

Panentheism and the Nature of Evil

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Panentheism in brief is: "The whole is in God." This means that the universe and God are not ontologically equivalent. Panentheism views God as the eternal animating force behind the universe, while the universe is nothing more than a manifest part of God. The cosmos exists within God, who in turn "pervades" or is "in" the cosmos. While pantheism asserts that God and the universe are coextensive, panentheism claims that God is greater than the universe and that the universe is contained within God (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panentheism>).

Panentheism is a philosophy that was first articulated in 1828 by the German philosopher Karl Krause. More recently, this position has been reflected in the works of writers such as Franklin Merrell-Wolff (Philosophy of Consciousness-without-an-Object), Lynne McTaggart (The Field), Amit Goswami (The Self-Aware Universe) and Robert Lanza (Biocentrism). The central feature of these views is the *primacy of consciousness*. Consciousness is construed as a unified field of consciousness (UFC), which some would equate with God. The UFC is IT. Everything material is a manifestation of the UFC, which creates an apparent dualism between matter and spirit (consciousness). Life plays an important role in this apparent dualism, which depends on subject/object relationships, which require a perceiving organism. However, this apparent dualism is an illusion albeit a necessary one.

The question naturally arises as to why the material universe and subject/object relationships exist. Goswami's writing implies that they exist to provide the UFC with an experiential context. Creation of an experiential context suggests that the UFC is engaged in self-development. The material universe then is an artifact of consciousness that has rendered a portion of itself ignorant of the rest so that dualistic representations of itself can interact. One might think of the material universe as a canvas created by an artist for the development of his or her creative talents. In short, the dynamic interactions that we think of as life are permutations of subject/object relations grounded in the UFC. Ultimately speaking, subject and object are ONE and the material universe is an illusion.

Human beings represent an important component of the material world simply because their capabilities greatly expand the range of experience possible. The key component governing most subject/object interactions involving human beings is ego. Ego is the identity cloaking that portion of the UFC manifest in human form. The development of ego draws a veil between self and the UFC, thereby creating the dualistic illusion of me and not me. Everything animate and non-animate beyond one's self-awareness is not me.

Good and evil, therefore, represent a dualistic pair of categories that can be applied to intentional actions by ego in the material world. From the perspective of panentheism, this dichotomy too is ultimately an illusion because the UFC is beyond good and evil since it is a spiritual singularity. However, it is a very "real" dichotomy for individuals lacking direct experience of the UFC and therefore awareness of the illusion. If the UFC created the material universe in order to impose a counterpoint to itself for the purpose of gaining experience, then the "struggle" between good and evil would appear to be an important and necessary dimension of experience.

In other terms, good and evil can be thought of as the difference between enlightened actions and actions grounded in ignorance. When construed this way, actions grounded in ignorance blind one to one's true nature, that is, as an aspect of the UFC or God. Thus, evil arises out of spiritual ignorance

that leads one to invest one's sense of being in ego. Life then consists of each individual's struggle to overcome ignorance and thereby achieve enlightenment. This dichotomy between enlightenment and ignorance might be thought of as a bipolar construct where one end is anchored by selflessness and the other end is anchored by selfishness or, conversely, egolessness versus egotism. The further one's identity falls toward the selfishness or egotism end of the scale the greater one's ignorance and the potential for evil actions.

An interviewer at the Nuremberg trials for Nazi war criminals was asked if he had learned anything from his interviews. He replied that what he had learned was that evil was the total absence of empathy. Empathy can be construed as the ability to expand one's sense of "me" to include others. Carried to its logical conclusion, this inclusive expansion submerges ego and becomes selflessness, which is the antithesis of "me" or ego. True selflessness requires the perfection of consciousness which requires the expansion of empathy that leads to a life grounded in compassion and love.

Evil then in this scheme of reasoning arises from attempts to gratify ego desires. Desire is what one wants as distinct from what one needs. One needs shelter but wants a penthouse apartment on Affluence Avenue. Desires are rooted in status seeking, righteousness, jealousy, lust, pride, power, honor, envy, fame and fortune along with many other similar obstacles to the expansion of empathy, spiritual development and enlightenment. When objects are perceived by ego as merely means to satisfy desire, they have no inherent value independent of one's use of them. People, animals, plants, physical elements are all treated as objects for satisfying one's desires. The desires of ego are an expression of ignorance and the source of evil in the world. Satan, in Christian theology, might be thought of as the personification of ego desire. Thus, to be consumed by the fires of ego desire is, metaphorically speaking, to be in Hell.

Treating self as an object is the initial step leading to treating others as objects. Think of this initial step as becoming an image manager. We are almost all image managers to some degree. The greater the degree to which we engage in image management the greater the extent of our self-absorption. An image manager desires to be viewed by self and others in a particular persona. Sometimes one has an intentionally constructed public persona and a private persona that differ from one another. Both will involve some degree of deception. A public persona deceives others while the private persona deceives self. Self-deception perpetuates ignorance, which can only be avoided by not treating self as an object.

The image manager makes choices that are believed to maintain or enhance his or her self-image or self-conception. A self-image can embody a positive or negative persona depending upon the purposes that it serves. Self-image can affect choices about things that include but aren't limited to one's personal narrative, physical appearance, possessions, public behavior, employment, social and intimate relationships. Image management is about "ME." I'm an important person, I have authority, I'm no good, I'm a victim, I'm beautiful, I'm handsome, I'm entitled, I'm helpless, I'm popular or even I'm spiritual, among many others. Once one has a "ME" narrative, then that narrative begins to control much of what one does. An image manager is self-absorbed and to be self-absorbed implies that one has a selfish identity. Thus, while it might be argued that image management itself isn't especially evil, at best it is probably a symptom of susceptibility to engaging in evil action.

Evil is not dependent upon any particular act but rather on the intent of the actor. To do harm to another individual unintentionally is not evil. The same harm resulting from an intentional act committed in the service of ego desire is evil. Graduations of evil or ignorant actions depend upon how damaging to "objects" are satisfaction of the egotist's desires. If the harm is not physical but psychological, such as causing embarrassment to someone in order to satisfy an ego desire for revenge, the act is evil. It is evil because it is action in the service of ego desire. It puts one's wants ahead of other considerations. If the

harm is economic, such as stealing property from someone in order to satisfy an ego desire for material goods, the act is evil. If the harm is physical, such as causing injury to someone in order to gain an advantage in a contest for some desired outcome, the act is evil. If the harm is mortal, such as killing someone for money, the act is evil. While all of these examples meet the criterion for evil or ignorant action, there is a difference in degree between them. Intentionally, causing someone a negative and temporary emotional state, like embarrassment, will in general be a lesser degree of evil than stealing goods or money from someone, causing someone a physical injury or killing someone to satisfy an ego desire. Evil of whatever degree is subject to escalation through the power of an egoist to impose desire broadly.

Take someone willing to cause psychological damage in the service of ego desire and give that person power and the evil will be multiplied. For example, a politician wants to diminish the status of a group that the politician thinks is inferior. The politician advances a piece of legislation intended to humiliate the group that the politician sees as inferior. Possibly only a psychological harm has been done, but it is a greater evil than the psychological harm done to a single individual due to the leverage gained by exercising political power. Likewise, take a business person who systematically steals from each customer by using a biased weighing scale. The systematic theft from a large number of people constitutes a greater evil than a small theft from a single individual. Further, causing injury to a large number of people such as causing a crowded bus to crash so that one can profit from the injuries, for example, by acting on behalf of the passengers in a tort against the bus company, is a greater evil than causing an injury to a single person. Finally, using a position of leadership to enact a campaign of extermination on a group of people, is a greater evil than killing a single person for profit. All are greater evils than comparable solitary acts simply due to the multiplicative effect of power in the service of ego desire though the degree of ignorance behind solitary and group actions are similar.

The examples are not exhaustive but simply illustrate different kinds of acts and their escalation through power. All of the acts arise from ignorance and qualify as evil though clearly there are differences of degree amongst them. It is probably possible to generate specific examples about which the relative merits might be argued but they are beside the point. The point is simply to illustrate that there is in some manner of speaking a continuum of sorts along which one might arrange acts of evil with varying degrees of precision. While all actions in the service of ego desire arise from ignorance, they are, by definition, evil even though there are lesser and greater evils amongst them.

Another consideration is complicity in evil through support for or ignoring the action of others, the outcomes of which serve one's own ego desires. Persons who stand by and watch an assault have to some degree identified with the aggressor and vicariously gratified an ego desire and are complicit in the assault. Residents in a community may remain silent about known thefts, beatings or killings by other members of the community because they identify with the perpetrators. Through their identification they vicariously gratify their own desires and are thereby complicit in the acts. An interest group that supports the pillage of another group through legislative acts and thereby satisfy ego desire is complicit in the theft. A social group that acquiesces in the genocide of another group within its population because the extermination is compatible with its own collective ego desire and thereby obtains vicarious satisfaction, if not direct benefit, is complicit in the extermination. In such cases the "bystanders" are not innocent but passive partners in evil actions and thereby bear part of the burden of such evil. In short, evil actions cannot be avoided by letting someone else engage in them on your behalf.

The above examples are largely focused on actions motivated by negative intentions. A further consideration are acts that take on the appearance of being motivated by good intentions. Surely, there

are selfless acts motivated by good intentions. However, the criterion for evil offered herein pertains to acts motivated by ego desire. To offer one example, an individual takes on the goal of providing assistance to farmers who are not making an adequate income from their efforts. This individual creates an organization and undertakes a campaign to raise money on behalf of the farmers so that lobbying efforts with government on their behalf can be undertaken. First, it must be recognized that the only way that new resources to help the failing farmers can be obtained is by government taking them from someone else, which does economic damage to those who involuntarily give up resources to the government. Thus, our lobbyist is encouraging taking from others in order to support his or her interest group. Second, our lobbyist also draws an attractive income from the funds raised on behalf of the farmers by the lobbying organization. In addition, the lobbyist gains status with the farmers, those who contribute to the lobbying organization and politicians who are engaged by the lobbyist through campaign contributions and other support. Ego desire for wealth, prestige and influence underlie this activity and make it, at root, an evil enterprise even if it benefits the failing farmers. A benefit that accrues as a result of actions motivated by ego desire does not justify the actions or neutralize the evil.

An effort that would be good intentioned and less likely to involve ego desire would be a charitable organization. In such an effort, the above individual would create a charity that raises resources by voluntary means to assist the failing farmers. The individual also donates his or her time to this charitable effort and deflects credit for the aid to all those who donated time or money to the charity. This is an effort in which the farmers and the contributors are much less likely to be mere objects used to mediate the ego desires of an individual or of a group.

So far the emphasis has been on the manipulation of "objects" in the service of ego desire or wants. A question can be raised about evil and the satisfaction of needs. This poses a fundamental question about natural rights. In the earlier instances described, there probably are few who would argue that the actors were exercising any fundamental right. However, when a mountain lion kills a deer for food, we would not describe this action as evil. It is the natural right of the lion to acquire sustenance from its environment. In the case of human beings, it might also be argued that they have a natural right to meet their life sustaining needs.

To explore this idea let's posit a very basic conflict situation. There is a group of people living in famine conditions. Some of these people have prepared for this eventuality and have stores of food. Others have not prepared or have been unable to prepare for this eventuality through no fault of their own. If those who have stores refuse to share with those who don't have stores, at least some of those without stores will starve. There is little doubt in this situation that those without stores have a real life sustaining need. There are several possibilities in this situation. The most desirable would be for those with stores to empathize with those without stores to the extent that they are willing to undertake a proportioning of the food and accept any hardship that accrues to them from doing so. Suppose though that the ones with stores are not empathetic and are unwilling to share. Would taking food from those who have stores be considered evil? As a last resort, one could argue that a human animal has the same natural rights as a lion and taking its sustenance by force is no more evil than the taking by the lion. Evil would be avoided, however, only by using no more force than is necessary, taking only the minimum that is needed or a fair apportionment whichever is less and engaging in no retribution. Even so, an enlightened individual would recognize that the situation is simply one "act" in an evolving human drama intended to provide opportunities to overcome ignorance. Thus, such an enlightened individual might refuse to participate in the drama and accept starvation. By doing so, the enlightened individual maintains detachment from the drama of the material world while serving as an example to those with and without stores and possibly contributing to their spiritual advancement.

Finally, there is the general question of how should one respond to evil action? This will depend upon the development of one's sense of selflessness. Someone operating from the selfish side of the identity scale will respond in-kind and strike back in anger with a desire for revenge and perpetuating ignorance. This is the morality of retribution. If a direct response isn't possible or avoided out of fear, the object of the evil action may at least harbor ill will (hatred) toward the perpetrator, which will also serve to perpetuate ignorance. In the case of a response to an unprovoked action engaged in for defensive reasons even if the defensive actions are in-kind, they are not evil. A purely reflexive defensive action may be grounded in ignorance but it isn't an intentional attempt to satisfy ego desire. Ignorant because the defender has not learned the negative moral implications of emotionally motivated in-kind, counter-aggression. This is, of course, the way the majority of human beings can be expected to act, which often leads to an escalating cycle of response and counter-response. Ignorance follows the path of least resistance and ignorance is the soil in which evil takes root.

A person operating from the middle of the scale will probably engage in defensive counter-aggression but without emotional content. In other words, an emotionally detached response is more likely to be a constrained response. Someone operating from the selfless side of the identity scale will recognize the evil nature of the "attack" and the need for a measured response. Such an individual will engage in counter-aggression as a last resort and will then only do so with emotional detachment. This is not unlike the concept of warrior-priests like the Chinese Shaolin, who legend has it first used moral authority, paradoxical responses, persuasion and acceptance when the object of evil action. Direct action was only taken to protect life. These priests were alleged to have the skills necessary to respond in a graduated manner that never employed more counter-force than was necessary. This graduated and minimal defense was made possible by complete emotional detachment and thereby without investment of ego in the response. Such an individual would have a well developed understanding of the nature of evil and how to make a humane response to it. Finally, a fully selfless and enlightened person who is the object of evil action might embrace and absorb the action to the point of physical annihilation, knowing that the action cannot do any real injury and recognizing that such a response to evil may serve as an instructional demonstration.

In conclusion, an undeveloped or under-developed sense of empathy is clearly an obstacle to spiritual growth. Thus, being ruled by ego desire and thereby satisfying one's wants through treating everything that is "not me" as an object with no purpose but to serve one's desires blocks the path to spiritual development. To open the path to spiritual development requires a freely made choice to let go of attachments to wants and expand one's sense of empathy through identification and perspective taking until ignorance and selfishness are crowded out by love and compassion. When the spiritual path is freely embraced one has taken one giant step toward perfection of consciousness, selflessness and enlightenment.