

DOES EVIL EXIST?

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It has become commonplace for Baha'is to cite one verse from one conversation that 'Abdu'l-Baha had with one believer as the definitive answer to a perennial question, namely, "Does evil exist?" This one verse is: "It is thus evident that all evil is mere non-existence. Good has a positive existence; evil is merely its absence."

Baha'is don't actually believe that evil does not exist. They believe that there are thoughts, feelings and actions that are evil. And that evil thoughts, feelings and actions have negative consequences...they hurt people. If they have been treated unfairly, brutally, and particularly if the person who mistreated them did so without repentance, and with a cavalier attitude towards the effects of their behavior, they know that evil exists. Anyone who has a child knows that evil exists, and knows that every responsible parent will do the best possible to protect their child from evil.

But not everybody is on the same page with this understanding. The parents of children in Gaza do not believe that Hamas is evil...they believe that Israel is evil. And the parents of children in Israel believe the opposite. The same for parents in Russia and parents in Ukraine. This is not just a matter of our time in history...it has always been so. What is evil to one person is good to another.

I don't like to say this, because I believe in a universal and objective standard for distinguishing evil from good. But I am in the minority. Most people believe that their personal standard is universal and objective! The 98% of the German electorate who approved of Adolf Hitler becoming the absolute ruler of their country believed that his abhorrence of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, communists and all those who associate with them was justified. These people were agents of evil, and if they could be made to disappear, so much the better for the good people. It would be so nice if we could say that the Germans were wrong and we are right. But as long as we believe in evil only if that belief benefits us, we are deceiving ourselves.

'Abdu'l-Baha begins His first talk on the subject of evil with these prescient words: "To explain the truth of this matter is difficult indeed." (see below) To be objective and to look at the question of evil not only from a human perspective but from the "God's eye" point of view is difficult because we are so adamant to retain our personal beliefs.

'Abdu'l-Baha continues: "Know that created things are of two kinds: material and spiritual, sensible and intelligible. That is, some are perceptible to the senses, while others are only perceived by the mind." His

argument throughout this talk is that evil has no spiritual existence. In other words, there is no spiritual existence to evil.

That is a huge statement, and one that contrasts with the teachings of all the major religions. Zoroastrians believed in two spiritual powers – Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu(1), also called Ahriman (2). Jews believed in two spiritual powers – G-d and Satan, also associated with evil spirits called “shedim” and “se’irim”. Christians believed in two spiritual powers – The Father and Satan, also associated with evil spirits called “daimon”. Muslims believed in two spiritual powers – Allah and Satan, also associated with evil spirits called Iblis or ash-Shayṭān, also associated with evil spirits called “shayāṭīn”. Hinayana Buddhists believed in two kinds of spiritual powers – Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who were positive and Mara, which is negative, while Mahayana Buddhists believed in two kinds of spiritual powers – Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and dharmapāla(3), who are positive, and likewise Mara, which is negative, also associated with evil spirits called Asuras and Rakshasas. Hindus believed in a multiplicity of deities originally led by Varuna, that are called devas or adityas(4), and a host of negative spirits including those called Danavas which were originally led by Vritra.

And you may be thinking to yourself that it is going to be hard to convince followers of these religions, who account for more than half of the world’s people, of the Baha’i teaching that evil has no spiritual reality. Yes, and it is precisely because this teaching is so revolutionary that it must be carefully understood and explained to those who are encountering the Baha’i Faith for the first time.

If evil spirits existed, in the real world, that is, apart from mythology and fantasy, where they may serve some positive role, then that means that either God was co-creator of the world, with the other creator being Satan, or that God created evil. The first idea conflicts with monotheism, which has been integral to the Faith espoused by Jews, Christians and Muslims – who make up half of the world’s people – and the second idea makes God responsible for the existence of evil, and not only in this world but potentially in every world. Since we monotheists don’t want to believe in either of these doctrines, we are looking for something else. It follows that, at least for us, ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s teaching that “It is thus evident that all evil is mere non-existence” is attractive.

But it doesn’t explain the reality of evil that you and I encounter in the world. If that evil is not spiritual, then what is it? ‘Abdu’l-Baha points to the solution when He said: “Know that created things are of two kinds: material and spiritual, sensible and intelligible.” Spiritual reality is not experienced through the senses, which is why scientists can deny its existence. It follows that if evil exists at all then it has a material reality. But doesn’t material reality come from God along with spiritual reality? Yes it does. And so does “free will”. God created human beings with “free will” because we are created in His “image and likeness”(5). If we do not have “free will” then we are not created in His “image and likeness”,

because we are missing an important attribute of God. Do you recall those many references to “He doeth whatsoever He willeth” in the Baha’i Writings, and in the Qur’an? That means that God has “free will”. Because we have “free will” we can choose to do good or to do evil. We are not forced by God to do either one or the other. Baha’u’llah states: “All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition.”(6) Volition implies “free will”. It implies that we can choose to do what will not manifest “all that which [we] potentially possess”. And there is not one of us who doesn’t know that from our experience of life.

By the way, not to sidetrack but to remove an error that has confused people for thousands of years, the text of Genesis says that God created human beings in His image and likeness. That doesn’t mean that He looks like us, that He is male or female, that He is hermaphroditic, that He has the characteristics of human beings or the characteristics of our fantasies. It means that just as God is Spirit, we are spirit. And He says that in Genesis too: “[7](#)And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”(7) It is that “living soul” that makes human beings like God and not like any of His other creations.

The fundamental choice, the most important one that exists is the choice between doing what is good and doing what is evil. There are an infinite number of choices which we make that are all good. We may think that those choices are “good or bad” but in reality, in spiritual reality they aren’t. They are all good. The choice to do evil is not spiritually motivated. We may like to say “the devil made me do it” but, he didn’t because he doesn’t exist. You made that choice, and you have to pay the consequences for having made that choice. You may blame it on your parents, on your upbringing, on your teachers, on your bosses, but you did evil and you always had a choice, because you are created by God with that capacity.

Evil has a material existence which is real and which has consequences. Some day we can talk about consequences in detail. For every cause there is an effect, for every action there is a reaction. When we look around us and we see evil everywhere, we should not have any doubt about who is responsible for that evil – it is not God, it is not Satan, it is us. I am not implying that any of us have responsibility for the sins of our forefathers and foremothers, or for the evil committed by other people who are still living. That would be contrary to another attribute of God – justice. It is contrary to justice that we should pay for the choice of evil by others. And it also contradicts another attribute of God – mercy. He loves us. As Baha’u’llah wrote: “I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.” He created us with love, and if we return that love and “of [our] own volition” seek to manifest “all that which [we] potentially possess” then He promises to “fill thy soul with the spirit of life”. But I already have life, so why would I need another life? Because the fullness of human life is not that which we were given what God bestows upon us when we make every

effort to develop it. It is what we do with it that makes all the difference. Ever read Jesus talking about the “second birth”? Did you know that Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote a lot about it?

Not to pick on Adolf Hitler, but because his life furnishes a picture of the choice that is for each of us to make...ever since childhood Adolf’s father wanted him to be a civil servant like himself. It seemed to Daddy that this would provide a stable income for him whatever he might choose to do. And for as far back as he could remember, Adolf wanted to be a painter. With a burning desire like this, who knows what he might have accomplished. Now mind you, some people blame Adolf’s subsequent choice of profession on his being turned down twice by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. But we know that he freely chose to leave behind painting and take up genocidal dictatorship. Sure, he was influenced by all sorts of material factors, but the ultimate choice was his to make. And that is why we can hold him accountable for that choice. More importantly, that is why God holds him accountable for his choice.

This perspective is radically different not only from traditional religious teachings – as we have seen – but also from the materialism that has prevailed with increasing power and inclusiveness throughout the world. Materialism believes that human behavior can be altered only by physical factors. Karl Marx’s philosophy is far more popular than we may imagine. It blames everything that has gone wrong on other people. And it insists that only by either getting rid of those people or changing them in a fundamental way can rectify the problem. But they found that it was a lot easier to get rid of them than change them, and hence the death tolls racked up in communist countries, including wherever communists have tried but failed to take over countries. As for their record in changing people, they were temporarily successful in taking over the education of children, but as soon as the children grew up and could make decisions for themselves, they made other choices, they broke with their upbringing and embraced the opposite. It is their choice of unfettered capitalism which has made China one of the richest countries in the world, not the success of communism.

If we are accountable for our choices and cannot achieve our potential except through our own volition, through our own actions, and if the standard for good and evil is set by God, then we must inform ourselves of God’s Will for us. Otherwise, there is no objective standard for good and evil. Billions of people believe that the standard for good and evil is set by their religious and secular leaders, and all of us are taught to believe that from early infancy. Someone else is in charge. There is truth to that, because others have influence over us, but the greater truth is that God is in charge, has been, will always be. And He created us with “free will”. That is why He says:

“The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor.

Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”

(1) In the Avestan language.

(2) In the Pahlavi language.

(3) Guardian spirits who protect Buddhists from evil.

(4) Three of these Hindu deities have received the most press in the West – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

(5) "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.' So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26)

(6) Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, LXXVII.

(7) Genesis 2:7.

For the text of both talks by ‘Abdu’l-Baha on this topic:

To explain the truth of this matter is difficult indeed. Know that created things are of two kinds: material and spiritual, sensible and intelligible. That is, some are perceptible to the senses, while others are only perceived by the mind.

Sensible realities are those which are perceived by the five outer senses: So, for example, those outward things which the eye sees are called sensible. Intelligible realities are those which have no outward existence but are perceived by the mind. For example, the mind itself is an intelligible reality and has no outward existence. Likewise, all human virtues and attributes have an intelligible rather than a sensible existence; that is, they are realities that are perceived by the mind and not by the senses.

Briefly, intelligible realities such as the praiseworthy attributes and perfections of man are purely good and have a positive existence. Evil is simply their non-existence. So ignorance is the want of knowledge, error is the want of guidance, forgetfulness is the want of remembrance, foolishness is the want of understanding: All these are nothing in themselves and have no positive existence.

As for sensible realities, these are also purely good, and evil is merely their non-existence; that is, blindness is the want of sight, deafness is the want of hearing, poverty is the want of wealth, illness is the want of health, death is the want of life, and weakness is the want of strength.

Now, a doubt comes to mind: Scorpions and snakes are poisonous—is this good or evil, for they have a positive existence? Yes, it is true that scorpions and snakes are evil, but only in relation to us and not to themselves, for their venom is their weapon and their sting their means of defence. But as the constituent elements of their venom are incompatible with those of our bodies—that is, as these constituent elements are mutually opposed—the venom is evil, or rather, those elements are evil in relation to each other, while in their own reality they are both good.

To summarize, one thing may be evil in relation to another but not evil within the limits of its own being. It follows therefore that there is no evil in existence: Whatsoever God has created, He has

created good. Evil consists merely in non-existence. For example, death is the absence of life: When man is no longer sustained by the power of life, he dies. Darkness is the absence of light: When light is no more, darkness reigns. Light is a positively existing thing, but darkness has no positive existence; it is merely its absence. Likewise, wealth is a positively existing thing but poverty is merely its absence.

It is thus evident that all evil is mere non-existence. Good has a positive existence; evil is merely its absence. (Some Answered Questions, chapter 74)

Know that justice consists in rendering to each his due. For example, when a workman labours from morning till evening, justice requires that he be paid his wage, but bounty consists in rewarding him even when he has done no work and expended no effort. So when you give alms to a poor man who has made no effort and done nothing for your benefit to deserve it, this is bounty. Thus, Christ besought forgiveness for those responsible for His death: This is called bounty.

Now, the question of the excellence or baseness of things is determined either by reason or by religious law. Some believe that it is based on religious law: Such is the case with the Jews, who believe that all the commandments of the Torah are binding and that they are matters of religious law rather than of reason. Thus they say that one of the commandments of the Torah is that meat and butter cannot be eaten together, for this is “trefah” (and “trefah” in Hebrew means unclean, while “kosher” means clean). This they say is a question of religious law and not of reason.

But the divine philosophers hold that the excellence or baseness of things depends upon both reason and religious law. Thus, the prohibitions on murder, theft, treachery, falsehood, hypocrisy, and iniquity are based on reason: Every rational mind can grasp that these are all vile and reprehensible. For if you merely prick a man with a thorn he will cry out in pain: How well must he realize then that murder, according to reason, is vile and reprehensible. And were he to commit such a crime, he would be held accountable for it whether the prophetic message had reached him or not, for reason itself grasps the reprehensible character of this deed. Thus, when such a person commits such base actions, he will assuredly be held to account.

But if the prophetic injunctions have not reached a place and the people fail, as a result, to act in conformity with the divine teachings, then they are not held accountable according to the laws of religion. For instance, Christ enjoined that cruelty should be met with kindness. If a person remains unaware of this injunction and acts according to the promptings of nature, that is, if he returns injury for injury, then he is not held accountable according to the laws of religion, for this divine injunction has not been conveyed to him. Although such a person is not deserving of divine bounty and favour, God will nevertheless deal with him in His mercy and grant him forgiveness. (Some Answered Questions, chapter 76)