

## **The Problem of Evil in the World**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

My understanding of the problem of evil in the world has centered on the idea of inherited and learned values. It seems that families, groups, clans, etc. that have taught their members how to effectively interact in society have produced less evil. Individuals who have taught religious, ethnic and racial tolerance have been less violent. Conversely, those groups who have taught that their religious beliefs, ethnicity, or race are the dominant, or 'correct' one have produced the most violence or evil. While my understanding of right and wrong were, to some degree, advanced by a Roman Catholic education, my basic understanding of evil transcended religion. My parents and secular teachers all added to my understanding of the definition of evil. While it is certainly true that some children from families who promoted good will committed evil, it seems that the numbers were less than those from families who taught basic societal values.

Karma-Samsara is the theodicy that I find most meaningful. While I personally do not believe in samsara, I can see that, as Livingston writes, "Every human thought and action thus has its effect and, as the Bible also affirms: as a man sows, so shall he reap." The Hindu rejection of excuses that would place blame for evil elsewhere places the responsibility for the avoidance of evil on the individual. The rationale of this Indian theodicy is plain to see since the individual has no one to praise or to blame for successes or for misfortune or suffering. The Buddhist connection with karma and samsara manifests in the 'Wheel of Life.' Every action produces its effect and the pleasant and painful consequences cannot be escaped. Perhaps the key to the avoidance of evil comes back to the idea of inherited and learned values. If the consequences of actions are understood and the positive actions promoted, evil will be less. Blaming gods or attempting to explain evil by explaining it as 'Gods will' only deflects the reasons for evil away from the perpetrators. A laissez-faire approach is destructive to society and does not address the true cause of evil.

The idea of 'right' in any given situation comes back to what we have been taught. As in Theravada Buddhism, I do not believe in gods, demons, saviors, cosmologies, heavens, or hells. I believe that in order to function in any society there are some fundamental laws that govern our behavior. Those fundamental laws have evolved as man has evolved and have been adopted by most societies and religions throughout the ages.

While groups, and even nations, have justified twisting or breaking those fundamental laws in the name of their own religion, ethnicity, or race it does not change the fundamental nature of the laws. One does not need to belong to a religious sect to recognize that it is not a good idea to steal from one's neighbor or to kill someone. The Bible has the Ten Commandments, Buddhism the Four Noble Truths, Confucianism- Filial piety, and Hinduism-Dharma and Karma, and so on. These are all noble truths in their own right and certainly worthy of study and reflection.

The Socrates' question: "Is something right because God commands it or does he command it because it is right" is a very interesting one. It seems to me that in order to examine this question we should examine the dialog between Socrates and Euthphro. Socrates generates a dilemma from this simple question posed to Euthphro. He asked, "Is the pious loved by the gods [God] because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods [God]?" Socrates suggests that if right actions are pious only because the gods love them, then moral

rightness is entirely arbitrary, depending only on the whims of the gods. In the context of the question of right, it seems that the obvious question is what if God changes his definition of right? If he does, how would we know it and what would we do? It appears that what has evolved; often supported by religion, is a universal definition of right in society. Therefore, I would have to conclude that right can exist without religion or commands from gods.

### References

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