

## Exploring Zoroastrian Responses to the Problem of Evil:

### Seven Philosophical Perspectives on Dualism and Monotheism

*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?*<sup>1</sup>

Boyd and Crosby's article "Zoroastrianism: Dualistic or Monotheistic?" explores various perspectives on this question. In their work, the authors delve into the dualistic and monotheistic aspects of Zoroastrianism, considering six different responses. These responses are subjected to rigorous philosophical examination, primarily focusing on how they address the challenge of evil. Ultimately, Boyd and Crosby propose a seventh response, which they find more compelling and philosophically robust than the previous six alternatives, aligning more closely with their criteria for rigorous scrutiny.

This paper delves into the seven versions put forth by Boyd and Crosby and evaluates their efficacy in responding to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil mentioned earlier. Epicurus' formulation, structured as questions demanding answers, prompts an active engagement with its inquiries. I contend that while Boyd and Crosby's version does possess certain philosophical advantages over the others, it cannot ensure humanity's salvation. This limitation arises from their perspective, which allows for the possibility of viewing the world as progressively improving, a perspective that humanity may be hesitant to relinquish entirely. In the subsequent sections, I will (1) reconstruct the seven versions as presented by Boyd and Crosby, (2) subject each of them to the questions

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<sup>1</sup> Bayne, *Philosophy of Religion*, 64

raised by Epicurus, (3) summarize the overarching analysis, and (4) conclude with some final 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 posits that Angra Mainyu, while as primordial as Āhurā Mazdā, lacks the latter's omnipotence and omniscience. Boyd and Crosby affirm that the Twin passage in the Gathas (Yasna 30:3-4) typically identifies these two spirits as Spanta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu.<sup>2</sup> According to the authors, this passage serves as early and textual evidence for a recognized Zoroastrian dualism. This raises a twofold question: firstly, whether both spirits share an equal degree of omnipotence and omniscience, and secondly, whether they are primordial or derived from some other divine entity. Both Dhalla and Henning offer dualistic frameworks to address this question. Dhalla suggests that Spanta Mainyu is not an independent spirit but an alternate name for Āhurā Mazdā, making Spanta Mainyu one of the primordial divinities. Hence, Angra Mainyu represents the other primordial divinity. Henning's perspective asserts that the battle between Good and Evil has been ongoing since time began<sup>3</sup> - implying that Zoroaster recognized the critical role that humanity must play in history. In essence, good and evil have existed since time immemorial and constitute the two fundamental primal divinities in the world.

In their analysis of the Dhalla-Henning version, Boyd and Crosby contend that it provides a compelling explanation for the existence of evil in the world. According to this

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<sup>2</sup> Boyd & Crosby, *Zoroastrianism*, 559

<sup>3</sup> Henning, *Zoroaster*, 45-46

perspective, evil coexisted with good from the outset, embodied by Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu, respectively. It also offers a rational justification for why Āhurā Mazdā created the world: to engage in an ongoing battle against Angra Mainyu, thereby allowing humanity to participate in this struggle within the context of lived historical time.<sup>4</sup>

However, Boyd and Crosby raise objections to the Dhalla-Henning dualistic account. They point out that Zoroastrian texts emphasize an inherent imbalance between the two powers, which is challenging to reconcile because both divinities are primordial. Dhalla's assertion that Āhurā Mazdā possesses superior omnipotence and omniscience and can eventually eradicate evil but chooses to do so only at the end of time becomes a focal point of contention.<sup>5</sup> From Boyd and Crosby's perspective, this notion merely reiterates the problem of evil. The question arises: if Āhurā Mazdā can ultimately eliminate evil, why has this not occurred yet, and does this reluctance implicate Āhurā Mazdā in some way?<sup>6</sup>

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, Āhurā Mazdā possesses the willingness and capability to prevent evil, but he has chosen to do so only at the culmination of time. This choice grants humanity the agency to engage in virtuous actions and combat evil in their own lives rather than promoting the prevalence of Angra Mainyu in the world. Therefore, it is not a question of Āhurā Mazdā lacking omnipotence; instead, he refrains from using his omnipotence to dictate how humanity should freely choose to act in the world. In this context, Āhurā Mazdā is not malevolent either, as he can vanquish

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<sup>4</sup> B&C, 560

<sup>5</sup> B&C, 561

<sup>6</sup> B&C, 561

evil but calls upon humanity for assistance while respecting their free will to decide between good and evil. However, the fact that he is both able and willing to act in this manner does not negate the existence of evil. Evil, like good, is an inherent aspect of the world. Āhurā Mazdā embodies a deity who allows humanity the autonomy to manage and confront evil as they see fit.

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

Given that the first dualistic version posits equal power between Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu, which Boyd and Crosby find problematic, they argue that any dualistic interpretation of Zoroastrianism must elucidate how these two entities are not evenly matched. Such an interpretation, they contend, is found in Shaked and Boyce's version. This interpretation hinges on the notion that only Āhurā Mazdā and his creations exist in material form, referred to as "getig,"<sup>7</sup> while Ahreman (Angra Mainyu) has no material form at all and only participates in the realm of getig in a secondary and parasitic manner. As Boyd and Crosby elaborate, this perspective places Angra Mainyu at a significant disadvantage compared to Āhurā Mazdā, whose spiritual form, known as "menog,"<sup>8</sup> is complemented by a getig nature. Consequently, they explain that Āhurā Mazdā is compelled to create the material world as a means to confront Angra Mainyu, who can only disrupt the material creations of Āhurā Mazdā.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation aligns with Boyce's assertion that evil functions as something that preys upon material creation in a vampire-like manner rather than existing

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<sup>7</sup> Shaked, *Notions*, 71

<sup>8</sup> B&C, 562

<sup>9</sup> B&C, 562

independently and self-sustained.<sup>10</sup> In the authors' words, Āhurā Mazdā's act of creating a *getig* world is the very action that establishes his superiority over Angra Mainyu, as any decisive confrontation between them can only transpire within the realm of *getig*.<sup>11</sup> In essence, although evil shares a primordial existence with good, it lacks the same capabilities, as it exists primarily as a motive within the lived reality of humankind rather than as an independent, tangible entity.

In their examination of Shaked and Boyce's version, Boyd and Crosby contend that it not only assigns primacy to Āhurā Mazdā but also provides a rationale for the creation of the world, elucidating the advantage it confers upon Āhurā Mazdā.<sup>12</sup> They argue that this perspective not only underscores the dignity and responsibility of humanity but also imparts genuine significance to human existence.<sup>13</sup> This significance arises from evil's hostile and parasitical nature, primarily within the human body. However, the authors object to Shaked and Boyce's assertion that the absence of "*getig*" should inherently result in a fatal deficiency in Angra Mainyu. They argue that the parasitical character of evil may not diminish its potential danger.<sup>14</sup> Even if evil is considered solely as an internal force, Boyd and Crosby assert that it can still be profoundly destructive.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, they maintain that even if evil is not an inherent aspect of a person's essence, there is no guarantee that individuals will unfailingly choose to resist its influence.

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<sup>10</sup> Boyce, *History*, 201

<sup>11</sup> B&C, 563

<sup>12</sup> B&C, 564

<sup>13</sup> B&C, 564

<sup>14</sup> B&C, 564-565

<sup>15</sup> B&C, 565

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, it remains ambiguous whether Āhurā Mazdā is willing to prevent evil, considering that evil exists parasitically within the bodies of every human being, and humans retain the choice of how to confront evil in their lives. I concur with Boyd and Crosby's perspective, which highlights the absence of a guarantee that any individual possesses the means to eradicate evil within themselves. It is plausible that when a person makes such a decision, assistance from Āhurā Mazdā might be forthcoming, but this version does not elucidate the precise mechanism of this assistance. Furthermore, if evil is indeed as primordial as Āhurā Mazdā, differing primarily in its lack of a physical nature, it raises the concern that it may possess comparable capabilities to Āhurā Mazdā and, therefore, has the potential to wreak havoc in the world. This implication does not cast Āhurā Mazdā as malevolent, but rather, it underscores the challenge of ascertaining the extent of his omnipotence. Given the existence of evil, it becomes unclear how a deity whose omnipotence is not definitively established would respond to such a predicament.

### (1.3) The Monotheistic View of the Created Spirits

As elucidated by Boyd and Crosby, the first monotheistic perspective posits that the Twin passage in the Yasna suggests a derivative dualism rather than a primordial one, with the singular God, Āhurā Mazdā, at its core. According to Fox, a supreme creator exists who is the sole God; however, this deity has brought into existence two spirits through whom the universe's creation unfolds.<sup>16</sup> Notably, Fox argues that Spanta Mainyu is distinct from Āhurā Mazdā, contending that Āhurā Mazdā created both Spanta and Angra

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<sup>16</sup> Fox, *Darkness*, 133

Mainyu.<sup>17</sup> Since Āhurā Mazdā serves as the origin of both spirits, Fox's version asserts that monotheism represents the ultimate truth within Zoroastrianism.<sup>18</sup> Hence, if Āhurā Mazdā is the source of Spanta Mainyu, he is also the source of Angra Mainyu, the embodiment of evil in the world. Gerschevitch goes even further by asserting that this conclusion is not only "unavoidable"<sup>19</sup> but also emphasizes that the evil spirit was not inherently created as evil but instead freely chose to adopt an antagonistic stance against Spanta Mainyu.<sup>20</sup> In essence, this perspective underscores the notion that a single God, Āhurā Mazdā, is responsible for creating both good and evil.

When examining this initial monotheistic perspective, Boyd and Crosby raise several noteworthy objections. Firstly, they question whether, if Āhurā Mazdā is all-powerful yet allows Angra Mainyu to exercise its evil choice and carry out its malevolent plans in the world, there might be some indirect attribution of evil to Āhurā Mazdā.<sup>21</sup> This line of reasoning stems from the fact that Āhurā Mazdā both created evil and permitted its existence in the world.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, if Āhurā Mazdā is indeed omniscient, he would presumably be aware that Angra Mainyu would choose to perpetrate evil in the world, thus implicating Āhurā Mazdā to a certain extent in the allowance of evil.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, if Āhurā Mazdā cannot prevent the creation of the evil spirit or its malevolent actions, it raises the possibility of an ontological dualism lurking behind

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<sup>17</sup> B&C, 565

<sup>18</sup> B&C, 565

<sup>19</sup> Gerschevitch, *Zoroaster's*, 131

<sup>20</sup> B&C, 566

<sup>21</sup> B&C, 567

<sup>22</sup> B&C, 567

<sup>23</sup> B&C, 567

monotheism. In such a scenario, this opposing force acts upon Āhurā Mazdā and holds more significant sway. Fox posits an alternative perspective, asserting that Āhurā Mazdā only creates the potentiality for evil, with the actuality of evil resulting from the free choice of Angra Mainyu.<sup>24</sup> However, Boyd and Crosby challenge this notion. They question why Āhurā Mazdā would create the potentiality for evil if he knows that evil could or would be actualized.<sup>25</sup> Fox responds that the realization of evil can serve Āhurā Mazdā's purpose in creating individuals who are both free and loyal.

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, it is posited that Āhurā Mazdā is the creator of evil, which implies that he cannot prevent it. In the presence of evil, even if it exists only in potentiality, there is no guarantee that it will not be actualized. Consequently, it can be argued that Āhurā Mazdā is not omnipotent in the sense of having the power to prevent evil. However, this perspective does not necessarily cast Āhurā Mazdā as malevolent. According to Fox's viewpoint, he introduces evil into the world to guide humankind towards virtuous actions. This creation of beings with free will, who can choose suitable over evil, fosters loyalty to Āhurā Mazdā. Nonetheless, given that Āhurā Mazdā cannot prevent evil and is also unwilling to do so when a human being chooses to commit evil, owing to the inherent gift of free will granted by Āhurā Mazdā, it becomes uncertain how Āhurā Mazdā can maintain any form of precedence or superiority over the force of evil.

#### (1.4) The Monotheistic Transformationist View

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<sup>24</sup> B&C, 567

<sup>25</sup> B&C, 567

Boyd and Crosby briefly introduce this perspective, which they argue bears similarities to dualism, as it frames the conflict between good and evil not as a struggle between twin spirits but as a direct opposition between Āhurā Mazdā and Angra Mainyu. Nevertheless, they ultimately classify it as a monotheistic viewpoint, as it maintains that Āhurā Mazdā both created Angra Mainyu and permitted the manifestation of evil in the world.<sup>26</sup> Upon scrutinizing this perspective, Boyd and Crosby contend that it presents a dilemma akin to the one posed by the Created Spirits view without offering a substantial resolution.

This dilemma hinges on two potential scenarios: either Āhurā Mazdā intentionally chose to create the evil entity, implicating him in evil through deliberate choice, or a more potent force than Āhurā Mazdā influenced this creation, raising questions about the inherent nature of God, his capacity for unequivocal goodness, or the presence of external compulsion acting upon him.<sup>27</sup> In the latter case, the authors argue that it becomes impossible to maintain the unqualified goodness of Āhurā Mazdā.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Boyd and Crosby assert that if God is responsible for creating evil, this act must be attributed to choice, necessity, or compulsion. Denying that God creates evil essentially negates the entire interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Given that the authors present this perspective as a means for Zoroastrians to evade Muslim persecution, since it fails to address the concerns raised by the Created Spirits view, it may not warrant further detailed examination.

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<sup>26</sup> B&C, 568

<sup>27</sup> B&C, 569

<sup>28</sup> B&C, 569

<sup>29</sup> B&C, 569

### (1.5) The Monotheistic Zurvanite View

Boyd and Crosby also offer a concise presentation of this particular viewpoint. They contend that it resembles dualism and the Transformationist view in that it envisions Āhurā Mazdā in direct opposition to Angra Mainyu. However, it crucially diverges from these perspectives: it asserts that both Āhurā Mazdā and the evil spirit are creations of a supreme divinity, Zurvan, often called "Infinite Time."<sup>30</sup> According to this perspective, the ultimate deity responsible for creating the opposing forces is Zurvan, not Āhurā Mazdā, who is relegated to the status of a created being.<sup>31</sup>

In their analysis, Boyd and Crosby acknowledge one virtue of this view: it posits the existence of a single, infinite absolute - the source of finite time - instead of endorsing a primordial dualism.<sup>32</sup> However, the authors refrain from launching a philosophical critique of this perspective, primarily because it falls short of meeting several of their fourfold criteria.<sup>33</sup> They present this viewpoint merely as a myth, devoid of authoritative Zoroastrian textual evidence, and consequently, they suggest that it may not warrant further exploration in their discussion.

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

The final monotheistic perspective presented by Boyd and Crosby posits that when we speak of evil as coeternal with good, it signifies that good and evil are logical contraries. This implies that both cannot simultaneously be true but can be false. In

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<sup>30</sup> B&C, 569

<sup>31</sup> B&C, 569

<sup>32</sup> B&C, 570

<sup>33</sup> B&C, 571

simpler terms, something can either be good or potentially evil, but it cannot be both good and potentially evil concurrently, though it can also be neither good nor potentially evil.<sup>34</sup> According to this viewpoint, the coeternality of good and evil merely signifies the potentiality for evil whenever there is good. In essence, it explains that Āhurā Mazdā, existing eternally and wholly good, inherently carries the potentiality for evil.

However, this potentiality can only manifest within the confines of time when Āhurā Mazdā's creations choose to engage in evil actions.<sup>35</sup> In other words, because Āhurā Mazdā is inherently good, the potential for evil exists, but it is not that both can be true simultaneously; instead, they can both be false, with the element of time enabling the possibility of evil. This potentiality cannot manifest within Āhurā Mazdā himself but solely within historical times. Moulton succinctly encapsulates this perspective by stating that if anyone likes to say that Evil existed from all eternity, he is perfectly suitable if he only means that a thing cannot be Good unless we can conceive of its opposite, which is not Good.<sup>36</sup> Boyd and Crosby describe this view as advocating unqualified monotheism because it asserts that Āhurā Mazdā alone reigns, with the dual alternatives of good and evil being open solely to the choices of free beings.<sup>37</sup> However, they emphasize that this duality is not an objective fact but a timeless logical possibility.<sup>38</sup>

In their analysis of this perspective, the authors acknowledge that it holds a philosophical advantage over the other monotheistic interpretations. It distinguishes itself

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<sup>34</sup> B&C, 572

<sup>35</sup> B&C, 572

<sup>36</sup> Moulton, *Teachings*, 20

<sup>37</sup> B&C, 572

<sup>38</sup> B&C, 572

from the Created Spirits' view by asserting that Āhurā Mazdā does not create the potentiality of evil, let alone its actuality; instead, it is a timeless logical consequence of Āhurā Mazdā's existence.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Boyd and Crosby argue that it differs from the Transformationist view by asserting that evil does not originate from a compulsion acting upon Āhurā Mazdā but rather arises from the free choices made by his created beings.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Āhurā Mazdā is not as directly implicated in evil as in the other monotheistic perspectives, while his ultimate authority and supremacy are still upheld.<sup>41</sup> However, the authors raise a significant objection to this monotheistic version. They contend it falls short in explaining the world's creation because evil is regarded as a timeless logical necessity; humanity must not eradicate it since it will inherently persist.<sup>42</sup>

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, it becomes evident that Āhurā Mazdā cannot prevent evil solely because, by his very existence, evil is a logical necessity. Although he may be willing to address evil, altering the terms of his existence would be necessary to prevent it, which implies a limitation in his omnipotence. However, it is crucial to avoid concluding that he is malevolent. It may well be beyond his omnipotent capacity to prevent evil, given that it is a logical necessity stemming from his existence. Even though he may be unable to prevent evil, Āhurā Mazdā must maintain his willingness to address it. Otherwise, the world's circumstances become perplexing, mainly when evil is widespread, and human frailty alone would prove insufficient to

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<sup>39</sup> B&C, 573

<sup>40</sup> B&C, 573

<sup>41</sup> B&C, 573

<sup>42</sup> B&C, 573

counteract it. Given that evil is an inherent logical consequence of his existence, there arises a necessity for a redefined understanding of what it means to be a benevolent deity.

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

According to the authors, Zoroastrianism represents a fusion of cosmogonic dualism and eschatological monotheism. To put it in their words, Zoroastrianism cannot be neatly classified as either straightforward dualism or straightforward monotheism, rendering the question posed in the title of their paper a false dichotomy.<sup>43</sup> They argue that this dichotomy fails to account for the pivotal role of time within the Zoroastrian belief system, where a progressive movement exists from dualism towards monotheism.<sup>44</sup> Boyd and Crosby contend that Angra Mainyu cannot be vanquished in a timeless eternity but only within the confines of historical, finite time. Consequently, they conclude that time plays a crucial role in fundamentally reshaping the ontological status of Āhurā Mazdā. They emphasize that it is not Āhurā Mazdā's omnipotence or omniscience but rather his wisdom that affords him an advantage over Angra Mainyu.<sup>45</sup>

This wisdom enables Āhurā Mazdā to anticipate and counter the malevolent tactics of Angra Mainyu, suggesting that his omniscience does not imply prior knowledge of future events.<sup>46</sup> For instance, he cannot possess complete foreknowledge of the future, given that it hinges partly on unpredictable acts of human freedom. However, when these events transpire, Āhurā Mazdā can leverage his wisdom to navigate them to his best

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<sup>43</sup> B&C, 575

<sup>44</sup> B&C, 575

<sup>45</sup> B&C, 578

<sup>46</sup> B&C, 578

advantage.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, his omnipotence signifies the most substantial degree of power within the universe, though it does not encompass all power. For instance, Āhurā Mazdā cannot alter Angra Mainyu's intrinsic nature as the agent of evil.<sup>48</sup> In essence, there exists only one God, Āhurā Mazdā, and the battle against evil within the Zoroastrian framework operates more akin to a play, with time and cosmogony providing the context for this cosmic struggle.

When comparing their interpretation against the others, the authors assert that their viewpoint does not succumb to the same weaknesses, or at least not to the same extent.<sup>49</sup> By applying the criterion of philosophical cogency, their perspective safeguards the enduring dualistic theme within Zoroastrianism while establishing a solid foundation for confidence in its eschatological monotheism. They elucidate how a proper comprehension of the former inherently incorporates the latter. Moreover, their perspective emphasizes the pivotal role of human choice without diminishing the cosmic dimensions of the ongoing battle against evil. This is achieved by accentuating the cosmic implications of humanity's role in this struggle. Importantly, their interpretation captures, in a manner distinct from the other interpretations, the profound transformative power inherent within finite time.<sup>50</sup> The authors acknowledge that their view does not definitively resolve whether Zoroastrianism should be classified as dualistic or

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<sup>47</sup> B&C, 578-579

<sup>48</sup> B&C, 579

<sup>49</sup> B&C, 581

<sup>50</sup> B&C, 583

monotheistic, but they contend that it takes significant strides toward providing a more nuanced understanding of this complex issue.<sup>51</sup>

In response to Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, God possesses both the willingness and the capability to prevent evil, yet he refrains from coercing his willingness upon humanity. This restraint is essential to preserve free will, as its absence would lead to a deterministic, linear notion of the victory of good over evil. Free will introduces an element of choice and agency in the cosmic struggle. While God has the power to eliminate evil unilaterally, he also relies on the collaboration of humankind. Human efforts in the battle against evil contribute to the gradual improvement of the world, making it progressively better.

An objection can be raised, however: it remains unclear how this process of making the world better necessarily translates into the salvation of humankind. This limitation arises because their perspective allows the notion of the world to improve continually, which may dissuade humans from relinquishing it altogether. The authors point out that driving out evil and making the world increasingly better does not guarantee that humans would choose to leave this improved world and attain salvation. They may instead opt to remain in this increasingly better state.

In essence, Āhurā Mazdā is omnipotent but exercises his power in a way that respects and preserves free will. He is willing and able to aid those who rely on him to diminish evil from their lives progressively. As such, Āhurā Mazdā cannot be regarded as malevolent unless one imposes a simplistic, mundane notion of morality that disallows the

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<sup>51</sup> B&C, 583

existence of evil in a world created by an entirely good God. In summary, their view yields a conception of God where evil exists. Āhurā Mazdā is capable and willing to assist, but he refrains from imposing his magnificence on those who choose not to align with him. According to the authors' viewpoint, this is the essence of God's definition.

In this paper, I have outlined seven distinct interpretations of the relationship between the problem of evil and Zoroastrianism, as articulated by Boyd and Crosby. I have advanced the argument that while Boyd and Crosby's interpretation holds a philosophical advantage over the others, it falls short of guaranteeing the salvation of humankind. To address this, seeking an alternative explanation for why humanity should depart from an ever-improving material world becomes essential. This alternative explanation may lie in the relationship humans can establish with Āhurā Mazdā. This relationship cannot solely rely on the magnificence of God but may necessitate transcending the constraints of historical time.

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