

# Exploring the concept of evil in Japanese anime: a multifaceted perspective

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**Abstract:** Beyond its captivating narratives and stunning visuals, Japanese anime offers audiences worldwide a unique window into Japan's rich history, culture, philosophy and values. Within this vast and diverse universe, there exists a recurring and multifaceted thematic exploration — theodicy and the philosophy of 'evil'. This study aims to comprehensively deconstruct and examine the portrayal of 'evil' in Japanese anime emphasizing its substantial relevance within the broader discourse of Japan's soft power. Characters' behaviors, actions, curses, lability, suffering, natural disasters, wars, natural humanity, monsters are presented in a way that prompts viewers to question the true nature of evil, if there is any. Fundamental to this study is the notion that 'evil' in anime is not an absolute, fixed concept, but rather an ephemeral perspective. Moreover, sometimes anime delves into the unconventional portrayal of the supreme beings as evil, challenging traditional dichotomies of g(o)od and (d)evil, which from a certain reality-level do not exist anymore. In anime, the only things that exist are will and power, the way that they are used being a matter of perspective. What is the systematic cycle of evil in anime and how will it affect the next generation's mentality.

**Keywords:** cycle of evil in Japanese anime; God as power and will; postmodernism; non-dichotomous concept of evil; deconstructionism; Vos Viewer.

**Titlu:** „Explorarea conceptului de rău în anime-urile japoneze: o perspectivă multifacțată”

**Rezumat:** Dincolo de narațiunile captivante și vizualele impresionante, anime-urile japoneze oferă publicului din întreaga lume o fereastră unică spre istoria, cultura, filosofia și valorile bogate ale Japoniei. În acest vast și divers univers, există o explorare tematică recurentă și multifacțată — teodiceea și filosofia răului. Acest studiu își propune să deconstruiască și să examineze portretizarea răului în anime, subliniind relevanța sa substanțială în cadrul amplului discurs despre Japonia ca putere soft. Comportamentele personajelor, acțiunile lor, blestemele, labilitatea, suferința, dezastrelor naturale, războaiele, umanitatea naturală, monștri, sunt prezentate într-o manieră care determină spectatorii să pună la îndoială adevărata natură a răului, dacă există vreuna. Fundamentul acestui studiu este noțiunea conform căreia „răul” în anime nu este un concept absolut sau fix, ci mai degrabă o perspectivă efemeră. Mai mult, uneori anime-urile pătrund în prezentarea neconvențională a ființelor supreme ca fiind rele, provocând dihotomiile tradiționale dintre bine și rău, care la un anumit nivel al realității nu mai există. În anime, singurele lucruri care există sunt voința și puterea, felul în care acestea sunt utilizate fiind o chestiune de perspectivă. Care este ciclul sistematic al răului în anime și (cum) va afecta mentalitatea generației viitoare?

**Cuvinte-cheie:** ciclul răului în anime-urile japoneze; Dumnezeu ca putere și voință; conceptul non-dihotomic al răului; postmodernism; deconstructivism; Vos Viewer.

## Introduction

Japanese anime, a compelling aspect of Japan's soft power, is celebrated globally as a vivid and captivating medium of artistic and philosophical expression. Beyond its role as entertainment, anime serves as a cultural ambassador, offering audiences from diverse corners of the world a window into Japan's rich heritage, history, and contemporary values, which makes it a universal language (even in the context of friendly relations between states) (Minea 2023). Within this multifaceted universe of anime, there exists a distinctive thematic undercurrent - the exploration of the theological and philosophical concepts including the concept of 'evil'. This study delves into the portrayal of 'evil' within Japanese anime and its profound implications in the realm of philosophical discourse. Furthermore, 'evil' in the context

of Japanese anime also resonates with the belief systems of major religions. Anime often grapples with theological themes, exploring the eternal struggle to define abstract and contextual terms such as evil. Here, we glimpse the influence of religious narratives, drawing parallels to themes of sin and salvation, divine justice, and theodicy from a pungent perspective for the European Christian mindset.

This research is undertaken from a European theological perspective. It aligns with the postmodernist paradigm and deconstruction theory by critically examining the portrayal of evil in anime as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that defies traditional moral binaries. Drawing on Derrida's theory of deconstruction (Derrida 1995), the paper analyses anime narratives to reveal the inherent instability and fluidity of evil, showcasing how these narratives resist fixed interpretations and challenge the notion of absolute morality. By adopting a postmodernist research paradigm, the study highlights the relativity of evil, emphasizing its dependence on cultural, historical, situational and perspectival contexts.

### Literature review

This bibliographic and bibliometric investigation involved an extensive review of diverse sources, revealing a wealth of scholarly inquiries into the multifaceted concept of evil from varying perspectives. The corpus of literature explored numerous facets of anime such as its global power (Allison 2003), its global and regional effect (Teodorescu 2019), its effect on young people (Yamamura 2014), its religious insights (Tan 2020), its pedagogical potential (Jaohari and Kuraesin 2021), the artistic (Cheng 2010), philological (Yoshihara 2020), cultural and mythological values (Escudier 2020) that it has, the moral content and philosophical depth (Steiff and Tamplin 2010), the importance to be brought in academic libraries (Pope Robbins 2014) and so on.

However, it was notable that within this extensive body of research, a conspicuous dearth of notable contributions pertained to the specific thematic domain of the concept of evil as portrayed within the realm of anime. While the very few existing studies have begun to touch upon this subject, they are focusing on narrow aspects without considering the narrative arc in its entirety, where moral complexities are often resolved and justified. This study endeavours to address this discernible knowledge gap within the domain, aiming to provide a comprehensive exploration of evil in anime from a wide, permeable perspective that accounts for the evolving nature of characters and plots, ultimately offering a more holistic understanding of how evil is contextualized and resolved within these narratives.

To see the research trends on the subject I checked the Scopus database, employing the search term 'evil' with a keyword constraint limited to 'evil' in keywords and abstracts. As of October 26, 2023, a total of 1045 results were retrieved. These results were subsequently retrieved and subjected to analysis within Vos Viewer, thereby generating 'maps based on text data', inclusive of both keywords and abstracts from the aforementioned articles.

Of the 162 studies containing the term 'character' among the 1045 primary findings, a select few delve into the psychological dimensions surrounding this concept, while the majority centre their focus on literary works. Interestingly, a noteworthy proportion of these studies emerged at the outset of the global pandemic, with its zenith occurring in 2020. Contemporary analyses are increasingly concerned with the construction of villains in today's popular culture, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between modern fictional villainy and broader societal constructs (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2016). Furthermore, this period of emergence is marked by a systematic analysis of evil within the domain of literature (Candel 2021), and investigations into malevolent little girl characters found in comic books and animated series (Bent, Porter, and Gavin 2011).

While visual examination of the associated graphics reveals that the most recurrent subject within studies concerning evil pertains to theological inquiries regarding the divine, it is worth mentioning that the theme of fantasy exhibits a pronounced density as well (Fig.1).



the character not only within the context of human behaviour but mainly to that of fictional characters found within literature and other mediums. Thus, while years past may have seen the examination of evil in the context of law and subsequently with regard to theological considerations, contemporary research is shifting towards an exploration of evil in the realm of virtual landscapes, where an emerging query arises—Is evil an entirely virtual construct?

### **Evil in anime**

The delineation of the concept of evil within the anime medium is perspectival, contingent upon contextual considerations and multifaceted situations. This representation unfolds within a cyclical paradigm, where reason and effect mutually influence each other, constructing a dynamic narrative tapestry. Anime narratives, in their intricate portrayal of evil, often transcend traditional dichotomies, presenting a nuanced perspective that underscores the relativity inherent in the characterization of malevolence. The contextual nature of evil within anime becomes particularly pronounced in distinct thematic dimensions, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between characters, plot developments, and overarching philosophical inquiries.

The perspectival nature of evil is intricately woven into the narrative fabric of anime, where protagonists and antagonists alike are presented with a depth that transcends simplistic moral binaries. This complexity is not only evident in characterizations but is also reflective of broader cultural and philosophical underpinnings. Thus, anime serves as a fertile ground for the exploration of nuanced ethical frameworks, inviting viewers to critically engage with the multifaceted nature of evil within the realm of storytelling.

Moreover, the thematic exploration of evil in anime extends beyond individual characterizations to encompass overarching narratives that engage with profound questions of divinity, power, and societal structures. The cyclical interplay between reason and effect within these narratives becomes a vehicle for the examination of existential and metaphysical quandaries. The medium's capacity to depict nuanced ethical landscapes contributes to its status as a compelling artistic and philosophical platform. As anime continues to evolve, its exploration of evil serves as a testament to the dynamic nature of storytelling, inviting audiences to engage in critical reflections on morality, societal structures, and the complexities of the divine and human condition.

### **Evil as lability**

The connection between psycho-emotional states such as anxiety and evil emerges as a prominent and noteworthy thematic strand in literary discourse. For instance, an entire book (Peters 2011) is dedicated to the analysis of Patricia Highsmith's body of work, underscoring the significance of engaging with her writings through a lens that places heightened emphasis on the themes of anxiety and evil. Within the critical assessment, these themes are posited as pivotal components of her literary oeuvre, deserving a closer and more discerning examination.

First and foremost, it is imperative to acknowledge that in the realm of anime, the concept of evil is frequently interwoven with matters of the soul and psyche. In contrast to the paradigm within Christian-influenced societies, where 'bad things' are often interpreted as punitive measures for transgressions or, even worse, as in the gospel of John 9, 1-38, as an occasion for the manifestation of divine healing omnipotence, anime presents a distinct perspective. Within the anime narrative, bad events are predominantly attributed to human agency, wherein individuals actively project their desires and intentions, imbuing these energies with negative connotations. It is this conscious projection of emotional states that attracts and engenders what is colloquially termed 'bad luck'. This worldview underscores a subtle yet profound distinction—misfortune is not incurred through the violation of religious edicts, but rather through the act of diffusing negative emotional states (that sometimes can come as a result of the violation of certain rules) into the world.

This perspective extends beyond anime and is reflective of a broader East Asian cultural ethos, which encourages individuals to exercise restraint and modesty. Excessive self-indulgence and egocentric behaviour are viewed as potential triggers for calamitous events. It is important to note that, within Christian philosophy, the concept of sin is actually associated with the experience of guilt and emotions or actions that result in a separation from God. In this interpretation, such disconnection from the divine is posited as a potential catalyst for misfortune. However, among the lay populace, there exists a common misapprehension of the nuanced theological concept of sin, resulting in a wrong religious belief and behaviour. In essence, while there are inherent theological commonalities, the divergence in how bad events are perceived and attributed underscores the intricacies of cultural interpretations and the varying perspectives within distinct belief systems.

The association between evil and mental lability is notably prevalent in a multitude of anime productions, particularly in recent and highly successful titles such as 'Jujutsu Kaisen'. 'Jujutsu Kaisen', originally a manga series that debuted in 2018 and was subsequently adapted into an anime in 2020, offers a compelling narrative backdrop for this exploration. The principal characters in this narrative find themselves within an educational institution where they are being groomed to become sorcerers, individuals entrusted with combatting a distinct category of entities—monstrous beings inexorably generated by the pain, whether physical or emotional, experienced by humanity.

Within this narrative, it becomes evident that the origin of malevolence lies within the human condition; it is birthed from the depths of human souls. Subsequently, it materializes through actions and manifestations, albeit devoid of an intrinsic essence or 'ousia'. Instead, its genesis resides within the human psyche, and it proliferates in a somewhat ethereal form, a manifestation delineated in anime as an energy that materializes. This physicality encompasses form, appearance, and occasionally additional physical attributes, such as scent. Only a select few endowed individuals possess the sensory capacity to perceive or interact with this monster-like entities.

Hence, in this context, the sorcerers, individuals endowed with the capacity to engage with and counteract this malevolence are cast as the positive protagonists, while negative entities, per se, do not inherently exist. The central issue at hand resides in the inherent challenge humans face in mastering control over their own cognitive and emotional faculties.

### **Evil as curse**

These creatures, rooted in anxiety, are at times referred to as 'curses'. In 'Jujutsu Kaisen' sorcerers engage in combat against these 'curses'. However, it remains unspecified who instigates these 'curses' and upon whom they are cast. Are these 'curses' inherently malevolent, or is there more to their essence? An additional category of 'curses' exists — those individuals are born with. These individuals are either destined for particular forms of misfortune, born with physical deformities, or genetic anomalies. Nevertheless, it is often revealed, particularly in the denouement of the anime, that this category is devoid of any demonic connotations. A pertinent recent example is found in 'Requiem of the Rose King' (2022), where the central character, a hermaphrodite, is viewed and labeled as a '(d)evil' by society, including his own mother who grapples with guilt for giving birth to what she terms a 'monster'. However, this character ultimately exhibits remarkable moral qualities and, apart from the suffering endured due to his hostile environment and a psychiatric condition akin to schizophrenia, which often compels him to see and hear Joan of Arc, shows no demonic inclinations. This is one of the many animes that shows the drama behind people born in a way they cannot change but which is different from what is labeled as normality.

Indeed, there exist references at the concept of curse that resonates more closely with our cultural framework, particularly those engendered by an individual's suffering during pivotal moments, often conveyed through words. The potency of language has long held a prominent place in spiritual and magical traditions, wherein it serves as a conduit for invoking supernatural forces. However, this attribute of language extends beyond esoteric contexts, as

it wields immense influence in society at large. Beyond the realms of media and its constructivist capacity to shape narratives, language plays a central role in pivotal life events, such as marriage, where the very foundation of a family is established through the solemnity of spoken and written vows. Within the spectrum of anime narratives, this facet of language emerges as one of the most conspicuous manifestations of power, second only to the forces of individual will and desire. It is pertinent to note that this form of linguistic empowerment is predominantly harnessed for benevolent purposes, and as such, it is not universally construed as an 'incarnation' of evil within the broader anime narrative.

### **Evil as environmental pollution**

Another example of curse-monsters found in anime pertains to those associated with environmental pollution. The theme of pollution stands as one of the most pivotal and enduring motifs in anime and in all post-war literature, profoundly influenced by the historical traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Atkins 2017, 189). Consequences of war, pollution and atomic bombs upon Japan can be seen in many cultural products from the 1956 Godzilla film to mangas and animes such as Barefoot Gen (1973/1983) or Evangelion (1995). Pollution, in this context, emerges as a dual entity—it is both a curse upon nature and life, and simultaneously an outcome of human actions.

In 'Shaman King'(2001/2021), Horo-Horo aspires to become the shaman king, an individual destined to merge with the Great Spirit and be able to wield its unparalleled power. Horo-Horo wants to use it all in the pursuit of safeguarding nature and preserving the sanctity of the forest, the habitat of his protective spirit. 'Earth Maiden Arjuna' (2001) features the central character, Juna, offered a unique proposition by Chris, a young man in wheelchair, but with magical abilities, whom she encounters in the afterlife following a motorcycle accident in which she died alongside her boyfriend. Chris extends an offer for her return to life under the condition that she aids him in combating the evil forces (monsters-like entities) plaguing the earth.

Most of these malevolent forces are directly tied to pollution, spanning issues such as food contamination, human intervention in natural ecosystem, and other such ecological transgressions. The series also conveys the idea that humanity stands as the sole entity that struggles to discern its optimal dietary choices, while all other creatures instinctively recognize their appropriate sustenance.

Of particular interest is the fact that Arjuna initially sought to obliterate everything, and Chris continually asked her why is she seeking to kill the personifications of pollution (monsters), because killing is not the way to save the world. She gained the ability to spiritually perceive the pain of the universe, therefore, she was desperate. Ultimately, a transformation occurs in her outlook, whereby she learns to convert the evil by loving the nature affected by it, the suffering entities. She changes her attitude and behaviour and this represents a significant step towards communion with nature.

These recurrent themes naturally attract the attention of environmental researchers. Notably, even renowned anime studios like Studio Ghibli fervently advocate for the role of humankind in environmental conservation, often invoking animistic elements in their narratives (Mumcu and Yılmaz 2018). Additionally, prominent contemporary anime director Makoto Shinkai emphasizes the significance of environmental stewardship and climate change (Mulyadi 2022), proving the enduring concern within the Japanese mindset regarding pollution. It is crucial to understand that pollution, within this context, is not viewed as the cause of evil but rather as a collective reflection of Japan's post-World War II struggles and their enduring resilience in the face of numerous natural calamities.

### **Evil as action or situation**

Kant argued that evil is not a substance or a thing in itself but is instead a consequence of human actions. In Kantian ethics, evil is often understood in the context of moral actions that violate the principles of reason and the moral law. Kant's moral philosophy is deontological, meaning it emphasizes duty and moral obligation. According to Kant, moral actions are

determined by the intention behind them and the adherence to rational moral principles. He believed that actions are morally right if they are done out of a sense of duty and in accordance with universal moral laws. In the context of evil, Kant argued that actions that go against these universal moral laws, particularly actions driven by selfishness, disregard for the autonomy of others, or a violation of fundamental moral principles, are considered morally wrong or evil (Kant 2012).

In anime narratives, the significance of duty is prominently emphasized, with phenomena like 'Karoushi' (death from overwork) persisting as one of Japan's significant issues. Despite the prevalence of such challenges, there is an enduring appreciation for the concept of duty, even as certain anime productions delve into revealing the true nature of situations. However, another thematic dimension emerges, wherein human actions are perceived as malevolent, arising from emotional instability and inherent cruelty. The portrayals of human nature in adult-oriented anime are far from optimistic, revealing unimaginable cruelty. In 'The Promised Neverland' (2019) a heart-wrenching scenario unfolds as orphans raised in an institution referred to as "the farm" are intended as live prey for their society. In 'The Ancient Magus' Bride' (2017), Chise's mother commits suicide, leading her to be auctioned off on the black market. In 'Black Butler' (2008) Ciel endures torment for the sadistic amusement of psychopathic aristocrats, alongside other children, most of whom meet grim fates during these acts of entertainment. 'Tokyo Godfathers' (2003) underscores that orphans may undergo transformations, including becoming transgender, due to their struggle to find a stable start in life.

This depiction reveals the most severe cruelty in anime, a true manifestation of malevolence that transcends the boundaries of perception, becoming an action that is almost indisputably terrifying. However, the perspective drastically changes when the outcomes of these situations are considered. In 'The Promised Neverland', the protagonists manage to escape from the farm, ultimately rescuing all the children and even healing the creatures who required human consumption. One of the girls from the farm collaborates with supernatural beings from the captor society, whose blood can cure the monsters' need to devour humans when ingested. In 'The Ancient Magus' Bride', Chise is adopted by a supernatural being who desires to learn how to be human, caring for her, teaching her magic, and providing her with a significantly improved life. In 'Black Butler', Ciel strikes a pact with the demon Sebastian, who saves him and aids in exacting revenge on those who tormented him and murdered his family, although this ultimately becomes unnecessary. He later enjoys a happy life with Sebastian as his butler. In 'Tokyo Godfathers', the orphaned baby discovered by the transgender individual serves as a catalyst for everyone involved to find their place in the world.

In each case, the initial malevolent act is evident, but its ultimate portrayal shifts from evil to being a transformative experience that propels individuals toward an entirely new life.

### **Evil as war**

One of the most frequently explored themes in anime, often intertwined with the plight of orphans, is the theme of war. Among the myriad examples of war-related drama suitable for this study, 'Maria the Virgin Witch' (2015) and 'Grave of the Fireflies' (1988) emerge as poignant illustrations.

In 'Maria the Virgin Witch', Archangel Michael tells to Maria, a witch who often steps in to halt wars, that God allows war to keep the world in balance. Maria, however, views this perspective as overly harsh, likening it to the attitude of a ruthless businessman. This is largely because she is directly confronted with the pain it causes people, not to mention that her own partner, Joseph, is sent to war too. This situation raises questions about the divine attributes and the subjective understanding of evil, sparking a complex debate on theodicy.

But while 'Maria the Virgin Witch' elucidates its themes with clarity, with very accurate war-details and sincere philosophy, 'Grave of the Fireflies' adopts a more nuanced approach. This narrative delves into the chronicle of a brother and sister thrust into the tumultuous reality

of war, eventually enduring the unforgiving throes of hunger and emerging as poignant symbols of war orphans. One evening, she finds the fireflies she was taking care of, dead. The moment when the tender, toddler girl asks her brother with a profound query: 'Why do the fireflies have to die so soon?' remains one of the saddest moments in the anime history. From a Western perspective, culpability often rests with the relatives of children who failed in their duty of care, and, of course, with those who perpetuated the war and its devastating consequences. Conversely, from a Japanese viewpoint, the blame shifts toward the children who failed to endure the oppression imposed by their relatives, eventually ending up perishing. It's worth noting that 'Grave of the Fireflies' is based on the true story conveyed through a soldier's letter and has garnered numerous international awards.

In the realm of anime narratives, the act of taking a life, be it through suicide or otherwise, is unambiguously deemed as a morally reprehensible deed. Harakiri is a concept that has undergone a transformation in its portrayal within the anime industry. While it was once depicted as an act of courage in many anime narratives, a notable shift occurred in the 1990s. During this period, the anime industry began to challenge and confront the theme of suicide. Consequently, harakiri was recontextualized as an act of cowardice, characterized by an individual's inability to endure the overwhelming feelings of shame and guilt, ultimately leading them to contemplate suicide. Concepts such as cowardice, shame, and fear stand as the primary manifestations of malevolence, all of which trace their origins to human pride. They are considered to be very low, almost close to death, in the ladder of the levels of consciousness of D. R. Hawkins (Hawkins 2015).

Towards the close of the preceding millennium, Japan embarked on a concerted effort to address the concerning decline in its population, which led to the cultivation of a prevailing discourse against suicide. Consequently, numerous anime productions, such as 'Rurouni Kenshin' (1996/2023), have lent their narrative support to the notion that genuine courage lies in persevering through life, bearing the weight of shame, and transmuting it into a force for good. This paradigm shift underscores the idea that individuals can and should live to do good actions that overcome the consequences of past mistakes, rather than commit suicide. However, even within this context, the concept of evil is not ubiquitously exposed. Rather, it manifests most prominently in the psychopathic characters who derive pleasure from acts of violence and competition in fights. Beyond these instances, the overarching theme pertains to the realm of 'bad' rather than a strict alignment with 'evil'.

It becomes evident that the conception of 'evil' within anime is profoundly rooted in the tapestry of Japanese spirituality, cultural identity, and specially, the collective trauma endured through historical conflicts such as wars.

The assumption that there was a distinct Japanese animation type prior to the wartime era, and that 'post-war' solely pertains to the aftermath of the Second World War, is wrong. The birth year of Japanese animation is considered to be 1917 and the wars preceding the Second World War, including the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905, which incidentally has been revisited in recent anime adaptations like 'Golden Kamui', from 2018), had significant impacts on the Japanese film industry and the nascent animation field. Notably, the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) played a pivotal role in catalysing Japan's transition into a mass-media society (Atkins 2017, 159). Subsequent wars further contributed to the evolving landscape of Japanese animation and animes such as *Night Raid 1931* (2010) prove it.

Consequently, it is evident that there is no 'pre-war' era for Japanese animation. In fact, the very foundation of Japanese animation is inextricably tied to the collective traumas of Japanese mindset generated by sad historical events like wars. The imposition of terms such as 'pre-war' and 'post-war' upon the landscape of anime research is simply unsubstantial.

What principally came in the aftermath of the Second World War was that the war-related themes have now encompassed atomic bomb effects, mecha, more science fiction, and the archetype of the genius researcher. But this is simply a regular progression, in the nascent animation, not a distinct period classification within the anime history. It is noteworthy that the themes of conflict and war have perennially been intrinsic to the anime medium, effectively

forming its foundational core. War-related influences have consistently remained among the most definitive and emblematic themes in anime. This narrative landscape began to shift, particularly in the 1990s, when a plethora of magical and tranquil themes began to permeate the anime realm, marking a noticeable departure from the predominant war-centric narratives.

During wartime periods, anime served as a vehicle for inculcating a sense of national duty and preparedness, particularly among younger audiences. The themes and narratives were often designed to resonate with the wartime ethos. In the post-war and colonial eras, a significant proportion of anime productions continued to grapple with the themes of conflict and its enduring impacts on the national mindset. While there are subtle shifts occurring, the echoes of collective trauma continue to reverberate within contemporary anime narratives. Well of course we can say that wars are both bad and evil from a certain perspective, but since they forced the society to progress and gave birth to anime can we really label them only so?

### **God as the true (D)evil**

In war-related anime, the issue of theodicy is frequently explored. Expanding on the concept presented in 'Maria the Virgin Witch', it is articulated in the same episode featuring the preceding quotations that people make war, neglecting God, and consequently, God let them die, portraying Him as seemingly indifferent and self-centred. However, the narrative also highlights the significance of words and reveals that God is not solely just but also merciful. This is evidenced by the fact that, according to the divine order enforced by Archangel Michael, Maria was to be repeatedly punished to uphold the justice of the divine order. Yet, each time Joseph professed his love for her and demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his life for her, the heavens would brighten, and Michael would announce that God had forgiven her once again. Thus, the portrayal suggests that evil is relative, perspective-dependent, and susceptible to influence, particularly with the potential for conversion through love.

Delving further into the theme of war and the portrayal of God as malevolent, 'The Saga of Tanya the Evil' (2017), explores the narrative of a man who is pushed in front of a train by a former employee whom he had just fired. God grants him a chance to repent and reincarnates him as Tanya, an orphan whose father had died in war and whose mother had abandoned her. She is raised in an orphanage run by Christian nuns. Tanya retains her memory of her former life, and she resents God for forcing her to pray for the (magical) power she can use. The anime illustrates that forced prayer does not bring people closer to God. At the end of the first season, Tanya curses God, demonstrating that nothing has changed. She manages to win battles because of her unwavering faith, not just in the God's power, but in her own abilities (gifted by Him). It is evident that the God of Tanya embodies characteristics of a war deity, one of hatred, and revenge, a tyrant who needs personal cult worship, much like a communist leader. She must use this power primarily to kill in the war, as this is her sole means of survival. She is referred to as "Tanya the Evil" (in the English translation of the anime title only, in Japanese the anime's title is 少女戦記 which does not contain any reference to evil), primarily because she curses God. However, in her perspective, the true evil entity is the God who compels her into servitude. This ambiguity raises questions about the nature of evil, but what is clear is that God serves as the source of power.

In the realm of anime, the divine entity is the one that can harness the universal force. Whether good or evil, such distinction becomes irrelevant; what matters is the power itself. Power, however, is transient in this context. According to the anime mentality, anyone can become a god when they gain access to power, and sometimes multiple individuals do so simultaneously. Yet, there exists a universal order founded upon the strong desires of the collective unconscious which leads as a portrayal of God as a Holy Spirit only.

Anime critiques the God of the Old Testament, though not as intensely as it criticizes Jesus. However, it places a significant emphasis on energy, which can be associated with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps now, as people are no longer slaves, they no longer require a religion that associates humble food, humiliation, and poverty with the path to salvation (a concept

that has evolved into contemporary vegan and environmentally friendly respectable trends). Instead, there is a need for something more mystical, spiritual, freeing individuals from these now pejorative associations. Thus, starting from now, religions centered around the Holy Spirit are expected to thrive, overshadowing religions that oppress people.

Evaluating certain perspectives found in anime, it becomes apparent that the contemporary Christian ideal is often portrayed as embodying a deity linked to suffering and evil. This characterization seems to be connected to the manner in which Christians present their faith to the Japanese audience. Many anime series depict a negative image of Christians, while concurrently highlighting a profound appreciation for the moral teachings present in the Bible (Minea 2022). This duality in portrayal reflects complex perceptions of Christianity within the anime medium.

If anime conveys such notions regarding divinity, is it acceptable for Christians to partake in it? Indeed, it is. Typically, these anime productions are intended for mature audiences. Animes with more lenient age restrictions tend to endorse amicable ideas that largely bypass the profound theodicy dilemmas. They predominantly advocate values related to the significance of friendship, ardor for one's work, and other morally sound concepts upon which people from various religious backgrounds can consent.

Nevertheless, some anime works promote the idea that the world is governed by an all-encompassing wisdom. In anime like 'Sunday Without God' (2013), humans requested immortality from God, who granted their wish, only for them to realize it was a terrible curse. They found that they desired death, and God sent the 'grave keepers', a kind of priests, to bury them. Only after these grave keepers sprinkled soil over the individuals, could they find eternal rest. The protagonist of this series is Ai, which means love in Japanese. She suggests at one point that if God has abandoned the world, she will build/gouvern/make (*tsukuri*) it.

In 'Death Note' (2006), it is emphasized how dangerous it would be if gods entrusted justice to human intelligence. The main character exhibits what is known as a 'god-complex' and initiates a game of killings, the perpetrator of which is pursued by a brilliant detective. The anime becomes a challenge between geniuses who play at being gods, killing those they perceive as wrongdoers. Subsequently, they eliminate anyone who might interfere with their plans or reveal their identities, even including family members. The theme of genius is a prevalent one in anime. Initially, geniuses were often depicted as scientists contributing to a science fiction universe. Presently, genius is more often characterized as an intelligent character devising elaborate schemes and situations that elude the comprehension of other characters and often the audience as well. These individuals sometimes refer to themselves as gods, or the other characters do.

But the genius motif is not always portrayed as evil. 'Classroom of the Elite' (2017) serves as an excellent example of an anime where the main character, while not explicitly termed a god, becomes the orchestrator of all occurrences around them. Each episode commences with a quote from a notable philosopher. Besides enriching general knowledge, such anime productions encourage viewers to think and understand. Consequently, this may explain the results indicating that adolescent anime fans possess higher IQs compared to their non-anime-watching peers (Alsahly et al. 2021).

When we talk about anthropomorphic semi-gods<sup>1</sup>, there are some who are neuter or good in animes like 'Noragami' (2014) or 'Kamisama Kiss' (2012). But God as the supreme force is truly considered good when perceived merely as a source of pure power beyond dichotomies (sic!), as seen in anime like 'Shaman King', where the Great Spirit serves solely as a source of power. What becomes pivotal is who wields this power and how it is used. In 'Code Geass' (2006), for instance, the term 'collective unconscious' is utilized to refer to God, who apparently can also control time. Yet, once again, the emphasis shifts to the user of this power and the manner of its utilization. But when God is personified, it often entails a

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<sup>1</sup> In the Japanese language, there is no differentiation between 'God' and 'god'. All beings possessing divine attributes are referred to as 'Kami' (神), regardless of the extent of their divine authority.

malevolent aspect in the character's behavior, neglecting the thing that "God created being and substance, not their accidents" (Chira 2014, 26).

This concept finds manifestation in anime series such as 'Fruits Basket' (2001/2017), where the embodiment of divinity is depicted as a woman who was raised as a boy, entrusted with the governance of the zodiac animals. She holds the revered status of their deity, yet her character is marred by intense jealousy. Her antipathy towards the female members of the zodiac stems from her desire to have all the male members as her devoted admirers, essentially forming her harem. This character is portrayed as a narcissist with borderline personality disorder traits. In the culmination of the series, she undergoes a transformation, aligning her behavior with her true feminine nature and ultimately finding love with someone who had long cherished her. This exemplifies a recurring theme in anime where antropomorphic deities often possess human-mind characteristics. But can we be certain that this anime portrays God as a human rather than a suffering, not even evil, human who claims themselves a god?

### **The (D)Evil as a Character and the Character as Evil**

Within the realm of numerous anime narratives, the presence of characters engaged in malevolent deeds or embodying a demonic role is a recurrent theme. For instance, in 'Shaman King', the character Hao, the evil brother, emerges victorious in the shaman tournament, becomes one with the Great Spirit, and aspires to utilize this power for world destruction. Ultimately, Hao's brother, Yoh, along with the majority of characters and the intervention of his mother, persuades Hao to exercise patience and embrace love, thereby saving the world. It becomes apparent that Hao's resentment stems from the loss of his mother, portraying him as a wounded character.

Similarly, in 'Blue Exorcist' (2011), Rin and his brother, the sons of Satan, raised by an exorcist priest, become exorcists themselves aiming to defeat their malevolent father, illustrating that even the offspring of the devil can be good, especially if the Church takes care of them.

Contrarily, in 'Vanitas no Carte' (2021), the Church seeks to destroy vampires, demonizing them to maintain its power. However, it becomes evident that the majority of vampires are benevolent, and the truly demonic force is the Church itself, needlessly killing and tormenting them. On the opposite spectrum, in 'Demon Slayer' (2019), vampires are portrayed as malevolent, committing atrocious acts against humans, with vampire hunters striving to save humanity.

Nevertheless, there are anime scenarios such as Akuma Kun (1989/2023) where certain characters reincarnate and harness demonic power to contribute positively to the world. Additionally, instances of humor are found, as in 'The Misfit of Demon King Academy' (2020), where the Demon King is reincarnated, enrolls in a magic school where his identity is initially unrecognized, creating amusing situations. Diabolos, 'διάβολος' meaning 'to separate' in Greek, is the one who truly brings peace by preventing conflicts arising when humans, demons, spirits, and gods coexist. Anos, the main character, the Demon King, transforms his life into magic and creates barriers between these realms.

Unlike most shōnens highlighting the importance of collaboration, here, peace is achieved through separation. Symbolon (Συμβολον), the (important for religions) Greek term referring to the idea of 'bringing together' illustrates the significance of unity. But here it appears that peace is attained by the segregation of realms, not their unification, which make the religion and other symbol-and-communion-based philosophies to seem the evil ones.

In a subset of these anime narratives, a facet of a character emerges—an alter ego forged from psycho-emotional foundations. Often, due to personal suffering, characters strive to embody a malevolent role that essentially does not exist but is fervently created. Sometimes, an individual's obsession to appear divine in contrast to the surrounding evil is depicted, with evil serving the purpose of making a character seem virtuous. Examples of this theme can be found in anime like Fruits Basket, where a character who perceives themselves as a god is

essentially a person suffering from jealousy and borderline tendencies, or Death Note, where the protagonist resorts to killing his family due to a murder frenzy upon receiving divine power to enact justice by eliminating wrongdoers. Thus, we revisit psycho-emotional issues portrayed as evil, but from a different perspective than initially addressed in the preceding subsection, cyclically reiterating concepts of evil in anime across various levels and viewpoints while maintaining a similar thematic framework.

We deduce here that evil characters are usually just suffering(-masks) and what is evil it's actually their suffering and their actions, not the characters themselves, because even characters such as the son of Satan can be good. And their suffering often stems from a misguided perspective of the situations.

### **The eternity of the church vs the ephemerality of everything**

Within Christianity, distinctions between g(od) and (d)evil are clear, yet this evokes certain dogmatic errors, such as the belief that everything exists within the divine and nothing outside it, although it is not inherently evil, but evil cannot exist outside the divine, given that divinity is all-encompassing. This theory, challenging for Christians, finds natural understanding in many anime works that explore the theme. The Church promotes the idea of eternity, which in some anime universes can be perceived as eternal condemnation, implying an inability to even die. Anime rather emphasizes the concept of ephemerality, where death or life must have a meaning because everything is fleeting, like cherry blossoms, and should be cherished in the moment. Similarly, in anime, nothing is 100% evil; evil is always justified by hidden drama or a misguided perspective. Something deemed as evil is merely misunderstood or stems from suffering. Yet, wars and genocide are never fully justified in anime. These are considered the true evils in post-World War II Japanese mentality. But even these atrocities motivate people to overcome their limits, work together, strengthen family bonds or romantic relationships, and contribute to societal prosperity. The anime universe consistently seeks new perspectives on matters, avoiding definitive negative condemnations.

Typical of the (pre)post-truth era, everything is relativized; nothing is purely black or white, leading to a loss of certain values. However, this confusion can be beneficial in human evolution towards a different level of existence.

The only sources of evil are suffering, mental issues (including the desire and the act of killing) and fear, particularly the fear of losing power, a fear often attributed to religious institutions. This theme is evident in anime narratives like 'Vanitas no Carte' and resonates similarly in 'Ascendance of a Bookworm' (2019). These give birth to actions that lead the other characters to exasperation. On a phenomenological view that consents to the anime philosophy, we can say that "True evil occurs when human beings do not practice a calm and sober resistance in the face of its empirical evidence, which is aimed at protecting the world and the other, rather than maintaining a good conscience. In short, radical evil is related to the fact that I become the cause of the infinite despair of the other" (Martínez 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Within the realm of anime, several situations arise that problematize the concept of evil. Firstly, there is the portrayal of evil as psychological or emotional instability, often represented through monstrous entities. Sometimes they are known as 'curses'. These 'curses' extend beyond individual afflictions and encompass broader issues, such as environmental pollution. The post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki era in Japan witnessed a growing concern for pollution, a problem attributed to human actions, same as the abandonment of children who are left orphaned. Human activities, including war, which leads to both pollution and orphanhood, are perceived rather as inherently evil actions that are challenging to justify. Therefore, the anime universe sometimes tends to view the Supreme Being as the supreme source of this evil, either permitting or demanding such occurrences. However, this divine portrayal undergoes a subsequent transformation, depicting God as a suffering or fearful entity, offering justification for Their behaviour. Consequently, we find ourselves once more engaged in the examination

of psychological and emotional liabilities as manifestations of evil. And so, the cyclical pattern of evil in anime resumes, but in different contextual frameworks.

Anime, by its very nature, lacks inherent moral absolutes; everything is viewed through a perspectival lens and is justifiable to a certain extent. This metamorphosing perspective fundamentally reshapes the mindset of anime fans who are adepts of the Abrahamic religions, challenging classical dichotomies and the values that have been instilled in them. The anime medium serves as a crucible where traditional moral frameworks are deconstructed, fostering a more nuanced and relativistic understanding of the complexities surrounding the concept of evil. Intriguingly, this depiction often renders evil as an ephemeral and virtual entity, which takes shape only in certain perspectives, while in the others it might not exist at all. This departure from rigid moral binaries underscores the fluidity and adaptability inherent in anime's exploration of ethical dilemmas, encouraging a re-evaluation of preconceived notions within its audience, especially those instilled by Christian beliefs. Through this medium, audiences are beckoned to engage in a more discerning reflection, transcending the normative contours imposed by conventional moral narratives.

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#### BIONOTE:

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