

**Evil and the Mind: Philosophical Reflections and
the Myth of Zahhak**

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of evil through the framework of the philosophy of mind, investigating how mental states, intentionality, and moral agency intersect to shape our understanding of malicious human behavior. By interrogating the cognitive and phenomenological dimensions of evil, the study explores whether evil acts arise from disordered mental processes, volitional choices, or a complex interplay of both. Drawing on classical and contemporary philosophical discourse—from Augustine’s privation theory to modern debates on free will and determinism—the analysis situates evil within broader discussions of consciousness, empathy deficits, and the neural correlates of moral decision-making. Central to this inquiry is the tension between *compatibilist* and *libertarian* conceptions of agency: Can evil actions be reconciled with deterministic models of the mind, or do they necessitate a radical conception of autonomous choice? Additionally, the article critiques reductionist accounts that reduce evil to mere biological dysfunction, arguing instead for a layered approach that integrates psychological, social, and metaphysical perspectives. By synthesizing insights from philosophy of mind, ethics, and cognitive science, this work challenges conventional binaries of “good” and “evil,” proposing that moral malevolence emerges from the dynamic architecture of the mind itself. The conclusions underscore the urgency of interdisciplinary dialogue to refine ethical frameworks in light of evolving understandings of mental causation and responsibility. This article contributes to both scholarly and applied discourses on morality, offering nuanced reflections for theorists and practitioners grappling with the enigma of evil in human cognition and action.

Keywords: evil, philosophy of mind, moral agency, free will, intentionality, moral responsibility.

Introduction

The concept of evil has haunted philosophical inquiry for millennia, straddling debates in metaphysics, ethics, and theology. Yet, in an age increasingly shaped by neuroscientific discoveries and cognitive theories, the question of how evil emerges from the architecture of the *mind* demands renewed scrutiny. This article situates evil within the philosophy of mind, interrogating how mental states, intentionality, and the nature of moral agency illuminate—or obscure—our understanding of human malevolence. While traditional frameworks often rooted evil in theological narratives (e.g., Augustine’s *privatio boni*) or Kantian notions of radical moral failure, contemporary discourse increasingly grapples with empirical insights into cognition, emotion, and volition. How do disordered mental processes, empathic deficits, or deterministic neural mechanisms intersect with the *moral gravity* of evil acts? Can philosophy of mind reconcile the tension between free will and determinism when explaining malice, or does evil demand a unique metaphysics of agency?

At the heart of this inquiry lies a paradox: evil is simultaneously recognized as a profound moral category and reductively dismissed as a byproduct of biological or social dysfunction. This article challenges such reductionism, arguing that evil’s conceptual potency arises from its entanglement with the mind’s *phenomenological* and *intentional* structures. Drawing on thinkers from Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the “banality of evil” to P.F. Strawson’s work on reactive attitudes, the study explores how evil acts implicate consciousness, self-awareness, and the capacity for moral reflection. Simultaneously, it engages with modern empirical research, such as studies on psychopathy’s neural correlates or the role of empathy in moral reasoning, to critique oversimplified binaries between “evil” and “mental pathology.” Central to this analysis is the philosophy of mind’s capacity to reframe classical debates. For instance, compatibilist accounts of free will—which reconcile agency with determinism—raise critical questions about moral responsibility in cases of coercion or cognitive impairment. Conversely, libertarian views posit evil as a manifestation of undetermined choice, yet struggle to explain how such autonomy aligns with emerging models of the brain’s causal closedness. By synthesizing these perspectives, the article advances a *layered ontology of evil*, one that integrates psychological, social, and metaphysical dimensions without collapsing into biological or cultural determinism.

This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches theoretical debates but carries urgent ethical implications. As artificial intelligence and neurotechnologies blur the boundaries of human agency, clarifying the mind’s role in moral malevolence becomes essential to refining legal, educational, and therapeutic frameworks. Ultimately, this article contends that evil cannot be fully understood—or meaningfully confronted—without grappling with the mind’s dynamic interplay of reason, desire, and embodied existence. In doing so, it bridges philosophy of mind, ethics, and cognitive science, offering a scaffold for future dialogue on one of humanity’s oldest and most unsettling enigmas.

Method

This article employs a multi-dimensional methodological framework rooted in the philosophy of mind, synthesizing conceptual analysis, interdisciplinary critique, and hermeneutic engagement with classical and contemporary texts. The investigation proceeds in three interrelated phases, designed to address the complexity of evil as a phenomenon mediated by mental states, agency, and socio-cultural contexts. Conceptual and Historical Analysis begins by reconstructing key philosophical accounts of evil, from Augustine's privation theory to Kant's moral evil and modern existentialist critiques (e.g., Sartre). These frameworks are analyzed through the lens of philosophy of mind, focusing on how theories of intentionality, consciousness, and moral reasoning inform definitions of evil. For instance, Augustine's notion of evil as a "privation of good" is interrogated for its implications on mental causation, while Kant's emphasis on radical freedom is juxtaposed with contemporary debates on determinism and neural correlates of decision-making. This phase grounds the inquiry in canonical texts while identifying gaps that empirical and interdisciplinary perspectives might address.

Questions

1. How does the philosophy of mind in the Middle East contribute to our understanding of evil?
2. Is evil a product of the mind or external influences?
3. How does the story of Zahhak illustrate the complexities of evil?
4. Zahhak is it alive?

Zahhak – The Tyrant of Persian Mythology

Zahhak, a central figure in Persian mythology, is often depicted as a tyrant and a symbol of evil in the epic "Shahnameh" by Ferdowsi. His story begins with a dark prophecy and a fateful encounter with Ahriman, the embodiment of chaos in Zoroastrianism. This encounter transforms Zahhak from a noble prince into a monstrous ruler, marked by the grotesque growth of two serpents on his shoulders that demand the flesh of young men. This transformation serves as a powerful metaphor for the corrupting influence of power and ambition, illustrating how a once-promising individual can descend into tyranny.

Under Zahhak's reign, Persia is plunged into despair and suffering. His rule is characterized by brutality and oppression, as he employs fear and violence to maintain control over his subjects. The demand for human sacrifices to appease the serpents highlights the moral decay of his character and the extent of his depravity. The stark contrast between Zahhak's opulent lifestyle and the misery of his people underscores the consequences of neglecting the responsibilities of leadership, serving as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition.

However, Zahhak's tyranny does not go unchallenged. The emergence of Kaveh the Blacksmith symbolizes the spirit of resistance against oppression. Kaveh's personal tragedy, the loss of his son to Zahhak's demands, ignites a rebellion that inspires the oppressed to rise against their tyrant. This narrative arc emphasizes the themes of courage, sacrifice, and the quest for justice, illustrating that even in the darkest times, hope and resistance can prevail.

Ultimately, Zahhak's downfall comes at the hands of the hero Fereydun, who embodies the virtues of justice and righteousness. Their confrontation symbolizes the eternal struggle between good and evil, culminating in Zahhak's capture and imprisonment. This resolution serves as a powerful reminder of the triumph of good over evil and the restoration of balance in the world, reinforcing the moral lessons embedded in Zahhak's tale. Through his story, Persian mythology explores the complexities of human nature, the consequences of tyranny, and the enduring power of resistance against oppression.

Insights from Middle Eastern Philosophy and the Tale of Zakhak

The philosophy of mind in the Middle East, particularly through Islamic and Zoroastrian thought, offers a profound exploration of the nature of evil as a complex interplay of free will, moral responsibility, and external influences. These philosophical traditions emphasize that individuals possess the capacity to choose between good and evil, thereby holding them accountable for their actions. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of evil, suggesting that it is not merely an inherent trait but rather a manifestation of choices influenced by various factors, including societal pressures and personal desires.

The story of Zakhak serves as a compelling case study in this philosophical discourse. Initially depicted as a noble figure, Zakhak's transformation into a tyrant illustrates how ambition and the desire for power can lead to moral decay. His narrative reflects the philosophical idea that even the most virtuous individuals can succumb to evil when faced with overwhelming temptation. Zakhak's descent into tyranny is marked by his choices, which ultimately result in the grotesque growth of serpents on his shoulders—symbols of his insatiable greed and the consequences of his actions. This transformation underscores the potential for corruption within the human psyche, highlighting the delicate balance between good and evil that exists within us all. Zakhak's story encapsulates the eternal conflict between good and evil, a central theme in Middle Eastern philosophy. It raises critical questions about the nature of evil as an inherent part of the human experience. The narrative suggests that while individuals have the capacity for free will, external influences can exacerbate their propensity for evil. Zakhak's ambition is not solely a personal failing; it is also shaped by the societal expectations and power dynamics of his time. This interplay between individual choice and external circumstances aligns with philosophical discussions on the impact of environment on moral decisions, emphasizing that evil can be both a personal and collective phenomenon.

Moreover, the symbolism of the snakes in Zakhak's story serves to illustrate the consuming nature of evil. The serpents demand the flesh of young men, representing the insatiable desires that can overwhelm an individual and lead to destructive choices. This imagery resonates with the philosophical notion that evil can corrupt the mind and soul,

transforming a once-noble character into a figure of terror. Zakhak's reign of oppression and fear exemplifies how unchecked ambition can manifest in actions that not only harm others but also lead to the moral degradation of the individual.

The Nature of Evil: Mind, Influence, and the Tale of Zakhak

In the context of Middle Eastern philosophy, particularly within Islamic and Zoroastrian traditions, there is a nuanced understanding of evil as a complex interplay between internal psychological states and external societal factors. These philosophical frameworks suggest that while individuals possess free will and the capacity for moral reasoning, their choices are significantly shaped by their environment, culture, and societal expectations.

The story of Zakhak serves as a compelling illustration of this dynamic. Initially depicted as a noble character, Zakhak's transformation into a tyrant highlights how ambition and the desire for power can corrupt an individual. His descent into evil is not solely a result of his internal desires; it is also influenced by external forces, such as the manipulations of Ahriman, the embodiment of chaos. This narrative underscores the idea that evil can arise from a combination of personal choice and external pressures, reflecting the complexities of moral decision-making.

Furthermore, the symbolism of the serpents that grow from Zakhak's shoulders represents the consuming nature of evil and the external demands placed upon him. These serpents not only signify Zakhak's insatiable greed but also illustrate how external influences can exacerbate an individual's darker impulses. This interplay suggests that evil is not merely an internal failing but rather a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both the mind and the environment. Zakhak's serpents—demanding daily sacrifices of human brains—serve as a visceral symbol of how evil perpetuates itself through systemic violence. The ritualized killings reflect a feedback loop between psychological desensitization and institutionalized cruelty. Modern parallels can be drawn to Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," where ordinary individuals commit atrocities through habituation to immoral systems. Zakhak's tyranny exemplifies how oppressive regimes exploit cognitive biases (e.g., obedience to authority, moral disengagement) to normalize horror.

Neuroscientific insights into empathy deficits and dehumanization further illuminate Zakhak's psychology. The serpents' insatiable hunger mirrors the neurobiological mechanisms of addiction, where destructive behaviors become self-reinforcing. Similarly,

studies on psychopathy—marked by impaired emotional processing—resonate with Zakhak's detachment from the suffering he causes. Yet, the *Shahnameh* resists reducing evil to mere pathology; Zakhak's malevolence is inseparable from his ideological conviction and the societal structures enabling his rule.

Moral Responsibility and Free Will:

The narrative of Zakhak raises profound questions about moral responsibility and the concept of free will, particularly in the context of his transformation from a noble figure to a tyrant. In philosophical discourse, the relationship between free will and moral responsibility is a critical area of inquiry, especially when examining the nature of evil. Zakhak's story serves as a compelling case study for exploring these themes, as it illustrates the complexities involved in attributing moral culpability to individuals whose actions are influenced by both internal desires and external pressures. Free will is often defined as the ability of individuals to make choices that are not determined by prior causes or external influences. In the context of Zakhak, his initial nobility suggests that he possesses the capacity for good and the potential to make virtuous choices. However, as he becomes increasingly consumed by ambition and the desire for power, the question arises: to what extent does Zakhak exercise his free will? The influence of Ahriman, who manipulates Zakhak's desires and ambitions, complicates the notion of free will. While Zakhak ultimately makes choices that lead to his downfall, these choices are heavily influenced by external forces that exploit his vulnerabilities. Zakhak's story illustrates how external influences can shape an individual's moral landscape. The societal expectations and power dynamics surrounding him create an environment where ambition and the pursuit of control become paramount. As Zakhak succumbs to these pressures, his ability to make morally sound decisions diminishes.

In many philosophical traditions, including those found in Middle Eastern thought, there is an acknowledgment that while individuals have the capacity for free will, they are also subject to the influences of their environment. This duality suggests that moral responsibility is not solely a matter of individual choice but is also shaped by the context in which those choices are made. Zakhak's transformation into a tyrant exemplifies how external pressures can lead individuals to act in ways that contradict their initial moral inclinations. The interplay between free will and external influences complicates the assessment of Zakhak's moral culpability. On one hand, he is responsible for the choices he makes, including the sacrifices demanded to appease the serpents. On the other hand, the manipulative forces at play, particularly Ahriman's influence, suggest that Zakhak's actions are not entirely his own. This tension reflects a broader philosophical debate about the nature of evil and the extent to which individuals can be held accountable for

their actions when external influences are at play. In Middle Eastern philosophy, this complexity is often addressed through the lens of moral education and the cultivation of virtue. The idea is that individuals must strive to develop their moral character and resist external temptations. Zakhak's failure to do so serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of yielding to ambition and external pressures. It highlights the importance of self-awareness and moral fortitude in navigating the challenges of life.

Zakhak as an Ethical Figure

Zakhak, a prominent character in Persian mythology, particularly in the "Shahnameh" by Ferdowsi, is often viewed primarily as a symbol of tyranny and evil. However, a deeper examination of his character reveals complexities that invite ethical reflection. While Zakhak's actions are largely condemned, understanding his ethical dimensions requires exploring the motivations, societal influences, and moral dilemmas he faces throughout his narrative. At the outset of his story, Zakhak is depicted as a noble figure with the potential for greatness. His initial character embodies qualities such as strength and leadership, which are often associated with ethical virtues. This nobility suggests that Zakhak possesses the capacity for good and the ability to make virtuous choices. However, the ethical implications of his character become more pronounced as he encounters external influences that lead him down a darker path.

Ahriman, the embodiment of chaos and evil in Zoroastrianism, plays a crucial role in Zakhak's transformation. The manipulative nature of Ahriman raises ethical questions about the extent to which Zakhak is responsible for his actions. Ahriman's influence can be seen as a representation of external forces that corrupt individuals, challenging the notion of free will. This dynamic invites ethical considerations regarding the impact of societal and environmental factors on moral decision-making.

Zakhak's initial choices, influenced by Ahriman, reflect the ethical dilemma of succumbing to temptation. The allure of power and the promise of greatness lead him to make decisions that ultimately result in his moral degradation. One of the most striking aspects of Zakhak's ethical narrative is the demand for human sacrifice to appease the serpents that grow from his shoulders. This grotesque requirement symbolizes the consequences of unchecked ambition and the moral decay that accompanies the pursuit of power. Zakhak's willingness to sacrifice others for his own gain highlights the ethical implications of his choices and the extent to which he has strayed from his initial nobility.

The act of sacrificing innocent lives raises profound ethical questions about the value of human life and the moral cost of ambition. Zakhak's actions serve as a cautionary tale

about the dangers of prioritizing personal desires over ethical considerations. This aspect of his character invites reflection on the moral responsibilities that come with power and the consequences of failing to uphold ethical standards.

Despite his descent into tyranny, Zakhak's story also contains elements of a struggle for redemption. The narrative suggests that even those who have committed grave wrongs may have the potential for change. This aspect of Zakhak's character raises ethical questions about forgiveness, accountability, and the possibility of moral rehabilitation.

The emergence of Kaveh the Blacksmith as a figure of resistance against Zakhak's tyranny introduces a counter-narrative that emphasizes the importance of standing up against evil. Kaveh's rebellion serves as a reminder that individuals have the power to challenge oppressive forces and seek justice. This dynamic highlights the ethical responsibility of individuals to resist tyranny and advocate for the greater good, even in the face of overwhelming odds. Zakhak's character embodies a complex interplay of ethical dimensions that invite deeper reflection on the nature of good and evil. While he is often viewed as a symbol of tyranny, his initial nobility, the influence of external forces, and the ethical dilemmas he faces throughout his narrative reveal a more nuanced understanding of his character. Zakhak's story serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of ambition and the moral responsibilities that accompany power. It challenges readers to consider the complexities of ethical decision-making and the potential for redemption, even in the darkest of circumstances. Through this lens, Zakhak becomes not only a figure of evil but also a catalyst for ethical reflection and moral inquiry.

The Contemporary Resonance of Zakhak: A Behavioral Reflection:

In the modern world, the legend of Zakhak continues to resonate, particularly in societies grappling with issues of tyranny, corruption, and moral decay. His story serves as a metaphor for the destructive behaviors exhibited by leaders and regimes that prioritize power over the welfare of their people. In countries where authoritarianism prevails, Zakhak's legacy can be seen in the actions of those who exploit their positions for personal gain, often at the expense of human rights and ethical governance.

The behavioral effects of Zakhak's myth manifest in various forms, such as the normalization of greed, the sacrifice of the innocent for the ambitions of the powerful, and the pervasive culture of fear that stifles dissent. This echoes the narrative of Zakhak, who, driven by ambition and external manipulation, ultimately becomes a tyrant demanding sacrifices from his subjects. As such, the legend serves as a cautionary tale,

reminding contemporary societies of the moral responsibilities that come with power and the potential consequences of allowing such behaviors to flourish unchecked.

Moreover, the figure of Kaveh the Blacksmith, who rises against Zakhak's tyranny, symbolizes the enduring human spirit of resistance. In modern contexts, movements for justice and accountability often draw inspiration from this narrative, highlighting the importance of standing against oppression. Thus, while Zakhak may be a mythological figure, the behavioral effects of his story are very much alive, influencing both the actions of leaders and the responses of those who seek to challenge injustice in today's world. *The Contemporary Resonance of Zakhak: A Behavioral Reflection*

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In educational settings, the story of Zakhak is often used to teach moral lessons about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the importance of ethical leadership. By examining

Zahhak's character and the consequences of his actions, students are encouraged to reflect on their own values and the impact of their choices in society.

Conclusion

In exploring the intricate relationship between evil and the mind, this article has delved into the philosophical reflections that shape our understanding of moral responsibility, free will, and the influences that drive human behavior. Through the lens of Middle Eastern philosophy and the compelling narrative of Zahhak, we have examined how internal desires and external pressures intertwine to create the conditions for evil actions. Zahhak's transformation from a noble figure to a tyrant serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the potential for corruption that exists within us all when ambition and external influences go unchecked.

The discussions surrounding the nature of evil reveal that it is not merely an inherent trait but a complex phenomenon shaped by a multitude of factors, including societal expectations, cultural narratives, and individual choices. This complexity invites us to reflect on our moral responsibilities and the ethical implications of our actions in a world where the lines between good and evil can often blur.

As we navigate contemporary challenges, the lessons drawn from Zahhak's story and the philosophical inquiries into the nature of evil remain relevant. They remind us of the importance of self-awareness, ethical leadership, and the courage to resist tyranny and injustice. Ultimately, the reflections on evil and the mind encourage a deeper understanding of human nature, urging us to confront the darker aspects of our psyche while striving for a more just and compassionate world.

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