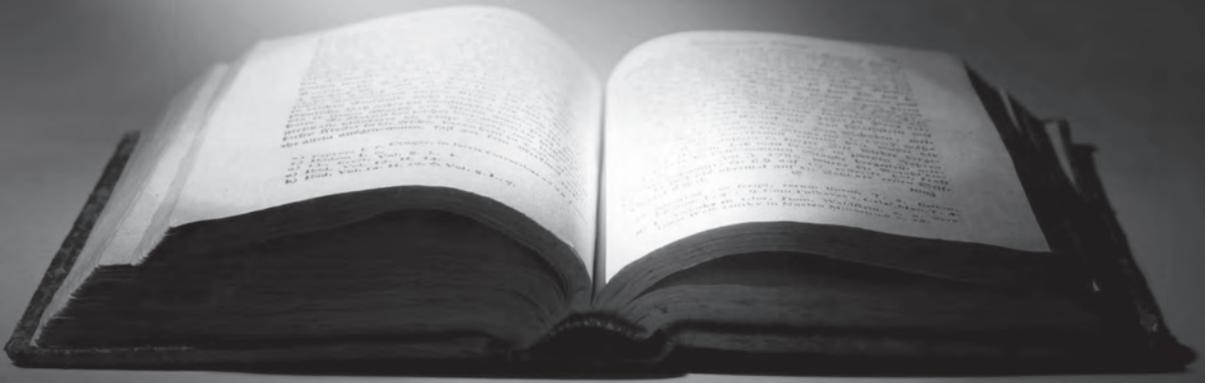


Prolegomenon to the Study of Evil

Subhasis Chattopadhyay



Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.¹

WE HAVE SIMPLY TURNED our backs to the reality of evil in us and in our midst. When a woman is brutally gang raped we name her *nirbhaya*, fearless, and choose to forget the raw terror, trauma, and final death she underwent. Instead of seeing how Hitler and his fanatical followers exterminated Jews, of how Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge killed Cambodians, of how various despots and dictators advocated and perpetrated evil, we gloss over the horrific facts and praise the human spirit that rises victorious from the evil that surrounds it.

Many ‘help yourself’ and ‘feel good’ books as well as talks on similar issues make us believe

that to think of evil is bad, is demeaning and not worthy of a good conversation. Who wants to talk of child abuse in our homes day after day, of ‘nowhere children’ living in the streets, of the nights of terror for the helpless, of human degradation? Who wants to talk of the way we love beating our spouses, of exhibitionism, of fetishes, of the need to destroy, break, murder, and create mayhem?

In philosophy classes throughout the world hardly any professor wants to lecture on the reality of shame, social ostracism, or compulsion to compromise and take bribes. What socialist wants to talk of the selfishness and greed for power that drives many of humankind’s actions? Psychologists dismiss evil with the convenient shroud of clinical jargon; they describe a real evil in terms of neuropsychiatric models where neurotransmitters are our internal gods or—for

example, instead of demanding the harshest punishments for child abusers, they see abuse as just another ‘-philia’. This stance may even reduce the culpability of the abuser. The media, by portraying hyperbolic images of evil makes us forget that lesser existential crimes are also evil. Certain social literature considers that everything is relative and, consequently, all things are equal. In short, it is unfashionable today to talk of evil.

Doubts in the Heart

Do you feel lonely? You may have been happily married for years and yet, while you cosily count your blessings at night, do you hear a torturous emptiness within? If you are a celibate, do you not feel shame and guilt by sexual fantasies created by a raging libido? Does it fill you with remorse to cheat and lie and deceive the helpless and weak? Have yours and others’ wrongdoings blunted your sensibility, killing something essential in you? Maybe you feel betrayed by those you loved and cherished. Where have your youthful glory, power, and dreams gone? Do you revel in the unhappiness of others? Is it possible you secretly gloat that your child fared better in the examinations than your neighbour’s or the boss’s kid? Is it just possible that you love the sight of the young girl you saw on the street the other day?

The Marquis de Sade (1740–1814) was not totally wrong when he praised and associated violence with pleasure. The body-mind complex is the vehicle of the soul, and the soul careens and stumbles along our innumerable and uncontrollable desires and compulsions, no matter how much we try to avoid them. These desires keep resurfacing in different forms over and over again. Psychoanalysts have been proved right, empirically at least, and hence the profession still exists. The subconscious, spoken a century and more ago by Sigmund Freud, has only been

scratched on the surface; what more lies below no one knows.

Is it that you feel that folks around you should be a bit up to your standards of punctuality and ethics? Has the good God appointed you to uphold the declining morals of this world? Or is it that you get a kick from intellectual frippery? Or is it that you are just in the wrong place among the wrong people who simply are too stupid to understand you? In Swami Vivekananda’s words:

We are all the time, from our childhood, trying to lay the blame upon something outside ourselves. We are always standing up to set right other people, and not ourselves. If we are miserable, we say, ‘Oh, the world is a devil’s world.’ We curse others and say, ‘What infatuated fools!’ But why should we be in such a world, if we really are so good? If this is a devil’s world, we must be devils also; why else should we be here? ‘Oh, the people of the world are so selfish!’ True enough; but why should we be found in that company, if we be better? Just think of that.²

No book has the answer to all these questions. This is the way things are: we are ambitious till we die, sensual till we die, unhappy and lonely till we die. And accepting this still brings more questions: If God is so good, powerful, present everywhere at once, why even in her lila does she allow us to feel the need to be violent, to rape, abuse, kill, or feel abject and deserted? Why is it that two persons born at the same time or from the same womb have so very different lives? And if there is karma, what propelled the first wrongdoer in creation to err? And if, as according to Advaita Vedanta, all things are One, then why does that One allow painful diversity, or the covering of the mirror of the soul that we see a snake where there is only a rope? Why does

the Infinite allow abuse, deaths by mutilation, and pogroms? What if you have no job, or your near ones are suffering from terminal illnesses, or schizophrenia, or a bipolar disorder runs in your family? This is what is known as ‘the problem of evil’. When Swami Vivekananda’s father passed away, plunging the family into grief and penury, Swamiji never lost faith in the existence of God. But one day when his mother heard him repeating God’s name, as he habitually did, she said: ‘Hush, you fool! you have been crying yourself hoarse for God from your childhood, and what has He done for you?’³ He was ‘stung to the quick’, as he put it, and all the questions mentioned above cropped up in his heart.

The truth is that people, animals, insects, reptiles, and plants live and die painfully. We conveniently projected evil upon Satan and blamed him and his hordes for it. Today there is no Satan to help us, and we find ourselves up to our necks in evil. When we say that pain is necessary for spiritual growth, what we generally mean is that pain is necessary for the spiritual growth of *others*. It is one thing to think that everything is *maya*, to believe that everything is God’s holy will, and it is quite another thing to be insecure, terminally ill, old, abandoned by one’s children, and to have no sight of God or Brahman anywhere. From all this we can understand that evil is subjective as well as objective.

Good and Evil

The twentieth century has been marked by wars, pillage, and untold human suffering. Gun-runners team up with drug cartels and traffickers of blood diamonds. These powerful forces are in the hands of other more powerful forces: governments and global criminal or financial networks. It was a century of genocide, and yet the real problem, the only problem endures, tormenting us with the rhetorical

question: Where did evil go? The answer is: *everywhere*. In a society that seeks to concern itself solely with the discourse on the good, evil has metamorphosed into all the viral and terroristic forms that engulf us. All religions mimetically represent for us that lost discourse on evil, interrogating how this evil is established here in the domain of the seeing. The academic study of this problem has been on the wane, both within secular academe and within the Catholic Church, since ‘evil [poses] an epistemological problem, highly ambiguous in origins, intractable, and woven into a net of other religious, philosophical, and political issues.’⁴ ‘To insist that evil is demonic is not only to insist that it is fundamentally mysterious, but thereby to relegate it to religion, rather than to politics.’⁵ Through this approach the problem can never be located within the established domains of philosophical and theological narratives. Yet it is urgent that we comprehend evil as neither being imposed on human beings by something outside nor it being an inscrutable component of a larger design for evil. One explanation can be this: ‘Evil results from the dialectical interaction between the practices human beings develop in our attempts to improve our lot and the basic characteristics that naturally define us as human individuals.’⁶

There is a necessity to recapitulate the history of ideas, which locates evil as a central problem within our lives and even within spirituality. This meta-narrative of evil mirrors other narratives of power and abjection. Thus, a cultural study of evil will expose the processes that are verifiable by ideological and historical registers. It is necessary to refer to evolutionary, forensic, and cultural branches of psychiatry to demystify evil, for ‘we may well ask whether man has a legacy of aggressive orientations, transmitted in some perplexing ways through

his genes, his hormones, his brain, and his customs.⁷ If we are to understand evil as real, it is important to establish it within the field of intelligibility, informed by the enlightened discourse on the empirical sciences.

Yet, the triumph of evil is not the assumed *telos* of history within the traditions of theodicy. Aristotle, for instance, sees humans struggling for *eudaimonia*, happiness, achievable when one actively chooses the good over the bad. Earlier Plato had commented on what constitutes goodness and the good life. The Greek discourse on the good was later appropriated by the Judeo-Christian tradition, which values the triumph of the good, with the 'idea of the holy',⁸ and the belief in the messianic role of Jesus Christ. History was understood as informed by a Personal God, and Christ became the model for future evaluations of the good. This good is expressed within the domains of history and fiction as a gesture towards cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and the reevaluation of the Darwinian man as *homo sacer*.

On what condition is responsibility possible? On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other; an experience of personal goodness and a movement of intention. That supposes, as we have seen, a double rupture: both with orgiastic mystery and with Platonism. On what condition does goodness exist beyond all calculation? On the condition that goodness forget itself, that the movement be a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love. Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other.⁹

Since it is now clear that 'the good as a transcendental notion has a certain complexity',¹⁰ being continuously assailed by the factuality of

evil, it is legitimate to interrogate it within theology and philosophy. Unless we identify evil, we are doomed to repeating the Shoah,¹¹ the abuses, rapes, and so on and never get rid of our own loneliness, our own failures to communicate. To study evil is to reaffirm the existence of God and love.

Swamiji's Experience

Evil has puzzled and mystified humankind and has sapped all its energy. It has made us forget our inherent Divinity. I would like to conclude this piece on evil by citing one of Swamiji's experiences:

One evening, after a whole day's fast and exposure to rain I was returning home with tired limbs and a jaded mind; overpowered with exhaustion and unable to move a step forward, I sank down on the outer plinth of a house by the roadside. I can't say whether I was insensible for a time or not. Various thoughts crowded in on my mind, and I was too weak to drive them off and fix my attention on anything in particular. Suddenly I felt as if by some divine power the coverings of my soul were being removed one after another. All my former doubts regarding the coexistence of divine justice and mercy, and the presence of misery in the creation of a Blissful Providence, were automatically solved. By a deep introspection I found the meaning of it all and was satisfied. As I proceeded homewards I found there was no trace of fatigue in the body, and the mind was refreshed with wonderful strength and peace. The night was well-nigh over.¹²

The only way to overcome evil is to attain to Truth, or the Reality, which is within us. Evil thoughts, words, and deeds, cover the Truth, and this covering makes us d-evils. This devil has to be extinguished by great vigilance and discernment.



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life forms must have some connection with this infinite indivisible Consciousness and therefore it must be possible to experience such an indivisible state of consciousness. This must also be the cause behind the common experience of different beings with respect to the observed phenomena or objects in the universe. For example, when one person sees a cow, others also see a cow in that animal and not a donkey.

When the infinite motionless Consciousness becomes active—creating, preserving, and destroying—it acts like energy; when it remains inactive, it becomes the Unmanifest. It is possible to realize the oneness of individual consciousness and the infinite indivisible Consciousness. Consciousness and energy are like milk and its whiteness, fire and its power to burn, the ocean and its waves, which cannot be separated. The entire manifest universe arises out of the infinite indivisible Consciousness, like blocks of ice in an ocean that present apparent multiplicity in a single expanse of water. The observer's perception of the entire universe is due to mistaking the absolute for the relative, just like mistaking a rope for a snake—in the typical example given in Vedanta. As long as false perception persists, Consciousness appears as insentient, and the relative universe appears real.⁸ ❧

Notes and References

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8. The author is grateful to Prof. Richard Mould of the State University of New York, Stony Brook,

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9. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 50–1.
10. See Elizabeth G Salmon, *The Good in Existential Metaphysics* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1953), 3.
11. Shoah is a 9 hour 36 minute French documentary film completed by Claude Lanzmann in 1985. It is about the Holocaust, also known as the Shoah.
12. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, I.126.