Zoroastrian Responses to the Problem of Evil: Seven Approaches Discussing Dualism and Monotheism

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Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?[1]

"Is Zoroastrianism Dualist or Monotheistic?" is an article in which Boyd and Crosby present two dualist and four monotheist responses to that question. The authors submit these six versions to philosophical scrutiny according to the way they manage the problem of evil. Ultimately, the authors opt for a seventh response – their response, which they find more plausible than the previous six other options and meets their criterion of philosophical scrutiny to a better extent.

In this paper, I will present the seven versions the authors describe and ask which one responds better to Epicurus' formulation of the abovementioned problem of evil. I am subjecting the seven versions to Epicurus' formulation because it is formulated as questions that demand answers. Thus, Epicurus' formulation provokes an active engagement with its questions. I argue that although Boyd and Crosby's version does have a philosophical advantage over the others, it cannot guarantee the salvation of humankind given that their view makes it possible to think of the world as an increasingly better place, which humankind might not want to let go of altogether. In what follows then, I will (1) reconstruct the seven versions Boyd and Crosby have presented, (2) subject each

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[1] Bayne, *Philosophy of Religion*, 64

to the questions Epicurus poses, (3) provide an upshot of the overall analysis, and (5) conclude with some finishing remarks.

(1) Reconstructing the seven versions Boyd and Crosby have presented

(1.1) The Dualistic View that Angra Mainyu is Primordial but Lacks Omnipotence and Omniscience

The first dualistic version states that Angra Mainyu is as primordial as Āhurā Mazdā but lacks the latter's omnipotence and omniscience. As Boyd and Crosby state, the two spirits mentioned in the Twin passage of Gathas (Yasna 30:3-4) "are usually taken to be Spanta Mainyu… and Angra Mainyu."[2] For the authors, the passage establishes a dualism early and textually evidenced by a recognized Zoroastrian text. The question is twofold: whether both spirits share to the same extent in omnipotence and omniscience and whether both are primal or posterior to some other divinity. Both Dhalla and Henning provide a dualistic framework to answer such a question. Dhalla considers Spanta Mainyu not an independent spirit but another name for Āhurā Mazdā – thus, Spanta Mainyu is one of the primordial divinities itself. By implication, Angra Mainyu is the other primordial divinity. For Henning, "the battle between Good and Evil has [thus] been in process since Time began,"[3] and that is why Zoroaster saw the critical role that humankind must play in history. In other words, good and evil have existed since time immemorial and are fundamentally the two primal divinities in the world.

In analyzing the Dhalla-Henning version, Boyd and Crosby argue that it readily accounts for the presence of evil in the world given that evil was born along with good –

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[2] Boyd & Crosby, *Zoroastrianism*, 559
[3] Henning, *Zoroaster*, 45-46

Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu – and offers a rational explanation of why Āhurā Mazdā

created the world: to battle against Angra Mainyu, thus allowing humankind to take sides

in lived historical time.[4] Boyd and Crosby, nevertheless, object to the Dhalla-Henning

dualistic account, given that Zoroastrian texts insist on an inherent lack of balance

between the two powers, which is hard to reconcile because the two divinities are equally

primordial.[5] Dhalla notes that Āhurā Mazdā is superior to Angra Mainyu in omnipotence

and omniscience. He can also destroy evil but has decided to do so only at the end of

time.[6] For Boyd and Crosby, this merely repeats the problem of evil. If Āhurā Mazdā can

ultimately destroy evil, it is unclear why he has not yet done so and whether he is thereby

not implicated.[7]

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, Āhurā Mazdā is willing

to prevent evil and can do so, but he has decided to do so only at the end of time. Thus,

he allows humankind to choose to perform virtuous deeds and destroy evil in their own

lives, not to increase the presence of Angra Mainyu in the world. Thus, it is not that Āhurā

Mazdā is not omnipotent but that he does not allow his omnipotence to dictate how

humankind should freely choose to act in the world. Thus, Āhurā Mazdā is not malevolent

either since he can destroy evil but request help from humankind, respecting the free will

to choose between good and evil. However, that he is both able and willing to do so does

not entail that there is no evil. Evil is as primordial as good. Āhurā Mazdā is a God who

allows humankind to manage evil as it wants.

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[4] B&C, 560
[5] B&C, 561
[6] B&C, 561
[7] B&C, 561

(1.2) The Dualistic View that Angra Mainyu is Primordial but Lacks a Physical Nature

Given that the first dualistic version grants equal power to Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu and sounds flawed, Boyd and Crosby argue that any dualistic interpretation of Zoroastrianism must show how they are not evenly matched. They find such an interpretation in Shaked and Boyce's version – the thrust of which is that only Āhurā Mazdā "and his creations exist in the material form, *getig*, while Ahreman… [has] no material form at all, and… only participate[s] in the life of *getig* in a secondary way, parasitically as it were."[8] As Boyd and Crosby describe, this puts Angra Mainyu at a fatal disadvantage against Āhurā Mazdā, whose spiritual form, *menog,* is complimented with a *getig* nature.[9] Thus, they explain that Āhurā Mazdā necessarily creates the material world to battle Angra Mainyu, who can only spoil the material creation of Āhurā Mazdā.[10] Boyce's mention confirms that evil is "something which preys, vampire-like, one the [material] creation, rather than existing independently and self-sustained."[11] As the authors put it, Āhurā Mazdā's creation of a *getig* world is just the act that affords him superiority over Angra Mainyu because a decisive clash between them can only occur in the realm of *getig*.[12] In other words, even though evil is as primordial as good, it does not have the same capabilities to the extent that it exists only as a motive in the lived reality of humankind – and not as a real thing itself.

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[8] Shaked, *Notions*, 71
[9] B&C, 562
[10] B&C, 562
[11] Boyce, *History*, 201
[12] B&C, 563

In analyzing Shaked and Boyce's version, Boyd and Crosby argue that it both ascribes primacy to Āhurā Mazdā and explains why the world needed to be created – showing the kind of advantage its existence gives to Āhurā Mazdā.[13] According to them, it further highlights human dignity and responsibility, thus giving real meaning to human life, given that it is in the human body that a hostile and parasitical evil mainly dwells.[14] However, the authors object to Shaked and Boyce's version of why the lack of *getig* should entail a fatal deficiency in Angra Mainyu. They argue that the parasitical nature of evil may not make it less dangerous.[15] Even if evil is only an internal force, they charge, it can be nonetheless radically destructive; even if evil does not belong to a human being's essence, there is no assurance that they will choose to resist evil.[16]

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, it is unclear whether Āhurā Mazdā is willing to prevent evil, given that evil lives parasitically in the bodies of every human being, and human beings still have the choice of how to manage evil in their lives. I agree with Boyd and Crosby that there is no assurance that a human being will have what it takes to destroy evil in one's body. It may be that when the human being decides so, one will get help from Āhurā Mazdā, but this version does not clarify how that should follow. Also, if evil is as primordial as Āhurā Mazdā, only lacking a physical nature, it may have the same capabilities as Āhurā Mazdā and thus wreak havoc in the world. The implication is not that Āhurā Mazdā is malevolent but makes him less

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[13] B&C, 564
[14] B&C, 564
[15] B&C, 564-565
[16] B&C, 565

omnipotent than one would like. Given that evil exists, it is unclear how a God whose omnipotence is unclear behaves.

(1.3) The Monotheistic View of the Created Spirits

As presented by Boyd and Crosby, the first monotheist argues that the Twin passage in the Yasna implies a derivative rather than a primordial dualism, behind which the only one God lies, Āhurā Mazdā. According to Fox, "there is a supreme creator who alone is God; but he has created two spirits… through whom the creation of the universe is effected… but there is only one God."[17] Fox argues that Spanta Mainyu is not the same as Āhurā Mazdā; instead, Āhurā Mazdā created both Spanta and Angra Mainyu.[18] Because Āhurā Mazdā is the source of both spirits, Fox's version argues that monotheism is the final truth about Zoroastrianism.[19] Thus, if Āhurā Mazdā is the source of Spanta Mainyu, he is also the source of Angra Mainyu – evil in the world; Gerschevitch claims that this conclusion is not only "unavoidable"[20] but also that the evil spirit was not created evil but freely chose to be so, thus setting itself up as an antagonist to Spanta Mainyu.[21] In other words, only one God, Āhurā Mazdā, created both good and evil.

In analyzing this first monotheistic version, Boyd and Crosby raise the following objections: if Āhurā Mazdā is all-powerful and yet allows Angra Mainyu to act on his evil choice and to conduct its evil plan in the world, it is unclear whether one should not at least indirectly attribute evil to Āhurā Mazdā – after all, he created it and allow it to exist

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[17] Fox, *Darkness*, 133
[18] B&C, 565
[19] B&C, 565
[20] Gerschevitch, *Zoroaster's*, 131
[21] B&C, 566

in the world.[22] Moreover, if Āhurā Mazdā is omniscient, he must know that Angra Mainyu would choose to do evil in the world, and thus, Āhurā Mazdā does permit evil to that extent.[23] If, on the other hand, Āhurā Mazdā cannot avoid creating the evil spirit or allowing him to execute his evil program, then an ontological dualism lurks behind monotheism. This force acts upon Āhurā Mazdā and is more significant than him.[24] Fox argues, in turn, that Āhurā Mazdā creates only the potentiality of evil and not its actuality, which results from the free choice of Angra Mainyu.[25] Boyd and Crosby object. If Āhurā Mazdā knows that evil will or can be actualized, it is unclear why he creates its potentiality.[26] Fox explains that the actualization of evil can serve Āhurā Mazdā's purpose of creating free but loyal persons.

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, Āhurā Mazdā creates evil, so he is not able to prevent evil. Given that evil exists, even though only in potentiality, there is no assurance that it will not be actualized. Thus, Āhurā Mazdā is not able to prevent evil. He is not omnipotent to the extent that omnipotence entails being powerful enough to prevent evil. However, it is not that Āhurā Mazdā is necessarily malevolent. After all, according to Fox, he creates evil to steer humankind to perform virtuous deeds, thus creating creatures who are free to choose, choose good over evil, and thus are loyal to Āhurā Mazdā. Given, however, that Āhurā Mazdā is neither able to prevent evil nor willing to do so if a human being chooses to do evil – given that the

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[22] B&C, 567
[23] B&C, 567
[24] B&C, 567
[25] B&C, 567
[26] B&C, 567

human being has free will granted by Āhurā Mazdā – it is unclear how Āhurā Mazdā can have any precedence over evil.

(1.4) The Monotheistic Transformationist View

Boyd and Crosby briefly present this view. They argue it is like dualism in that the opposition of good and evil is not between twin spirits but directly between Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu but ultimately monotheistic given that Āhurā Mazdā created Angra Mainyu and permitted him to do evil in the world.[27] In analyzing this view, Boyd and Crosby argue that it poses a dilemma like the one posed by the Created Spirits spirit without further helping resolve. Either Āhurā Mazdā chose to create the evil one, in which case he is implicated in evil by deliberate choice or by a more significant force than him, in which case there is either something evil about God so that he cannot be regarded as equivocally good, or there is a compulsion which plays upon God from without.[28] If the latter, they argue that there is no way to preserve the unqualified goodness of Āhurā Mazdā.[29] Finally, they claim that if God creates evil, he must do it by choice, necessity, or compulsion – to deny that God creates evil gives up this interpretation altogether.[30] Because the authors present this version as a way for Zoroastrians to avoid Muslim persecution and because it does not answer to the issues presented by the Created Spirits view, one need not dwell on it here.

(1.5) The Monotheistic Zurvanite View

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[27] B&C, 568
[28] B&C, 569
[29] B&C, 569
[30] B&C, 569

Boyd and Crosby also only briefly present this view. They claim it resembles dualism and the Transformationist view in that it sees Āhurā Mazdā as directly opposed to Angra Mainyu but departs from those views in that both Āhurā Mazdā and the evil spirit are creatures of a single supreme divinity, Zurvan – Infinite Time.[31] They describe the view as holding that the one God who creates the two opposing views is Zurvan, not Āhurā Mazdā, which is relegated to the status of a creature.[32] In their analysis, the authors cite one virtue of this view: it proclaims one infinite absolute, the source of finite time, in contrast to a primordial dualism.[33] However, the authors provide no philosophical attack on the view, given that it fails to meet several of the authors' fourfold criteria.[34] The authors only present this view as a myth with no authoritative Zoroastrian text providing textual evidence, so one need not dwell on it here.

(1.6) The Monotheistic View that Good and Evil are Coeternal only in a Logical Sense

The final monotheistic view that Boyd and Crosby present argues that when evil is spoken of as being coeternal with good, this only means that because good and evil are logical contraries – meaning that both cannot be true at the same time although both can be false – whenever there is good, there is also the potentiality of there being evil.[35] In other words, either something is good or something is potentially evil; it cannot be good and potentially evil at the same time though it can be neither good nor potentially evil. This view explains that, given that Āhurā Mazdā exists eternally and is completely good,

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[31] B&C, 569
[32] B&C, 569
[33] B&C, 570
[34] B&C, 571
[35] B&C, 572

there is also the potentiality of evil. However, this potentiality can only occur in time, with

Āhurā Mazdā's creatures choosing to do evil.[36] In other words, because Āhurā Mazdā is

good, there is potential for evil, but it is not that these can be true at the same time.

Instead, they can both be false, given that time makes it possible for it to occur. It cannot

occur in Āhurā Mazdā himself but only in historical times. Moulton explains it as "if any

one likes to say that Evil existed from all eternity, he is perfectly right if he only means that

a thing cannot be Good unless we can conceive of its opposite which is not Good."[37] The

authors describe this view as espousing an unqualified monotheism given that Āhurā

Mazdā alone reigns – the dual alternatives of good and evil lying open to the choices of

free beings only.[38] However, they present this dualism as not an objective fact but a

timeless logical possibility.[39]

 In analyzing this view, the authors credit it with a philosophical advantage over the

other monotheistic interpretations. It differs from the Created Spirits' view by holding that

Āhurā Mazdā does not even create the potentiality of evil, let alone its actuality. It is a

logical fact that follows timelessly from Āhurā Mazdā's existence.[40] It also differs from the

Transformationist view, they claim, by holding that evil does not spring from a compulsion

acting on Āhurā Mazdā but from acts of free choice by his created beings.[41] Thus, Āhurā

Mazdā is not as directly implicated in evil as he is in the other monotheistic views, and

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[36] B&C, 572
[37] Moulton, *Teachings*, 20
[38] B&C, 572
[39] B&C, 572
[40] B&C, 573
[41] B&C, 573

yet, his ultimacy is as much upheld as it is in the others.[42] Boyd and Crosby raise a significant objection, however: this monotheistic version cannot account for the world's creation – given that evil is a timeless logical necessity, humankind does not need to do away with it since it will always exist.[43]

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, Āhurā Mazdā cannot prevent evil, given that, by his existence alone, evil is a logical necessity. Though he may be willing, he could not prevent evil without modifying the terms of his existence. To that extent, he is not omnipotent. The implication should not be, however, that he is malevolent. It may be beyond his omnipotence to prevent that evil following as a logical necessity from his existence. Though he may not be able, Āhurā Mazdā must remain willing; otherwise, it is unclear what one would make of the world given that evil can be widespread; human frailty would prove insufficient to stop it. Given that by the very terms of his existence, evil follows as a logical necessity, a new definition of what it means to be a good God needs to be in place.

(1.7) The Authors' View in Response to All Previous Views

According to the authors, Zoroastrianism combines a cosmogonic dualism and an eschatological monotheism. In their own words, Zoroastrianism "cannot be categorized as either straightforward dualism or straightforward monotheism, meaning that the question in the title of [their] paper… poses a false dichotomy."[44] According to them, the dichotomy fails to consider the central role of time: Zoroastrianism asserts a movement

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[42] B&C, 573
[43] B&C, 573
[44] B&C, 575

through time from dualism towards monotheism.[45] They claim that Angra Mainyu cannot

be defeated in a timeless eternity but only in historical finite time, thus concluding that

time plays a role in fundamentally altering the ontological status of Āhurā Mazdā, for it is

his wisdom – neither omnipotence nor omniscience – that gives Āhurā Mazdā an

advantage over Angra Mainyu.[46] It is by wisdom that Āhurā Mazdā can anticipate the evil

tactics of Angra Mainyu – thus, his omniscience does not imply previous knowledge of

future events.[47] For example, he cannot know the future wholly, given that the future

depends partly on unpredictable acts of human freedom. However, when those events

occur, Āhurā Mazdā can turn them to his best advantage through wisdom.[48] Likewise, his

omnipotence amounts to the most significant amount of power in the universe but not all

the power: Āhurā Mazdā, for example, cannot change Angra Mainyu's nature as the doer

of evil.[49] In other words, there is only one God, Āhurā Mazdā, whose battle against evil

functions more like a play – the context of which is time and its cosmogony.

    In analyzing their version against the others, the authors claim that their view does

not fall prey to the weakness of the other lines of interpretation – or at least not to the

same degree.[50] By the criterion of philosophical cogency, it safeguards the persistent

dualistic motif in Zoroastrianism while providing a firm basis for its eschatological

monotheism confidence; it exhibits how a proper understanding of the first necessarily

involves the second; it stresses the importance of human choice without detracting from

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[45] B&C, 575
[46] B&C, 578
[47] B&C, 578
[48] B&C, 578-579
[49] B&C, 579
[50] B&C, 581

the cosmic dimensions of the struggle against evil; it accomplishes this by highlighting the cosmic implications of man's role; and it captures in a way that none of the other interpretations does the radically transforming power of finite time.[51] The authors acknowledge that their view does not settle whether Zoroastrianism is dualistic or monotheistic – but it takes significant steps toward better understanding the issue.[52]

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, God is willing and able to prevent evil, but he does not force his willingness; otherwise, there would be no free will. Without free will, there would be no element of play but only a pedantic linear notion of the victory of good over evil. Although he can do it, he also counts on the help of humankind, whose struggle against evil counts towards making the world an increasingly better place. It is not clear, however, how making the world an increasingly better place entails the salvation of humankind. By making the world increasingly better, by driving out evil, there is no assurance that human beings would leave this place and be saved rather than stay here and enjoy this increasingly better life. Āhurā Mazdā is omnipotent, but only to the extent that he allows free will. Given that he is both willing and able to prevent evil – by helping those who count on him to drive evil away from their lives increasingly, Āhurā Mazdā is not malevolent – unless one imposes on him a mundane notion of morality by which there can be no evil in a world created by an all-good God. In sum, there is evil, Āhurā Mazdā is both able and willing to help, but he will

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[51] B&C, 583
[52] B&C, 583

not impose his magnificence on one who does not want to align with him. Such is the definition of God resulting from the authors' view.

In this paper, I have sketched out seven versions of the relationship between the problem of evil and Zoroastrianism, as presented by Boyd and Crosby. I have argued that although Boyd and Crosby's version does have a philosophical advantage over the others, it cannot guarantee the salvation of humankind given that their view makes it possible to think of the world as an increasingly better place, which humankind might not want to let go of altogether. Something else must explain why humankind should leave behind an increasingly better material world. Perhaps, the response lies in the nature of the relationship that human beings can have with Āhurā Mazdā – a relationship that cannot rely only on the magnificence of God and can only occur outside of historical time.

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