rather than as *virtù* in a more Machiavellian sense, that is, as skill or efficacy in governing.

Put differently: even if Confucius has a *concept* of evil (which, as seen, may be doubted), this need not imply that he also recognizes a substantial philosophical *problem* of evil. Famously, Confucianists are concerned more with proper human conduct, in particular in governing others, rather than with abstract and systematic metaphysical or cosmological speculation; hence, one should beware of reading too much ontological or cosmological import into Confucian terms like *xing*, “(human) nature,” or *tian*, “Heaven.” In the *Analects*, one finds little if any moral concern with such cosmic entities. Likewise, given Confucius’s concentric view of loyalties, starting with one’s family and only derivatively extending to the state, and given his relative lack of interest in laws, one should perhaps not even expect any ethical doctrines with a claim to universal validity here.

The Confucian views on evil substantially change with the work of Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289 BCE), Confucius’s most influential pupil. Although for Mencius, as for Confucius, the notion of Heaven remains inarticulate and play an at best a subordinate moral role, Mencius pays much more attention to human nature (*xing*). He argues, famously, that human nature is good, since all humans have a “heart of compassion,” which cannot bear to see others suffer.⁷ Even nowadays, he argues – in clear allusion to the general degradation of moral standards in his own age – people still have this natural reflex. The innate feeling of compassion, he adds, is identical to the principle of benevolence that is innate in all humans. It takes education and development, however, to transform this principle into a virtue that actually informs our actions.

Mencius further argues, in particular against the Mohists, that, because human nature is good rather than evil, morality and education ought to elaborate or realize this nature rather than do violence to it (II.1.6). He also counters claims that human nature is morally indifferent, and hence can be arbitrarily educated to do either good or evil (VI.1.2): although it is possible to make men do what is not good, he argues, it is not according to their nature, just as we can force water to move up, even though its natural inclination is to move down.

Mencius’s comments on government leave hardly more room for a serious problem of evil than his doctrine of human nature. According to him, government should be benevolent; that is, it should take care of the population’s need for food and security. The analogy between the nature of man and the nature of water returns here: “the people turn towards a benevolent rule as water flows downwards” (IV.1.9). Clearly, he thinks that his own age is far from ideal: “the people have never suffered more under tyrannical government than today” (Lau 1970: 75). He does not make clear, however, whether he thinks of violent or oppressive government as evil in a moral sense, or merely bad – or illegitimate – in a practical or political sense. One reason to infer the latter is the fact that he characterizes persons who act badly despite their education as “not wise,” rather than as “bad” or “evil.” One other possible reason for the absence of a major moral category of evil in Mencius is his optimistic belief that all men, even if their actions are bad, can be taught the virtue of benevolence and other virtues, as a result of which their actions will eventually become good. This faith in the benefits and efficacy of education leaves little if any room for incurably evil human actions and characters, even if Mencius nowhere says that education will necessarily or without exception correct the behavior of all humans, and make all rulers benevolent.

The later Confucianist Xunzi (d. 238 BCE) is rather more pessimistic than Mencius. Human nature, he argues, is bad or evil (*è*), and hence, natural human inclinations are a threat both to fellow humans and to the states in which they live. These natural inclinations, he continues, should be countered and suppressed by government, which functions primarily not through laws but – and here the Confucianist in him shows – through rites or ceremonies instilled by means of education. By nature, he claims, man is not simply amoral but positively evil: he is born with aggression, envy, hatred, and a love for profit, and acting in accordance with these drives or feelings causes violence and crime. Hence, humans need teachers and models to become corrected, but this correction (*zheng*) is articulated in terms of ritual principles and moral precepts invented by the sage kings of antiquity, rather than laws and punishments. More generally, Confucianists seem to characterize good and evil, and other terms that to us seem moral, in terms of *ritual* correctness, suggesting an approach to normativity that is relatively unfamiliar to the Western tradition.

Xunzi's pessimism leaves us with the more radical question of how *any* good actions can arise, given that all humans are naturally evil. To this question, Xunzi presents two answers. First, he argues, all things seek their opposite: thus, men desire to do good precisely *because* they are evil in nature. Second, for Xunzi as for Confucius himself, sages play an indispensable civilizing role. Sages, he seems to be saying, are unique among humans in that they are able to change their own nature through self-cultivation; hence, societies should be governed by ritual principles born of the acquired natures of sages (23.7). Among others, this notion of an “acquired nature” seems to imply that the Confucian notion of *xing* is not quite identical to the present-day concept of human nature as strictly natural and innate. On Xunzi's account, this transformation of an inborn trait into an acquired nature by ancient sages is precisely what produces ritual and moral principles. It is not that sages have any unique talent or capacity for being good, but merely that most humans are “petty men”: although they are *able* to become well-educated “gentlemen,” they are simply not *willing* to do so (23.15).

Conspicuously absent in all this is a notion of cosmic evil. Xunzi considers *tian* (translated, significantly, as “nature” rather than “Heaven” by Knoblock) as not in itself a cause of suffering or evil for humans. The course of nature, he argues, is constant, and should be countered or corrected with good government:

If you respond to the constancy of Nature's course with good government, there will be good fortune; if you respond to it with disorder, there will be misfortune. . . . If you conform to the Way . . . then Nature cannot bring about calamity. Accordingly, flood and drought cannot cause famine. . . . You can have no cause to curse Nature, for these things are the consequences of the Way that you have followed.⁸

Thus, whatever calamities befall humans should be blamed on bad human actions, and more specifically on poor government, rather than on Heaven, or nature, as a possibly evil force. This would seem to amount to a strict denial of the existence of evil in the broad sense of undeserved suffering, and to an exclusive focus on the morality, or even the efficacy, of human actions, and in particular of government, but it leaves open the question of whether incompetent government is also necessarily bad, or evil, in a moral sense.

One encounters completely different ideas on good and evil, and on the importance of education, in Daoist thinkers like Laozi (d. c. 300 BCE) and Zhuangzi (d. c. 286 BCE). Unlike the Confucianists, who talk of the Way (*dao*) as a principle for correct human conduct, Laozi and Zhuangzi see *dao* as a generative *cosmic* principle that produces, and hence precedes or transcends, opposites like man–woman, living–dead, strong–weak, and good–bad.

Implicitly or explicitly, both also distance themselves from the Confucianists, and from their notion of *de* (“virtue” or *virtù*) as acquired through lengthy education.

It does not become clear whether Laozi thinks of *dao* as morally significant. On the one hand, he appears to think that the world consists of opposites; all things, he says, will in time transform into their opposite; whoever is now strong will at some point become weak, whoever is now alive will at some point die, etc. This would seem to imply that the cosmic order is a transformative process in which each thing eventually and inevitably turns into its opposite, and is itself beyond good and evil. Yet, on the other hand, Laozi clearly thinks of the cosmic principle of the Way as in *some* sense good, witness comments like “the way of Heaven (*tian dao*) is on the side of the good man.”⁹

Famously, Laozi also preaches *wu wei*, that is, effortless and noncoercive action, in particular for rulers: successful government, he claims, consists in not interfering in the course of events. With this idea of effortless action, Laozi also appears to reject the Confucian notion of *de*, “virtue,” and with it the quintessentially Confucian virtue of humanity (*ren*). It is probably in this context that we should read Laozi’s comment that “Heaven and Earth are not humane; they take the myriad things as straw dogs.”¹⁰ According to Perkins, this suggests that Laozi rejects the idea of cosmic evil, since Heaven is indifferent to human morality, but on a more plausible reading this statement seems to amount to a rejection of anthropocentrism. Heaven and Earth are not ‘human’ in that they do not involve human distinctions like that between good and evil, and humans as such have no special status, that is, we should not see nature (or, rather, the cosmic order) as somehow reflecting or following human feelings and intentions.¹¹ Perkins may be overstating the inhuman and metaphysical character of Laozi’s comment, however: he downplays or overlooks the fact that immediately after this claim Laozi goes on to say that that sages, too, are not humane. That is, Laozi appears to be rejecting the specifically Confucian virtue of humanity (*ren*) as what governs, or should govern, humans, and his notion of *de* as a spontaneous and effortless capacity for government is based on *forgetting* what one has learned, rather than, as Confucians believe, on long years of instruction.

It is here that Laozi’s difference with the Confucianist view of governing and education in terms of correction or rectification (*zheng*) becomes most apparent. For Laozi, governing in accordance with the Way consists precisely in *not* correcting, or interfering with, the course of things and events. This is not to say that the ruler does not act at all; rather, *wu wei* consists in acting spontaneously and effortlessly, instead of trying to impose one’s will or intentions. Hence, “when his [i.e., the ruler’s] work is done, the people all say, ‘It happened to us naturally’” (17). For Laozi, therefore, the relevant moral – and political – opposition is not between good and bad, or good and evil, but between intentional action and “nonaction” or *wu wei*. This would imply that Laozi does not recognize a substantial philosophical problem of evil either in the cosmic sense or in the moral sense.

We find a rather greater attention to evil in the sense of human suffering in that other classic of Daoism, the *Zhuangzi*. The first seven chapters of this book, known as the “inner chapters,” are conventionally seen as stating Zhuangzi’s own thoughts rather than those of his disciples. They contain various examples, or rather stories, of seemingly undeserved suffering, as a result of either natural disasters or human actions. Yet, like Laozi, Zhuangzi does not seem to recognize a problem of (cosmic) evil. In these chapters, he emphatically rejects the opposition between right (*shi*) and wrong (*fei*), and between benefit (*li*) and harm (*hai*); what is beneficial to one creature, he argues, is harmful to another. By extension, he would presumably also reject any moral distinction between good and bad.

At first blush, this seems to amount to a relativist or skeptical rejection of all morality, but perhaps this conclusion may not be warranted. Zhuangzi recommends acting in accordance

with the Way, as it is effortless and successful; but he also seems to view it as normatively good. Nonaction (*wu wei*), he claims, “can set right or wrong. The utmost joy, keeping the body alive – only nonaction comes close to preserving this.”¹² Moreover, despite his acceptance of death as inevitable, Zhuangzi clearly values life: famously, he prefers being alive and powerless over being dead after having lived a life of influence.¹³

Rather exceptionally for a pre-Han thinker, Zhuangzi shows virtually no interest in matters of government. Moreover, the term *xing*, “human nature,” does not occur in the inner chapters. Zhuangzi not only rejects the idea that the human species is in any way special or privileged; he also appears to reject the very idea that humans, qua humans, share a specifically human essence or nature.¹⁴ Thus, Zhuangzi’s is a perspectivism that sees human values and standards as but one of countless options or positions, without there being any one standard or criterion that has a broader, let alone universal, validity. Moreover, even on a human scale, forms of evil that may befall men are part of the inevitable flow of things, and hence should not be grieved over, least of all for reasons of societal propriety, as the Confucianists demand. The most moving – or perhaps shocking – example, of this attitude is the story of Zhuangzi’s reaction to the death of his wife. Instead of going into extended mourning, as required by custom and Confucianism, Zhuangzi is found making music. When asked why he does not mourn his wife, he replies:

When she first died, how could I alone have no distress? But I looked at her beginning and that originally she was without life. . . . Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is like the progression of the four seasons: spring, fall, winter, summer.

(Mair 1994: 169)

To condemn death, or to mourn the passing away of beloved ones as evil, is to remain trapped in one’s human perspective.

A final question of a comparative character arises in this context: ancient Chinese philosophy has on occasion been labeled “pragmatist,” in that it values practical concerns over metaphysical claims. Now American pragmatism, in particular Rorty’s, shows a similarly practical orientation, but Rorty famously adds the desire to alleviate or counter suffering caused by human cruelty as a central concern; and this desire appears to presuppose a notion of evil of sorts.¹⁵ Given the absence, or at least the philosophical irrelevance, of the problem of evil in pre-Han thought, however, exactly what kind of pragmatism do we encounter here? Can we even insert a moral concept of evil into a tradition that appears to reject any idea of morality as involving universal claims, or to display an amoral Machiavellian concern with effective government? Conversely, could a more Chinese-inspired pragmatism encourage us to discard the notion of evil altogether, as it does not necessarily add anything beyond practical concerns with human suffering and bad actions? At present, answers to these questions remain wide open.

Indian thought: Hinduism and Buddhism

Now let us turn to the Hindu tradition and its offshoots. In classical Indian thought, evil in the broad sense of suffering caused by natural or cosmic causes is not a topic of any major moral concern. Rather more attention is paid to the moral implications of human actions, primarily, of course, in the idea of *karma*, i.e., the thought that whatever happens to us in this life is a punishment or reward for our actions in our past lives. Indeed, one might argue that, in Indian thought, all seeming cases of cosmic evil are in fact the result of moral evil: what appears to be a natural disaster may turn out to be an instance of karmic law in action.

The idea of cosmic evil as linked with moral evil through karma was first formulated in more or less philosophical terms in the *Upanishads*, and further developed in later texts like the *Bhagavad Gīta*. In the *Upanishads*, the Hindu concept, or concepts, of rebirth (*samsāra*) appears with the belief that the soul can leave the body upon death, and return in this world, and that the conditions under which it is reborn are determined by the person's actions in a previous life.¹⁶ Rebirth is not yet systematically linked to questions of evil, however. Further, the Chandōgya Upanishad generally speaks narratively in mythological terms, rather than argumentatively in philosophical terms, of the true self (*ātman*) as free from evils, old age and death, and whose desires and intentions are real. In the Bhradarayaka Upanishad, this self is identification with brahman or "immense being"; as such, however, it does not amount to individual identity, as it dissolves into universal brahman like a chunk of salt thrown in water.

The *Bhagavad Gīta* marks a further refinement of karmic law with its distinction of discipline through action (*karma*), knowledge (*jnana*) and devotion (*bhakti*). It also appears to see evil in terms of human action rather than natural or cosmic events. Famously, as the final battle between the two groups of half-brothers, the Pāndavas and the Kauravas, is about to begin, one of the protagonists, Arjuna, develops doubts about the prospect of slaying one's own kinsmen, neighbors, and teachers as an "evil act" (*pāpa kartya*), and hence refuses to fight. His charioteer, who is none other than the god Krishna incarnate, scolds him for his weakness, and enjoins him to fight, arguing that this apparently evil act is, in fact, the right course of action. Although he acknowledges that Arjuna's words are wise, Krishna nonetheless argues that the latter should not grieve for his opponents' death (nor for his own, for that matter) for a number of reasons. First, Krishna says that, in killing an opponent, one only kills his mortal body, but not his immortal and indestructible Self (*ātman*), which will reincarnate in another body. Second, he claims that death is inevitable anyway, so there is no reason for mourning over it. Third, he states that, for Arjuna, as a member of the caste of warriors (*kshatriya*), fighting is simply a caste duty (*dharma*). Fourth, he addresses Arjuna's sense of masculine honor: whereas killing and dying in battle bring honor, in not fighting one brings "disgrace worse than death" over oneself (2.34). Finally, and most importantly, he argues that one should not act for personal gain like power or honor but liberate oneself from all desires and all attachment to the objects of perceptions, in particular through "discipline" (*yoga*); in doing so, one is released from the "bondage of action" (*karma-bandhana*) and – it is implied – will follow the right course of action automatically or as a matter of course.

The *Bhagavad Gīta* hardly involves any *problem* of evil: Arjuna's misgivings about the apparent evil of killing relatives are simply brushed aside, and no further doubts about either cosmic or moral evil appear. The reasons given by Krishna, however, cannot easily be reconciled with each other, as they combine a seemingly universalist notion of liberation with particularist norms of caste-specific duty and gender-specific honor. Further, from the text of the *Bhagavad Gīta*, it does not become unambiguously clear whether *good* and *evil* are merely human labels for human actions, or also apply to the cosmic order as a whole. Finally, the text does not unambiguously state whether the moral precepts given apply only to warriors or also to members of other castes (not to mention women).

On such a view, evils like suffering, killing, and, most importantly, dying are not major philosophical or theological problems but at worst mere nuisances that one can and should rid oneself of by realizing one's true self. And, indeed, many earlier scholars – starting, famously, with Max Weber – have concluded that Indian thought does not see theodicy as a serious problem, and actually succeeds in *solving* that problem. Against such claims, O'Flaherty (1976) argues that the problem of theodicy is in fact pervasive in classical Indian culture, but it appears

in mythology and folk traditions rather than in more philosophical writings and hence has long been overlooked by Western scholars focusing on more canonical texts.

In the one major comparative study of this topic in a Western language, Arthur Herman (1993) approaches what he calls the theological problem of evil in terms of the Western notion of theodicy, that is, the question of how to reconcile human suffering with divine goodness and justice. *Prima facie*, the Western and Indian traditions seem broadly comparable, and in fact such a comparison constitutes a substantial portion of Herman's study. A few caveats are in place, however. Most importantly, to the extent that the philosophical currents of Hinduism discussed by Herman (the Brahmanism of the Upanishads, the theism of the Bhagavad Gita, and the Advaitan monism of Shankara) can be called theistic (let alone monotheistic) at all, they do not involve an all-good and omnipotent creator god like the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic traditions do. Hence, it is not clear that theodicy does in fact pose as serious a problem in Hindu philosophy as it does in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought. Accordingly, Herman (1987) has coined the term "karmadicy" to formulate the problem in nontheistic terms, but this coinage has not found wide acceptance.

After considering, and rejecting, attempts by Western thinkers from St. Augustine to Leibniz to solve the theological problem of evil, Herman (1993) argues that Indian thinkers, in particular Shankara (*c.* eighth century CE) do provide a tenable solution to the problem. In a comparative vein, he argues that the theological problem of evil, so central in Western philosophy, simply does not arise in Indian thought, since it is actually solved in a philosophically acceptable manner by Indian theories of *samsāra* or rebirth. In making this case, Herman distinguishes two notions of rebirth: transmigration, which involves an individual soul that migrates from body to body and is capable of personal identity; and reincarnation, which involves rebirth without such identity being preserved. It is in the guise of a doctrine of transmigration, he argues, that the theological problem of evil can be solved in all of its current formulations:

No matter how terrible and awe-inspiring the suffering may be, the rebirth theorists can simply attribute the suffering to previous misdeeds done in previous lives, and the puzzle over extraordinary evil is solved with no harm done to the majesty and holiness of Deity.¹⁷

This explanation presupposes the doctrine of rebirth, which is likely to be less acceptable to a non-Indian, nonreligious, and/or philosophical audience, and faces other philosophical problems. But, *if* it is philosophically tenable, then the Indian philosophical tradition may be said to have succeeded in actually solving the problem of evil. And, indeed, karmic doctrine has been praised for doing so by authors like Max Weber as the most rigorous solution to the theodicy problem. It has hardly been subjected, however, to sustained philosophical critiques. One recent critic is Kaufman (2005), who argues that a karma-and-rebirth theory, even if one accepts the philosophically problematic assumption of rebirth, fails to adequately account for evil in the sense of human suffering. He claims that the idea of punishment for deeds committed in a life one does not even remember empties the doctrine of any idea of moral growth, learning, or improvement; further, it leads to an infinite regress (if all suffering in any life, including death, is the result of earlier evil actions, then what was the origin of this evil?); it presupposes rather than explains the supreme evil of death (why did God, or the gods, allow this evil to come into the world in the first place?); and it simultaneously affirms and denies human free will and responsibility. He bases his arguments not on the theory as encountered in any one source, however, but on a "simplified and idealized version" of the doctrine, reflecting specifically modern attempts to develop karmic doctrine into a "complete, systematic theory

of the origins and explanation of human suffering.”¹⁸ It remains to be seen whether this does justice to existing karmic doctrines.

More recently, Mike Burley has argued that the moral implications of karmic beliefs are less straightforward than either proponents or critics suggest. In implying that whatever evil happens to humans is morally just, these beliefs risk blaming the victim: any injustice, no matter how seemingly undeserved or horrible, may now be explained as really a well-deserved punishment for one’s actions in previous lives. In fact, however, widely different positions have been taken by different Hindu and Buddhist thinkers; thus, when confronted with victims of torture, persecution, or genocide, one – rather heartless – Buddhist reply is that these victims must themselves have done something terrible in a previous life, and hence deserve such karmic punishment. A more compassionate Buddhist answer is that committing evil is itself a misfortune, and warrants forgiveness toward, or prayer for, the perpetrators rather than condemnation.¹⁹ Shocking or moving as such positions may be, in general they do not offer any clear practical guidance for ethical or political action, in particular the question of whether and how one may avoid, lessen, or counter any evil done by humans.

The development of Buddhism in India and its later spread to China deserves a special mention in this context. Early Buddhism not only denies that there is a deity responsible for the creation of the world, and hence, in a sense, for the existence of cosmic or metaphysical evil; it also denies the existence of an unchanging self (*ātman*), and hence, in a sense, of moral evil. Nonetheless, evil, in the guise of suffering (*duhkha*), does of course play a central role in Buddhist eschatology: suffering is an inevitable part of life, but it is predicated on the illusory belief that we have a self; and, once we rid ourselves of this belief, suffering will also come to an end. This is not simply a *denial* of the self, however: already in the famous “Questions of Milinda” the early Buddhist sage Nāgasena refuses to either affirm or deny that there is a self. What survives death, it is sometimes asserted, is merely the flame that passes from one candle to another.

This immediately leads to even more pressing conceptual and normative problems than we encountered in Hinduism concerning the justice – and, indeed, the very coherence – of karmic law. These primarily concern the underlying actor or entity undergoing rebirth, and assuming responsibility for past actions: if there is no self, then exactly what is the underlying entity or identity that is reborn? And how can I reasonably be rewarded or punished for actions in the past that have not been committed by *me* or my *self*? Likewise, tough questions concerning evil lie ahead if one thinks, as the early Buddhists do, that human suffering is not primarily the consequence of evil actions in a previous life but rather of the belief that there is a self in the first place.

These are difficult questions; but they do not appear to have been of central concern in early Buddhism. Nor is it such problems which guided or motivated the rise of the later form of Buddhism usually referred to as Mahāyāna Buddhism; if anything, questions concerning existence, self, and evil are complicated even further by the novel doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyata*), i.e., the belief that neither the objects of perception nor the concepts of our thinking have any substance, essence, or “own-being” (*sva-bhāva*), or “massive” (and ultimately indestructible) existence of their own. The topic of evil does not figure prominently in these later Buddhist writings; instead, actions are “merely” good or bad, proper or improper (*dharma/adharma*), or, more rarely, commendable (or “skillful”) or reprehensible (*kusala/akusala*). One is faced, however, with the complex question of exactly what the status of moral rules or precepts is when simultaneously the emptiness of those rules is asserted.

The most influential, and philosophically rewarding, of these later Buddhist authors is undoubtedly Nāgārjuna (d. approx. CE 250). In his *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* (“Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way”), the most influential and sophisticated statement of this doctrine, Nāgārjuna argues that not only metaphysical entities or notions like time and causality are

empty but also our terms and concepts, like the very opposition between *samsāra* (rebirth) and *nirvāna* (liberation from rebirth), and, by extension, between good (*dharma*) and bad (*adharma*), are equally devoid of own-being (*sva-bhāva*). Instead, he argues, these entities are neither caused nor destroyed but “dependently arising” (*pratītya samutpāda*). With this doctrine, Nāgārjuna calls attention to the radical impermanence and contingency of all things. His views carry the threat of nihilism, however, an objection raised most forcefully in the opening verses of Chapter 24: emptiness, it is alleged here, leads to a denial of the four noble truths of Buddhism, of the “three jewels” (i.e., the Buddha, his doctrine or *dharma*, and his community or *samgha*), and thus of good and bad:

Delving in emptiness (*sunyata*), you will destroy the reality of the fruit of attainment, the proper (*dharma*) and improper (*adharma*) acts, and all the everyday practices relative to the empirical world.

(24.6)

Against such criticisms, Nāgārjuna argues that his position does not amount to the nihilist *denial*, but to a *reinterpretation*, of classical Buddhist doctrine. His claims are considerably complicated, however, by his distinction between provisional or conventional and ultimate truth (24.8); the latter goes beyond the former, but cannot be taught without it. This suggests that the ultimate truth is, to speak in a Nietzschean vein, beyond good and evil, that is, beyond the conventional concepts and distinctions by which we order the world. That leaves open, however, the question of what exactly a doctrine of evil as empty but real would amount to, let alone whether Nāgārjuna formulates *any* positive ethical (or other) doctrine, instead of strictly denying all doctrines.

Nāgārjuna’s views on the emptiness of our concepts and distinctions, including that between good and evil, and between provisional and ultimate truth, have had an enormous influence on various later Buddhist schools, but they lead to major conceptual and moral challenges, which we are only beginning to fathom. To mention but one example: Brook Ziporyn claims that, in Tiantai Buddhism, provisional and ultimate truth are identical. This, he argues, is an epistemologically important but ethically problematic insight, as it suggests not merely that good and evil are conceptually dependent, as each other’s negation or complement, but also that compassionate actions are equivalent to deeds of aggression, given that any apparently evil action can be recontextualized and turn out to be, in fact, good: “the most horrible evils are . . . fully and eternally present even in Buddhahood.”²⁰ In a lengthy review of this work, David Loy (2004) points out some of the problems of this view. The fact that all apparently evil acts *can* be recontextualized as really good is too general, in that it gives us no practical moral guidance as to when we *must* do so in our daily lives, rhetorically asking what Tiantai Buddhists would make of Hitler and the Holocaust.

Finally, it seems that it was Buddhist authors who gave the idea of evil or sin as a violation of a universal or divinely given law a wider circulation in Chinese thought from the second century CE on. The Chinese term, *zui*, does not occur in this sense in the oldest Chinese texts, and appears in Chinese translations of Buddhist works, where it renders Sanskrit *pāpa* (“bad”); likewise, Chinese *è* acquires a meaning closer to Sanskrit *akusala* or “reprehensible.”

Islamic philosophy

For comparative and intercultural philosophical inquiry, the Islamic and Jewish traditions are qualitatively different from the Chinese and Indian traditions discussed above. Theologically, the Islamic tradition shows important continuities with the earlier Near Eastern monotheistic

faiths of Judaism and Christianity, in particular the belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent creator; philosophically, it is informed by the pagan Greek philosophers of antiquity, and in particular by the view that being is good and that evil is in some sense nonexistent.

Islam being a monotheistic religion with a notion of an all-good and all-powerful divinity, the existence of evil in the world poses a much more serious problem than it does for the Chinese and Indian traditions discussed above. The early Muslim theologians were well aware of this challenge. The earliest schools of *kalâm* or speculative theology, like the rationalist school of the Mu'tazila, and somewhat later the more voluntarist Ash'arite school, focused on questions of God's unity (*tawhîd*) and justice ('*adl*), and of predestination and free will.²¹ Good and evil, the Mu'tazilites argue, are notions that can be established and distinguished by reason, rather than arbitrary postulates of the divine will. On this account, God cannot enjoin what is contrary to reason, or act against the (rational) principles of justice. Against this extreme rationalism, the tenth-century theologian al Ash'arî argues that God cannot be called unjust, since injustice is the transgression of laws imposed by a superior, and nobody is superior to God, the lawgiver of the universe. There are acts and commands by God that we may not understand rationally, he adds, but these show the limitations of human reason and should be accepted "without asking how" (*bi-lâ kayfa*). On this voluntarist view, good and evil cannot be determined rationally but are, respectively, what God has prescribed and what He has prohibited.

Islamic ideas about evil and theodicy are developed in rather more sophisticated terms by later philosophers like Ibn Sîna (Avicenna, d. CE 1037). He discusses evil (*sharr*) in Book IX, Chapter 6 of the section on metaphysics, or *theologia* (*ilâhiyyât*), of his massive work of synthesis, *The Healing* (*al-shifâ'*). Ibn Sîna's views on evil, as with so many of his doctrines, have been decisively shaped by those of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. From the former two, he derives the idea of being or existence (*wujûd*) as good (*khayr*), and evil (*sharr*) as nonexistence or as privation ('*adam*) of existence. From the latter, he derives the view of the intellect (Gr. *noûs*, Ar. '*aql*) as good and the body, or matter, as evil. He further refines the doctrines of his predecessors with his metaphysics of necessity and contingency, and of essence and accident.

For Ibn Sîna, evil occurs only in the material and sublunary realm, and affects only individual human beings, not the entire human species. Moreover, its existence is a metaphysical or natural necessity rather than a moral concern. First, he distinguishes metaphysical or cosmic evil, which is evil, disorder, or imperfection occurring in the cosmos at large, from moral or psychological evil, which is an imperfection of the soul (or more generally of perishable animals, in particular humans). He sees evil as only a partial privation of being, since an absolute privation would amount to a negation of being, that is, to nonbeing. At one point, Ibn Sîna claims that evil in the human soul is the result of ignorance; elsewhere, however, he argues that human evil is caused by human free will (*ikhthiyâr*), which would seem to imply that humans can freely choose to commit an evil act even if they know it is evil.

He further distinguishes essential evil (*al-sharr bi'l-dhât*) and accidental evil (*al-sharr bi'l-'arad*). Essential evil, he argues, is the privation of predicates required for a subject's essence, or of an element common to a species (for example, of corporeality for human beings or of having wings for birds). As essential evil is nonbeing, however, it cannot be a cause (whether an efficient or an existential one); it comes about not as the result of the action of some external agent or cause but precisely because of the latter's *inaction*. Accidental evil, by contrast, is "that which withholds perfection from what deserves it," like pain, grief, and injustice; unlike essential evil, which is privation of being without itself possessing any being, accidental evil is being in itself, but withholds or destroys perfection. To the extent that it exists, or has being, accidental evil may in itself be good; but it can be called evil since it *causes* evil.²² For example, fire may in

itself be good, but if it burns the legs and prevents a human from walking it destroys a human perfection and, as such, it is evil.

On this account, evil is a necessary concomitant of the constitution of the (material) world, which is in itself good. Moreover, it is relatively rare: for example, the privation of the natural perfection of a particular species (i.e., of that which makes an entity into a member of that species), such as the flawed generation of an embryo resulting in a handicapped or deformed human or animal, is the exception rather than the rule. Humans, Ibn Sîna adds, may also be deprived of secondary perfections, such as knowledge of philosophy or geometry; but this is not an evil with respect to the species “human being” but with respect to such secondary perfections only.

Thus, Ibn Sîna’s is a fundamentally optimistic world view: evil occurs relatively rarely in the world, he argues, and never becomes dominant. It occurs only in one small part of the universe, the sublunary sphere; moreover, it is only accidental evil that affects larger numbers of people, and it does so only relatively rarely in their lives. Still, one may ask why should there be any evil at all. Couldn’t God have made the universe all good? Here, Ibn Sîna argues that evil is a necessary consequence of the good, for “were the elements not to oppose each other, and be acted upon by the dominant one, these noble species would not have arisen from them.”²³ The good that is possible in things, in other words, becomes good only after, and in virtue of, the evil that may occur in them. For example, it is precisely because fire is capable of destroying things that benefits may also be derived from it. Conversely, he argues, evil may also be a necessary means to the good; for example, a lion’s killing other animals is in itself evil, but it is necessary for the preservation of the species, and hence good.

Fair enough, but couldn’t God have made creation free of all such evils or imperfections altogether? For example, couldn’t He have made all lions vegetarians, and all humans intelligent or immaterial? Ibn Sîna’s answer remains implicit but seems to be negative. All of God’s acts, he writes, are done by necessity; this implies that even God is bound by the laws of logical and/or (meta)physical necessity, and cannot arbitrarily act or will things excluded by these laws. The “hard determinism”²⁴ that Ibn Sîna appears to defend as a philosopher, however, appears difficult to reconcile with his – seemingly theologically motivated – belief in both human freedom and divine omnipotence.

Moreover, unlike Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, Ibn Sîna feels no need to relate (moral) evil to sin, in particular original sin.²⁵ This suggests that, unlike his Christian counterparts, he is able to account for moral or psychological evil in purely naturalistic terms of conflicting psychological forces rather than in moral terms of guilt and punishment.²⁶ A more detailed confrontation of naturalist-descriptive and normative-moral accounts of human evil however, awaits another occasion.

Ibn Sîna’s doctrines on evil, as with his ideas in other realms, have had a tremendous and lasting influence. Two of the most important later Islamic authors who are strongly indebted to his views on evil are Abu Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî (d. CE 1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. CE 1328). The terms in which both discuss evil and theodicy are clearly shaped by Ibn Sîna’s discussions. However, both try to do more justice to the theistic notion of a personal God as the creator (rather than a more abstract cause) of the world, and who can reward and punish people for their actions – and to a theistic notion of evil as embodied by Satan, or Iblîs.²⁷

Ibn Taymiyya, famous – or notorious – for his sustained polemics against every person or innovation he considers undesirable or harmful for the existence and well-being of the Muslim community, or *umma*, discusses the problem of evil in various of his numerous writings, in particular in the *Hasana*, a lengthy exegesis of Qur’an (4: 78–9). Here he states, among other things, that all good befalling man comes from God, and all evil comes from himself. Here, Ibn

Taymiyya follows various lines of argument, not all of which are easily reconciled with each other. On the one hand, he argues that evil should be attributed not to God but only to intermediate secondary causes; on the other, he argues that what we regard as evil is good by virtue of God's wise purpose. Echoing Ibn Sīna, he states that whatever evil God creates is not absolute (*mutlaq*) and general, but particular and accidental; moreover, whatever evil there is, is therefore relative to those who commit or suffer it, that is, to creatures. On his account, Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites fail to make this distinction between absolute and particular evil, and hence only speak of absolute evil as applying equally to man and God; thus, they wind up, respectively, denying that God wills all things, and asserting that God may create evil without a wise purpose. What this wise purpose is, however, we do not know and should not ask, he states, quoting a Qur'anic verse: "God is not questioned as to what he does, but they are questioned" (Qur'an 21: 23). Yet, elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya argues that, although God is the source of all things, evil, as nonbeing, cannot strictly speaking have been *created*. Yet, God is just in punishing sins, as sin is the failure to do that which God's servants were created to do.

It should be clear that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Sīna share a similar optimism about the existence, amount, and strength of evil in the world. Neither in Ibn Sīna nor in al-Ghazālī nor in Ibn Taymiyya, incidentally, do we find anything remotely like a suggestion that individuals, civilizations, or empires may be evil simply because they are infidels. Hence, whatever sweeping rejection of the West, America, or Zionists and Crusaders we may find among some present-day Islamic radicals, this does not in any straightforward manner derive from either the Qur'an and hadīth, or from the Islamic philosophical and theological tradition. Despite his own claims to the contrary, Bin Laden's justification of mass violence against civilians (see also, e.g., Lawrence (ed.) 2005: Chapter 11) has no precedent in, and cannot simply be justified from, any supposedly timeless Islamic precepts or unchanging Islamic conceptions or doctrines.

One particularly striking teaching of the nonexistence of evil may be found among some currents of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. This view focuses on the character and status of the devil or Satan (*Shaytan* or *Iblīs* in Arabic). In the Qur'an, Iblīs is not only the great tempter of humans but also a fallen angel, cast out of Heaven for all eternity for his arrogant refusal to bow before Adam when ordered to do so by God.²⁸ Some authors in the Sufi tradition, however, argue that, in disobeying God's *command* (*amr*) Iblīs was in fact obeying the divine *will* (*irāda*), which clearly enjoins all creatures to worship God alone. In ordering his angels to bow before Adam, in other words, God has put his servants to the test; and Iblīs, in his refusal, is not only the sole angel to pass this test; in fact, he is also God's most loyal servant and the most consistent monotheist. On this view, his residence in hell is a temporary tribulation rather than a final punishment: Iblīs will help and/or guide all sinners, and will voluntarily remain far away from his Creator, until Judgment Day (*yawm al-qiyāma*), when he will once again take up his rightful place next to God. On this Sufi view, Iblīs is the enemy of God, man, and creation only in appearance; in reality, he is a lovable, indeed tragic, character.

This view, or vision, of a guiltless Iblīs leads Islamic mystics more generally to see persons and events as evil only in appearance; on a higher plane, even they form part of a divine eschatological plan. Regardless of whether this amounts to a coherent ethical position, it has inspired countless classical Islamic poets, including Rūmī and Farīd al-Dīn al-Attār, modern authors like Mohammad Iqbal, and folk beliefs and practices. It amounts to an even more radical denial of the reality of evil than can already be found in classical Islamic theological and philosophical literature. This view rests not on any ontological doctrine that evil consists in the privation of being but rather on a more personalized eschatological narrative of (seeming) arrogance and humility, and of punishment, purification, and the salvation of man's soul.

Judaism

Ever since the Book of Job, questions of evil, unwarranted suffering, and divine justice have haunted Jewish thinkers. Job, a virtuous man, innocent of any crime, and blessed (by God) with wealth and offspring, is made to undergo the most terrible sufferings, for no reason other than a contest between God and the Devil. Challenged by Satan to put the strength of Job's faith to the test, God allows Job to lose, first, his possessions, then his children, and finally his health. Yet, despite "all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (42:11), and despite bitterly bemoaning his fate, Job keeps his faith, refusing to curse God even when called upon to do so by his wife.

Job's story emphasizes the mystery rather than the justice of God's actions, and does not itself try to explain or justify human suffering in terms of God's plans and actions. It has, however, led later Jewish – and other – authors to ask why, if God is just and omnipotent, He inflicts suffering on people He has chosen. These questions were raised anew by various modern Jewish thinkers in the wake of the Nazis' attempted extermination of European Jewry. The enormity of the Holocaust, however, defies both brief summary and reductionist analysis; hence, this topic will not be discussed here.²⁹ Instead, I will restrict my discussion here to two earlier thinkers from the Jewish philosophical (as distinct from religious) tradition, namely Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) and Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677).³⁰

It may cause surprise to discuss the Judaic tradition after Islam, which it obviously antedates, but Jewish philosophy has in important respects been shaped by Islamic thought. Hence, there are good reasons for discussing it against the background of Islam.³¹ The medieval Jewish philosophical tradition, as philosophy, is literally unthinkable without its Islamic roots; it developed in Islamic lands, and in interaction with Islamic learning. Thus, Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-hā'irīn*), possibly the most widely read and discussed work of philosophy in the entire Jewish tradition, was originally written in Arabic and owed both its technical vocabulary and its philosophical themes to Islamic philosophers, most importantly al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd (Averroes).³²

Maimonides's discussion of evil leans more emphatically on his Neoplatonic and Islamic philosophical ancestors than on the rabbinic literature of the Judaic tradition. Although he does address Job's undeserved suffering (III.23–4), he does so as an illustration of broader philosophical points he has discussed in the preceding chapters. Initially, he appears to see evil as a human rather than a divine responsibility. Most evils in the world, he argues, are the work of (deficient) individual humans acting of their own free will:

the greater part of the evils that befall its individuals are due to . . . the deficient individuals of the human species. . . . We suffer because of evils that we have produced ourselves of our free will; but we attribute them to God.

(*Guide*, III.12: 443)

Things turn out to be more complicated, however, in particular because of his argument that evil is in itself not an independently existing thing (*mawjūd*), but nonbeing or privation (*'adam*). Following Isaiah (45:7), he writes that God does indeed create darkness and evil, but only as privations; that is, He creates them accidentally as privations of individual existents, rather than essentially as characteristics of entire species. For example, God has created the species of mankind as essentially endowed with speech, but the evil of lacking speech is a privation that may accidentally occur in any particular human being. Death, too, is an evil, since it is nonbeing in itself, and consists in a privation of form, i.e., of that which makes men into what they essentially are: living beings endowed with speech (III, 10: 439).

Evil is thus not an essential act of God, but is consequent upon privation. To this, however, Maimonides puzzlingly adds that all evils derive from ignorance, that is, the privation of knowledge (III.11). This seems to mean not that ignorance is the root cause of all evil, but rather that what we call “evil” is a product of ignorance rather than a reality in itself. This leaves it somewhat ambiguous as to whether Maimonides believes we should think of evil in primarily ontological or in epistemological terms. The latter reading is encouraged by his subsequent remarks that the masses (*‘amma*) believe that there is more evil than good in the world as a result of their ignorance. More precisely, he appears to argue that the belief that there are more evils than good things is a product of the imagination rather than the intellect. For, he continues, ignorant people imagine that good or evil concerns individual human beings rather than the human species at large; whatever exists, however, exists not for the sake of the individual but as a result of the will of the Creator.

One puzzling implication of Maimonides’s conception of evil is his claim that divine providence (*ināya*) is proportional to the degree and adequacy of human knowledge. Following the Islamic Neoplatonist philosophers, Maimonides sees the human intellect not in naturalistic terms as a faculty of the soul but as an emanation (*fayd*).³³ This implies that the actualization of the human intellect, which in itself is merely potential intellect, is a good of sorts. Rejecting, among others, the view (which he ascribes to Aristotle) that providence only watches over the heavenly spheres and not to individual humans and other creatures in the sublunar space of growth and decay, Maimonides argues that human beings, alone among mortal earthly creatures, are watched over by providence. This providence, however, is proportional to the degree of human perfection, that is, to the degree that humans have realized or actualized their highest potential, which is their intellect (476). He concludes that providence is consequent upon the intellect and attached to it:

divine providence does not watch in an equal manner over all the individuals of the human species, but providence is graded as their human perfection is graded.

(III.17: 474)

Divine providence, that is, only watches over human beings to the degree that they have actualized their intellect, and have liberated themselves from their imagination and ignorance. Even more astonishingly, if not shockingly, he adds that the ignorant and disobedient have been relegated to the rank of animals, and that hence it is a “light thing to kill them” (*ibid.*).

Maimonides also reads the biblical story of Job in the light of these views. He emphasizes that the evils befalling Job are caused by Satan rather than God; but, more importantly, he argues that Job is repeatedly called “virtuous” and “righteous” but not “wise” or “intelligent.” Job’s perplexity and complaints arise, he argues, because he did not have true knowledge of God, but merely *imagined* health, wealth, and offspring as his ultimate goal (III.23: 492–3). That is, in questioning the privation of an individual human rather than the human species, he relied on his imagination rather than his intellect. In acquiring true knowledge, however, we cease being troubled by evils and misfortunes, including even death. According to Leaman (1995), Maimonides thinks that asking about God’s justice is simply to pose the wrong question here: the question concerning apparent evil in the world, he argues, should be replaced by one concerning our relation to God. Maimonides’s is not a personal God whom one can criticize for causing undeserved suffering, but a more impersonal deity. Leaman also rejects the widespread idea that Maimonides’s position cannot be reconciled with the Judaic faith, arguing that the latter draws some unusual conclusions that are incompatible only with religious revelation

as traditionally conceived. This is one way in which Maimonides may be said to anticipate Spinoza. Let us therefore now turn to the latter.

Spinoza is even more remote from the traditional rabbinic literature on evil than his predecessor: Job appears only occasionally in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*), and not at all in the *Ethics*. Various present-day Spinoza scholars consider his position so remote from Judaic tradition, and from more theistic visions of a personal God, as to amount to atheism, but it may be said to belong to the Jewish philosophical tradition insofar as it discusses themes like an impersonal divinity and the relation between intellect and imagination in terms that are recognizably and arguably similar to those of medieval Jewish (and, by extension, Islamic) philosophy.

Even though Spinoza strongly criticizes Maimonides, in particular for reading philosophical meanings into Scripture, he may be said to stand in the Jewish philosophical tradition to the extent that he further develops themes and questions addressed by the latter. These themes include the relation between philosophy and prophecy, between mass and elites, and between intellect and imagination. More specifically, as Leaman already observes, Spinoza radicalizes doctrines concerning good and evil, already found in his Jewish predecessors, notably in relation to an impersonal God and the significance of reason (or, more correctly speaking, the intellect) “as a route to relative salvation” (1995: 121–2), and, even more strongly than Maimonides, Spinoza links the imagination to error. This holds in particular for our knowledge of the notions of good and evil.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Spinoza appears not to consider evil a major philosophical problem. Neither in the *TTP* nor in the *Ethics* does he discuss questions of cosmic evil or theodicy, or of evil human thoughts and actions, in any great detail. In fact, his conception leaves little if any room for seeing any kind of human action, for example theft or murder, as evil. He would argue that these acts are driven by affects such as greed or hate, and people who are driven by such affects, or passions, are by definition passive rather than active; that is, their actions are not free. A genuinely free person acts on the basis of adequate knowledge, not on appearances or affects. This need not imply, of course, that such acts cannot or should not be punished, but, for Spinoza, punishment involves not so much holding people responsible for their actions but rather deterring unwanted actions. Ultimately, however, he sees education as preferable to sanction.

Nor does Spinoza’s thought leave any room for believing that God’s actions may in any way be evil. The reason for this is obvious. Spinoza’s God is not a quasi-personal transcendent being who has created the world, and can intervene in his creation, at will. Rather, his “God or nature” (*deus sive natura*) is an immanent cause of things, and an infinite and indivisible substance – in fact, the sole substance.³⁴ God, moreover, acts from the laws of his nature alone, and in that sense is a free cause (13). The world created by this God may be said to be good insofar as things have been produced with the highest perfection, because they follow from His most perfect nature. Thus, we cannot say that good and bad are the products of God’s will.

In fact, Spinoza sees evil no longer even as a privation, as does Maimonides, but rather as a *mere* mode of thinking. In the preface to book IV of the *Ethics*, he argues that Good and Evil “indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another” (115). In particular, humans who “take the imagination for the intellect” call things in the world “good” or “evil” because they imagine that there is a moral order of things (29). For Spinoza, therefore, good and evil are strictly speaking not even modes of *thinking*, i.e., matters of intellectual knowledge; rather they are modes of *imagining*, which are driven by the passions or affects, and lead us to erroneously accept affects of the imagination as things (30). Despite their illusory character, however, we should not eliminate the terms “good” and “evil” from our vocabulary, Spinoza

continues, “because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to retain these words” (115). Thus, emotions that increase the body’s power of acting, like joy, may be called good; affects like sadness, by contrast, diminish this power, and thus may be labeled “evil.” This view also has political implications: things that promote harmony among men are useful, Spinoza elaborates, whereas things that bring discord to the state are evil (*Ethics* IV, P40: 138). People can be contrary to each other only insofar as they are subject to passions or affects (and, by implication, guided by their imagination), and, insofar as men live to the guidance of reason, they must always agree among themselves (*Ethics* IV, P35: 132). Thus, the evil of political discord or conflict can be avoided only by following the guidance of reason.

Seen from this perspective, even death is not really an evil: we may be sad at death because it stops us from enjoying worldly pleasures, but, insofar as we come to understand the causes of this sadness through our intellect, it ceases to be a passion. That is, by intellectually understanding death as a cause of sadness, we stop feeling sadness, and actually rejoice (*Ethics* V, P18: 169). This leads Spinoza to his well-known notion of the “intellectual love of God” (*amor dei intellectualis*). This intellectual love of God, he adds, is eternal, since it arises from the highest kind of knowledge, which does not depend on the body or the imagination and therefore is adequate as well as eternal (*Ethics* V, P33: 175). It is in this sense that salvation, or eternal life, may be said to be relative or proportional to reason, or more correctly, to intellectual knowledge and love.

Thus, according to Leaman (1995: 140–41), for Spinoza, as for Maimonides, the problem of evil as undeserved suffering is not a question of God’s justice but of human understanding: the better we understand our predicament intellectually, the more the importance of evil will diminish. Our imagination misleadingly leads us to see the world as endowed with a moral order, and God as a quasi-human actor capable of letting evil befall men; but our intellect should lead us to an adequate knowledge of a more impersonal divinity, in which the whole notion of evil disappears.

Conclusions

As seen above, notions and problems of evil vary widely across different philosophical traditions, but these differences do not appear to be so large as to render any comparative or intercultural confrontation meaningless. All traditions, it seems, show some reflection on the inevitable sufferings of life and death; on natural disasters like floods and famines; and on evil acts committed and suffered by humans. Much rarer is the idea that gods themselves may be evil or destructive; this idea seems to occur only in some forms of Hinduism. Although the authors discussed above are by no means blind or indifferent to the misery caused by natural disasters or cruel or vicious human actions, on the whole they recommend understanding – and accepting – this as an inevitable part of a larger order that is itself either morally neutral or positively good and just.

Behind this broad agreement, however, we find major conceptual and other differences. Not only have we seen radically differing views on whether the natural or cosmic order is good, and thus inherently value-laden; the different traditions discussed also involve qualitatively different *kinds* of normativity: divine command, rational validity, ritual correctness, and others. This may make it rather more difficult to speak of any unitary concept or phenomenon of moral evil across different traditions. In fact, a confrontation with different traditions may more forcefully restate the question of whether we can actually formulate, or even need, a substantial and universal moral concept of evil at all.

None of the traditions discussed has much to say on the modern philosophical notion of evil as expressed in, or based on, supremely cruel or violent actions, like unrestrained torture,

terrorism, or genocide. That is, both the social phenomenon of, and the moral concern with, evil as a qualitatively and/or quantitatively extreme form or degree of morally unjustifiable violence may be specifically modern. None of the traditions discussed above provides any straightforward way of dealing with such forms of modern violence; even less do any of them provide the means for justifying them. This suggests that any attempt to address the specifically modern concept of evil by appealing to religious or ancient philosophical traditions, i.e., to premodern conceptions and doctrines, is at best unhelpful and, at worse, justifies or ignores the very worst of human behavior and human suffering. Nevertheless, the various religious traditions provide a number of philosophically interesting and challenging examples of ways to grapple with what is a pressing, enduring and ineliminable (and, in some sense, universal) aspect of human experience. Contemporary discussions of evil would do well to take such traditions into account, so that they can avoid the pitfalls of earlier approaches and increase their own cross-cultural relevance.

Notes

- 1 To mention but a few: Bernstein (2002: x) sees the assaults as “the very epitome of evil in our time;” Neiman (2002: 281–6) calls them a form of evil that is “old-fashioned in structure” and describes how all attempts at explanation risk being rejected as attempts to relativize if not justify them; and Russell (2014: v) remarks that they triggered his subsequent philosophical reflection on evil.
- 2 For Bin Laden’s wavering justifications of the assaults, see Lawrence (ed.) (2005), in particular Chapter 14, “Nineteen Students,” and Chapter 16, “To the Americans.”
- 3 I use the inadequate term “non-Western” here for want of anything better. Islamic Spain in fact lay to the west of most European regions conventionally headed under “the West”; and as seen below, Judaic philosophy is discussed here primarily against its background in Islamic thought.
- 4 See, for example, Panaïoti (2013).
- 5 For a recent overview, see Perkins’s (2014) indispensable study. The present paragraph owes much to this work, even if I do not necessarily agree with all of Perkins’s analyses and conclusions.
- 6 Perkins (2014: 17; 32).
- 7 Lau (1970: 38).
- 8 Xunzi, 17.1; Knoblock (1994: vol. 1, p. 68).
- 9 Lau (1970: 79; see also p. 49).
- 10 Cf. Perkins (2014: 90); Lau (1970: 61).
- 11 Perkins (2014: 90–99).
- 12 Mair (1994: 168); see also Perkins (2014: 172).
- 13 Mair (1994: 164).
- 14 See also Perkins (2014: 158–65).
- 15 See Rorty (1989), in particular Part III, “Cruelty and Solidarity.”
- 16 See, for example, Chandôgya Upanishad, V.10.7–10, in Olivelle (1996: 142–143).
- 17 Herman (1993: 287–8).
- 18 Kaufman (2005: 18).
- 19 Burley (2014: 420–24).
- 20 Ziporyn (2000), as quoted in Loy (2005: 348).
- 21 For a fuller account of both the Mu’tazilî and the Ash’arî theological position, see Fakhry (1983: 42–65 and 203–17). The pretheological and prephilosophical literature of the so-called hadîths, or traditions of the prophet, has a rather broad view of evil, arguing that the Devil is attracted to all bodily filth; hence, it enjoins a strict bodily hygiene. I will not address this literature, however.
- 22 For both kinds of evil, see in particular *al-shifâ’*, *Ilâhiyyât*, p. 416. See also Inati (2000: Chapter 3) for a fuller discussion.
- 23 *Al-shifâ’*, *Ilâhiyyât*, p. 418.
- 24 See also Inati (2000: 161).
- 25 For a comparative study of Ibn Sîna and Aquinas, based on the Latin translation of the former’s *Ilâhiyyât*, see Steel (2002). Inati (2000: 173) argues that Ibn Sîna implies a denial of God’s omnipotence, but stops short of explicitly drawing this conclusion, allegedly out of fear of the *mutakallimûn*, or Islamic theologians.

- 26 See also Steel (2002: 195).
- 27 On al-Ghazālī on theodicy, see in particular Ormsby (1984); on Ibn Taymiyya's ideas, see Hoover (2007), on which the following paragraph is largely based.
- 28 See, in particular, Qur'an (38: 71–85).
- 29 For some preliminary philosophical discussion, see the chapters on Hannah Arendt and on genocide in the present volume; see also Cohn-Sherbok (ed.) 2002.
- 30 This section owes much to the important monograph by Oliver Leaman (1995). For more detailed discussion of Maimonides, see Raffel (1987), Pines (1990); on Spinoza, see e.g., Frankena (1977).
- 31 The Jewish and Islamic philosophical traditions bear more resemblance to each other than to that of Christianity. For example, medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers tend to discuss prophecy and revealed religion in terms of laws rather more consistently than their Christian near-contemporaries.
- 32 The intellectual culture of al-Andalus, or Islamic Spain, is marked by a relatively pronounced rationalism, and a relative dislike (at least among the literate elites) of mysticism. Hence, authors like Ibn Sina and al-Ghazālī do not figure very prominently in Maimonides's writings either. Obviously, he cannot have read Ibn Taymiyya, who was active over a century later. A fuller discussion of his Islamic sources and inspirations on the topic of evil awaits another occasion.
- 33 Pines's translation renders this term as "overflow" rather than "emanation," but this rendering that makes Maimonides's backgrounds in Neoplatonist philosophy more obscure.
- 34 This immanence, of course, is the reason that many present-day interpreters view Spinoza's position as a form of atheism, but it should be kept in mind that Spinoza himself vehemently denied being an atheist.

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