

The Problem of Evil: Some Indian Approaches

JOY BHATTACHARYYA

Madhusudan in his famous poem on Vidyasagar describes the great soul as an ocean of kindness. Really, the stories of Vidyasagar's kindness are amazing. He would often ask the question: If God is good, how can there be evil at all? The Problem of Evil is a serious issue which Western thinkers are also concerned with. The present article is an attempt to deal with some prominent Indian approaches to this problem in different philosophical systems of Indian philosophy.

In connection with the above, we would first take into consideration the Mādhyamika and Yogāchāra approaches in the history of Buddhist Philosophy. It is known to all that Siddhartha, the prince in the royal family, became very much convinced as regards the presence of Evil in human life in the forms of advanced age (*jarā*), death (*maranā*) and disease (*byādhi*). He afterwards followed the path of renunciation in order to arrive at enlightenment (*bodhi*) regarding the world and human life. He did not do so for his own sake. On the contrary, it was for the good of mankind in general. In the very first noble truth he made everyone convinced that there is Evil in the form of suffering—*sarvam dukkham dukkham*.

In subsequent years the message of Buddha gave rise to four philosophical schools including Mādhyamika and the Yogāchāra. The former school of Buddhism

is associated with the name of Nāgārjuna—an advocate of Nihilism (*Shunyavāda*). According to the Nihilist, everything is void. Whatever there is, is ultimately devoid of essence. There is neither self nor consciousness or its object. When there is no self, there is also no question of its suffering from evil. There is neither good nor evil to experience.

The Nihilist's explanation does not satisfy us. Existence of Evil as suffering can hardly be denied. So the theory denying Evil as a naught is not acceptable. So let us consider the other Buddhist theory of the Yogāchāra School. The Yogāchāra School advocates subjective idealism. It accepts the reality of (momentary) consciousness alone. This school does not agree with the Nihilist School on this point, that everything is ultimately devoid of essence. Yogāchāra, on the contrary, believes in the reality of the self—that is again of the nature of consciousness. It is a firm conviction of this school that the so-called object of consciousness is inseparable from consciousness. A jar as divorced from consciousness can never be thought of. A jar is invariably known as an object of consciousness. So distinctness of an object of consciousness cannot ultimately be proved. Consciousness alone is there. Everything else, good or bad, is only a manifestation of consciousness. Evil is thus looked upon by the Yogācharā School as

absolutely subjective—as being dependent upon consciousness. A dreadful dream causes pain to the dreamer. Here both the dream-object and pain are entirely subjective. In all so-called cases of Evil there is actually no objective reference. Evil is only a construction of consciousness. The Yogāchāra account of Evil does not, however, satisfy a realist. In this context we are certainly reminded of the Nyāya-Vaishesika and Sāmkhya-Yoga positions. The Nyāya account of Evil in the form of suffering may be considered first.

Nyāya refuses to recognize the Nihilist view of Evil on the simple ground that Evil is a hard fact and not a fiction. Everyone in this world and in the other world has experiences of Evil in the form of pain. ‘I am unhappy’, ‘I have a pain’—these are all very common experiences. Hence it is not at all right to discard Evil as an absolute naught. An absolute nothing such as a hare’s horn can never be an object of knowledge. But Evil in the form of pain is a very common experience among men and women under bondage.

The Yogāchāra-understanding of Evil as purely subjective does not also satisfy the Naiyāyika. A firm conviction of this school is that Evil has quite a solid objective basis, though it is a fact that pain as a special quality of the self inheres in the self. Pain is caused by something extraneous to the self. So Evil cannot be said to be entirely subjective. In this context an important point has to be kept in mind. The disembodied self is beyond pleasure or pain, good or evil. The embodied self alone is under the sway of good and evil. The basic reason behind this is that the specific contact of the self with the body enables the self to suffer or enjoy. For this reason the body is described in Nyāya as the abode of enjoyment and suffering (*bhogāyatanam*).

However, the Evil from which an embodied self suffers is neither an absolute naught nor anything subjective. In fact Evil is real and suffering caused by it is also real. Mundane experience of suffering is a fact and not fiction. But behind this pessimistic thought Nyāya certainly upholds an optimistic view. Evil is neither an absolute naught nor eternal. Eternity of Evil is quite inadmissible. Had Evil been eternal, there would never occur any experience of happiness. But there are no doubt experiences of pleasure or happiness. Even a street beggar has inner perception of happiness when a kind person offers him some money instead of a coin. The Naiyāyika argues that at that time the man enjoys pleasure and has no experience of Evil—at least for some time. This proves beyond doubt that the Evil we suffer from is not eternal.

In this connection it may also be mentioned that in almost all Indian systems of philosophy Evil is not the final word at all. The systems do emphasize the point that absolute release from Evil in all possible forms is possible and absolute release (*mukti, moksha* or *apavarga*) is the highest good (*parama purushārtha*) for all beings in this world or the other world. Is not then heaven entirely free from Evil? The answer is negative. In the *Katha Upanishad* Nachiketa describes heaven as a place where one can enjoy pleasure having transcended pain (*shokātigo modate svargaloke*). But Shankara points out that his words need not be taken as absolute. Heaven is actually relatively free from Evil but it is not absolutely so. Various stories in the Purānas and the Upa-purānas corroborate this. Even the deities are much troubled and disturbed by the evil spirits (demons etc).

The Nyāya account of Evil in heaven may also be discussed here in short. Good is

obtainable through good deeds and Evil has to be suffered from because of bad deeds. Vedic sacrifices as good deeds, of course, result in attainment of heaven. But the cruel act of killing an animal on this occasion gives rise to Evil in heaven. So even in heaven one has to accept Evil as a hard truth. Thus the Naiyāyikas, by and large, hold that like *artha* and *kāma*, *dharma* (religious duties) is also relatively good (*preya*—to borrow the word from *Katha Upanishad*). Absolute release (*apavarga*) from Evil is considered the highest good by the Naiyāyikas.

How does a Naiyāyika deal with the problem of Evil in general? He is a strong believer in God or the Supreme Self. God is said to be the creator of the world at large. But God has got no purpose of His own behind His creation. In order to enable beings to enjoy the fruits of their good and bad deeds God creates the world. But God is not responsible for the fruits of actions. When a man performs an action with attachment towards the fruit of actions, the man accumulates *adrishta*. The same includes both merit (*dharma*) and demerit (*adharma*). Through merit, one avails oneself of some good. Through demerit one invites Evil. Thus Evil owes its origin to man's bad deeds. Suffering thus becomes inevitable. But Evil is not the final thing. Nyāya believes in absolute cessation of Evil. In Liberation there is neither good nor evil because a liberated self transcends both.

We are now in a position to discuss the Sāmkhya-Yoga view of Evil. While Naiyāyika is a moderate realist accepting Evil as non-eternal, Sāmkhya is a radical realist emphasizing eternity of Evil. How? Let us now analyze the Sāmkhya position. The Sāmkhya system is frankly dualistic. It accepts consciousness and matter as realities. Self is of the nature of

consciousness and is called *Purusha*. The other reality is *Prakriti* or *Pradhāna*, the primordial matter. Thus *Purusha* and *Prakriti* are two ultimate realities in Sāmkhya metaphysics.

It is important to note here that *Prakriti* is said to be of the nature of three *gunas*—namely, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The term *guna* is used in the system in a specific sense to mean the constituent of *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is constituted by three *gunas*. Of the three, *sattva* is of the nature of pleasure and whatever is noble is the modification of *sattva*. *Rajas* is of the nature of pain. Moreover *rajas* is in essence restlessness. *Tamas* is of the nature of nescience. Thus Evil is the nature of *rajas*. In so far as Evil is concerned, *sattva guna* is not a cause of worry.

The basic point to be noted in this connection is that according to Sāmkhya, Evil is very much objective since it is within the very nature of the object. Why does Sāmkhya say so?

All objects without exception are modifications of *Prakriti*. As we have already mentioned, *Prakriti* is of the nature of three *gunas*. It is a firm conviction of the Sāmkhya School that Evil in the form of *rajas* is certainly there in the object. According to Sāmkhya, *Purusha* or Self being essentially pure transcends good and evil. But Evil is very much there. Where is it located? Sāmkhya tells us that just as good is there in the object, so also is Evil. A jar is a source of pleasure for one but simultaneously it can be a source of evil for another.

The Sāmkhya classification of pain is not out of place here. Sāmkhya mentions three types of pain—*ādhyātmi*ka, *ādhibhautika* and *ādhidai*vika. The first kind is again of two kinds—physical and mental (*shāriram* and *mānasam*). A special

feature of the first kind is that the source of Evil is located within the individual concerned. When one is physically ill or when one is mentally troubled, one is affected by the Evil of the first kind.

The Evil of the second kind is *ādhibhautika*. This is Evil in the form of suffering caused by others. The source of Evil is there in the external world. Other persons, like enemies, may disturb one by creating problems. An animal may attack and cause pain. Thus the Evil of the second kind comes to one from outside. The third kind is *ādhidāivika*. This type of Evil is caused by stars, demons, storms, floods etc. The basic point to be noted here is that according to Sāṃkhya all evils are objective and those are never creations of the mind as the Yogācāra School thinks.

Now if Evil is objective and eternal, as being the nature of *rajas*, how can there be absolute release from suffering? Does not Sāṃkhya also accept Liberation (*kaivalya*) as the highest good? A subtle difference between Nyāya thought and Sāṃkhya thought is to be noted here.

It is known to us that Nyāya accepts *abhāva* (absence) as real, one kind of which is due to destruction (*dhamsābhāva*). Nyāya explains Liberation in terms of absence of Evil after it is destroyed. But Sāṃkhya does not believe in negation (*abhāva*). Sāṃkhya cannot, therefore, explain Liberation in terms of negation of Evil. Sāṃkhya tells us that actually Evil is only minimized in Liberation. The tiny spark of fire of the incense stick cannot cause serious burns. It cannot seriously do any harm. Thus in Sāṃkhya, Liberation is minimization of Evil though Evil is not absolutely negated. For Sāṃkhya, Liberation (technically called *kaivalya*) actually stands for minimization of pain of all the three kinds mentioned above. Thus, according to Sāṃkhya, Evil is never a

construction of *buddhi*; it is certainly there, being present in all objects, including *buddhi* itself. Incidentally, we may mention that *buddhi* is the first modification (*parināma*) of *Prakṛiti*. Hence it is obvious that *buddhi* is of the nature of three *gunas* mentioned earlier. *Purusha* or the Self is of course free from three *gunas*. Non-discrimination of Self and non-Self (*Purusha* and *Prakṛiti*) makes one ascribe good and evil to the Self. But the Self in its essence is affected by neither. It is transcendental in nature.

We now propose to discuss the Advaita view of Evil. It must be noted at the very outset that Advaita neither discards Evil as an absolute naught nor regards Evil as real. Eternity is the other name of reality—this is what Advaita repeatedly points out. Evil is not real for the simple reason that it is not eternal. Non-eternity of Evil guarantees attainment of Liberation or *Moksha*—the *summum bonum* of life.

Advaita points out that Evil is only empirically real but ultimately false. Self is transcendental in nature and therefore neither good nor evil is ascribable to Self which is none other than Brahman. But when under bondage, one becomes a hapless victim of Evil. No Evil can actually affect a realized Self. The Advaitin upholds the view that Evil is at best empirically real. It is real from the worldly point of view but from the ultimate angle there is no such thing as Evil. It is nescience (*avidyā*) alone that is the fundamental evil as it is the cause of bondage. When in bondage, one has to accept evil, suffer from evil—and obviously one does not like to suffer from evil.

How can suffering come to an end? When the cause of suffering is removed, suffering also ceases to be there. The cause of suffering is nescience and the same can be removed only by wisdom or Self-knowledge. Wisdom is the highest form of

knowledge since it is knowledge of the Truth. Advaita believes in the Self alone.

In conclusion, however, we may mention that most systems in Indian philosophy hold the view that nescience or false knowledge about the real nature of the Self is the fundamental evil from which other evils spring. Nyāya, for example, holds the false knowledge of the twelve metaphysical categories responsible for our bondage; because of these we face all evils. Sāmkhya philosophy contends that non-discriminative knowledge (*aviveka*) of Self (*Purusha*) and non-Self (*Prakriti*) is the

worst evil because of which there is suffering from all other evils. Thus we see that most systems in Indian philosophy put emphasis upon the point that the worst Evil one needs to fight against is *avidyā*, *aviveka* or *mithyājñāna*. The sole weapon to fight Evil with is Wisdom, as distinguished from other kinds of knowledge. Through devotion and non-attachment our mind gets purified. Purification of mind happens to be a prerequisite for attainment of Wisdom. Wisdom leads to absolute release from all evils. ■

* Dr Joy Bhattacharyya teaches Indian Philosophy in different courses of the Institute.

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There is another thing specially in modern Vedanta which Swami Vivekananda greatly stressed. There are people outside. See them. Go and do something for them. Once a man came and asked for instructions on meditation. 'O, my mind is all dry', he said. 'How are you practising meditation?' 'Oh, I go to my room, close all the doors and windows and then practise meditation.' 'Open the windows. See outside. There are so many needy people outside. Do something for them and then you will see how you will open up'. So when a dry period comes, that is one of the solutions. Let God go for a while. Let me as a human being see another human being and do something for him. A human being is not merely a human being. He is God Himself. You may not know it. Unknowingly, you have done something for God.

Once a devotee was complaining about a dry period and many problems at home, all at the same time. Nothing could be done. During the course of the day he had to visit

a sick person. By the time he returned home, all his feelings of dryness were gone. Some sort of service to others helps you break the ego-centric state. Mahatma Gandhi used to say, when such things come, go and gaze at the stars. Sometimes taking a brisk walk is also helpful. These are all small steps. Considering all, it seems to me, yoga is the best. Somehow make a communion with God. Send out a desperate cry—God, take care of me, or God, you alone have to do it all. I am not going to do anything. You do whatever you like. This is what Rāmānuja calls complete offering of oneself. When desperation comes, let it come. Try and your Lord will be there, as surely as a mother comes to her child's aid. Whatever the child may have done, it knows that the mother is not going to desert it. The devotee feels the same way because, he knows that it's just there (here Maharaj points at his own chest). Advaita Vedanta says, it is not coming from anywhere else. ■

* Swami Prabuddhananda (1929-2014) was Minister-in-Charge of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco. The article is based on an informal talk given on 19 June 1988, at the Vedanta Society of St. Louis.