

# **PARADOXES OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL THROUGH EXISTENTIALISM, SECULAR HUMANISM AND PANTHEISM AS COMPARED WITH CHRISTIAN THEISM**

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## INTRODUCTION

If there is any such thing as 'peace', its realization seems to be unfeasible when man-made concept of evil remain a paradoxical remedy. Unless a true understanding of the biblical concept of evil where there is a merciful and just Creator, the reality of evil will continue to be an obstacle of man's search for true peace.

'True peace' as in the absence of war, calamity, animosity and the anxiety over what lies after death is as almost impossible to achieve and comprehend, in light of the obvious problem of evil surrounding us everyday. Instead of setting our mind free from ignorance and our hearts from doubts, the so-called truths of religious worldviews only carry us further away from real peace. In finding a solution to a more permanent peace, all worldviews have to wrestle with the problem of evil but unfortunately their incoherent epistemology are found to be wanting, as compare with the Judeo-Christian perspective. It is only when there is a correct theological and philosophical view on the problem of evil; the path will be easier on the search for true peace either in the realm of our physical or spiritual welfare.

Evil is indubitably an intrinsically unappealing subject. It is a common admissible topic for secular discourses to discredit the doctrines of Christianity. The problem of evil generates more

controversial discourses amongst philosophers of different worldviews than any other issue surrounding the question of God's existence. Evil itself, howsoever one may define will always include human predicament to whatever degree of 'pain' one is subjectively suffering or can endure. This may include from a niggling toothache to physical death; from a piddling inconvenience of a short drizzle to calamitous natural disaster; and from a common relationship breakdown to illegal abortion allowed by a rape victim. Whether one from any culture may view it as radical evil which could not be readily forgiven or is a mere simple necessary bad consequences (e.g. an apple that goes bad due to oxidization), it is still a problem of evil in the sense the world is not perfect but full of the absence of goodness.<sup>1</sup> Thence, peace withers.

Logically, the question on the problem of evil can be raised prior to and as a prelude to the question of God's existence. If He exists, why does He allow such radical evil or trivial badness? Or maybe He is not an omnipotent being capable of giving us true peace by overcoming evil. Or if He is capable but unwilling to wipe out the problem of evil, then He is not a good God after all. Some theodicies may argue that evil is necessary so that one can compare and appreciate goodness or real peace. Other generally states that the concept of peace and evil are perforce relative. Peace and evil are not absolutely opposed; rather they are shifting categories. However, the emphasis of this paper is not on the argument of God's existence on the basis of the dichotomy consequences of evil but on the logic on how certain worldviews deals with the problem of evil.

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<sup>1</sup> The author does not intend to discuss the variation or the range of human predicament created by languages from various cultures which may have conflicting meanings. It is understood that some non-western religions may lack terms which do not quite translate as the English evil. Suffering may be culturally defined but is never lacking. "Evil" here is simply defined as the absence/privation of goodness or any imperfection which excess can be seen as destructive. It covers both natural evil and moral evil. This plain definition is believed to be generally acceptable by most religious and philosophical school of thoughts, without going beyond the boundaries.

The inevitability of death is regarded by many (including various religions) as one of the greatest of natural evils. Even the fear of death which diminishes the peace of mind of the family members and the person nearing death is considered as a problem of evil. Other evils whether viewed on different levels of tolerance and subjective experience either caused by human atrocities or natural disasters are also problem that necessitates justifiable explanation. Philosophers, religious pundits and world religions throughout the centuries had rather propounded various theories to explain the problem of evil in the world. They ‘perambulate’ in the intellectual wilderness (behind their desk or under a tree) and whilst engaging in behavior that is beyond the bounds of human understanding, postulate concepts of evil but return their madness into human hope. Unfortunately, instead of leading towards a rationalistic and pragmatic solution towards peace, these false hopes created by some of them might turn life into despair and meaningless. Basically, their view of evil does not cohere with the reality of evil, peace and goodness.

One of the few advantages from these conflicting worldviews is that it produces interesting discussion on the contestability of evil. For example, dualism such as the school of Confucianism and Manichaeism viewed evil as the other side of the two co-eternal cosmic principles of good and evil. These ‘*yin and yang*’ similitudes are separate and oppose to one another. However, on the other end of the ‘spiritual scale’ are those theodicies of the monist that regard everything including evil as an aspect of God. After all, their fundamental theory is that reality exists in one form only, especially that there is no difference in substance between body and soul. Hence, evil is God, you and I. All are one and one is all.

Buddhism, on the other hand, lacks a belief in a God and so, exposing any typology, does not fit well into this 'spiritual scale'. But its notion of *karma*, as in Hinduism, argues that what a man does causes him to become what he is, and so defines him as innately embodying both good and evil acts and states. As for the Sufi Islam, all that exists and is experienced comes from Allah and from no other source. Non religious philosophies like secular humanism and existentialism which insist that neither God or absolutes exists will only lead people in giving up the concept of rational, unified field of knowledge. Hence, also it leads to giving up evil and any real hope in achieving peace.

As a comparison, Christianity teaches that all men were born with Original Sin. Therefore, sin is an expression of evil which deemed to be necessary. To be more precise, men are imperfect and it is their nature to sin, but that does not absolve them from responsibilities. This is because they have the free-will to choose. Christians believe the existence of God, reality of truth and moral absolutes. It is at the last days, God will judge the wicked and evil will be destroyed. Schaeffer explains that Christian philosophy '*demands antithesis, not as some abstract concept of truth, but in fact that God exists and in personal justification. The biblical concept of justification is a total, personal antithesis. Before justification, we were dead in the kingdom of darkness. The Bible says that in the moment that we accept Christ we pass from death to life*'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, evil is not an illusion or within an ambiguous relativity but truly is the absence of goodness. In terms of the act of men, it falls short of God's absolute standard of goodness. But yet God provided a solution through Jesus Christ to overcome the reality of evil. Christianity does not

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<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* Volume I (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, Crossway Books) p. 47.

teach that one must invent an original solution for overcoming each evil situation. This is because all levels of evil fall short of the perfect glory of God. Only through Christ Jesus we shall receive forgiveness and attained salvation, hence see all natural and moral evil completely obliterated. Jesus Christ is the solution to true peace.

This article will only evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of three worldviews i.e. existentialism; secular humanism and pantheism in their dealing with problem of evil. Although many brands of philosophy including Hinduism fall under the category of pantheism, we shall investigate more on Buddhism under this category. We shall begin with existentialism in general, although no doubt existentialism can be divided between secular (atheistic) and religious (theistic). However we leave its comparison of the two extensions of existentialism to some other writers of more intellectual equanimity.

### EXISTENTIALISM<sup>3</sup>

Like any worldviews and religious ideologies, existentialism are not easily confined and defined in one precise description. It overlaps with other worldview propositions to some extent and even with subtle variations amongst their own existentialists. Whether it is Albert Camus, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or the other lesser influence, we shall concentrate on their similar propositions in regard to evil in this world.

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<sup>3</sup> This essay will only discuss the existentialists' worldview of evil as a whole, but leaning towards atheistic/secular existentialism. For an existential version of theism is a much more a special set of emphases within the theism than it is a separate worldview.

The secular existentialists' perspective on the problem of evil has its root foundation upon naturalism where God does not exist. Since the cosmos only exist as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system and ethics is related only to human beings, evil is not seen as the absence of goodness as accordance with the standard of a divine being. The existentialists see evil as what man chooses to recognize and within its own subjective definition. What considered as morality as opposed to immorality; peace as opposed to calamity or evil depends on one's freedom to devote themselves to any values they please, whether they sincerely believe it or not.

Before one can understand their perspective on evil, it is best to briefly recognize the propositions of their worldview in general. This would help us to comprehend how its seeds of understanding gradually sprout and branch out to a distinct view on the problem of evil. James W. Sire<sup>4</sup> summarized the basic atheistic existentialism into five propositions:

- 1] The cosmos is composed solely of matter, but to human beings, reality appears in two forms:
  - subjective (the world of mind and conscious), and
  - objective (unconscious material machinery of the universe).
- 2] For human beings alone existence precedes essence; people themselves make themselves who they are.
- 3] Each person is totally free as regards their nature and destiny.
- 4] The highly wrought and tightly organized objective world stands over against human beings and appears absurd.

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<sup>4</sup> Sire, James, *The Universe Next Door* (InterVarsity Press, 1997, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed) pp. 97 -100.

- 5] In full recognition of and against the absurdity of the objective world, the authentic person must revolt and create value.

Prima facie, these five propositions imply that existentialists view evil according to the subjective experience and evaluation of each individual person. Evil has no absolute moral value. In the sense there is no transcendent standard of the good to ultimately distinguish right from wrong in order to assess the value of the immorality. After all, there is no supreme divine adjudicator to decree what is or not immoral. Thus, existentialism, as its name depicts, all definition and value of an existing evil are subjectively viewed by another existing human being at that very existing time within that existing space which may be different from another existing entity of another pre or post existing time and space.

Likewise, Existentialism is Humanism in the sense that it is very much concerned with human and personal value, and with the realization of an authentic human experience<sup>5</sup>. In consequence, no absolute standard from any absolute being or institution can objectively lay a permanent absolute value of goodness or explanation on the problem of evil. There will be no perpetual absolute solution over evil except the mere existing explanation by the existing human being on a particular existing moment temporarily.

However, some existentialists may object to this shallow generalization of existentialism's view on evil as merely a subjective phenomenon. For example, Sartre disagreed with Berkeley's form of idealism and wrote, '*A table is not in consciousness – not even in the capacity of a representation. A table is in space .... The first procedure of a philosophy ought to be to expel*

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<sup>5</sup> Macquarrie, John, *Existentialism* (Penguin, reprint 1976) p. 76.

*things from consciousness and to reestablish its true connection with the world, to know that consciousness is a positional consciousness of the world*<sup>6</sup>. So, it seems Sartre claims that consciousness (of the presence of evil) is intentional and directed upon an object (evil) outside of itself. Hence, the appearance of evil is not something that belongs to an objective phenomenon. Despite existentialists' emphasis on subjectivity, it also stresses that to exist is to be in encounter with a real world. At this juncture, it would seem agreeable that existentialist objectivity on the real world (actual presence of evil) corresponds to the Christian theistic worldview on reality and the existence of evil. But yet it is the existing man himself that has the priority to authenticate the real evil, if he so chooses and recognize. Of course, he has to first authenticate the real world.

On the other hand, Heidegger clearly made a pivotal exploration on existentialism by illustrating that the *"being whose manner of being is existence is man. Man alone exists. A rock is, but it does not exist. A tree is, but it does not exist. A horse is, but he does not exist. An angel is, but he does not exist. God is, but he does not exist."*<sup>7</sup> Heidegger continues to explain that the sentence *'man alone exists'* does not mean that only man really is and that all other beings are unreal or illusions or ideal of man. Macquarrie<sup>8</sup> wrote that Heidegger's use of the word *'exist'* is not the conventional definition of a living thing or reality but actually emphasizing that man alone exists is far from any kind of subjective idealism. In summary, differing from the philosophy of idealism<sup>9</sup>, existentialism starts its point of argument based on man's total being-in-the-world, whereby man begins with themselves, whilst the idealist begins from ideas.

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<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Ober den Humanismus* (Frankfurt, 1949) p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> n. 3, pp. 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> Idealist begins from man as thinking subject, thereby any existing entity actually begins from ideas. To some extent, this Western philosophy of idealism overlaps with Hinduism i.e. the theory that everything that seems to be material is actually mind, and part of one supreme mind.



Based on the diverse explanations from various philosophers mentioned above, it is hard to comprehend the full and complete extent of existentialists' concept of evil. Though it is easy to accept that existentialism is a revolt against the Aristotelian traditional philosophy of being but on the other hand, it is considered as an explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude. Philosophers who adopted or in a way propounded existentialism attempted to explain away the existence of evil through individual experiences existing at a very particular time and yet recognizes such evil could not be solved. Evil in relation to the world itself is referred in variety of vocabulary by different existentialist philosophers, hence resulting in unanimity with no one common worldview of evil and its solution. Thus, peace remains a pipe dream only existing within the sub-consciousness of the existing dreamer.

Basically, existentialism is merely a philosophical realization of a self-consciousness living in a “*broken world*” (Marcel), an “*ambiguous world*” (de Beauvoir), a “*dislocated world*” (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which we are “*thrown*” and “*condemned*” yet “*abandoned*” and “*free*” (Heidegger and Sartre), a world which appears to be indifferent or even “*absurd*” (Camus). It is an attitude that recognizes the unresolvable confusion of the human world, yet resists the all-too-human temptation to resolve the confusion by grasping toward whatever appears or can be made to appear firm or familiar – reason, God, nation, authority, history, work, tradition, or the “*other-worldly*,” whether of Plato, Christianity, or utopian fantasy<sup>10</sup>.

Ironically, the existential attitude begins with the disoriented and disarrayed individual facing a confused world that he or she cannot accept. Too much reliance on his or her own subjective

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<sup>10</sup> Solomon, C. Roberts, *Existentialism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Oxford, 2005).

existence without acknowledging the objective world may in turn lead to distrust about themselves. Such a confused philosophy will give neither any benefit nor solution to the real problem of evil.

The world is absurd, according to Sartre, because it lacks any concept of ultimate justification. Sartre asserts that man have no ultimate purpose or plan to their lives. Humans are nothing and are therefore free to make for themselves into anything they want to be.<sup>11</sup> Secular existentialists suggests that it doesn't even matter if one believe in your own proclamations because there is no more reason for you to exist than for you to not exist. There is no difference between the two. In other words, whatever one picks and choose his ethical values makes no difference whether it is of evil or goodness. There is no transcendent truth or power beyond man himself. Since atheistic existentialists do not believe in God's existence or any preconceived design, there is no ultimate principle of authority to determine their action. Sartre says one must invent an original solution for each situation. In the sovereignty of his freedom, man creates his own values. Morality is rooted in human choice. Only man alone provides for himself a meaning to his life. Mankind must somehow transcend a life of absurdity and despair. In other words, only man alone defines and provides the meaning of peace.

Some modern existential linguists argue that the ethical value of evil and goodness depends on how one comprehends with their own language. Forsyth<sup>12</sup> equates evil with nothingness in the sense the meaning of 'evil' rest on the language used. By nature, it has no essence or absolute

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "*Existentialism and Ethics*." Moral Education. Barry I. Chazan and Jonasa F. Soltis, Eds. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1973, reprinted from *Existentialism*, New York: The Philosophical Library, 1947), pp. 11-61.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Forsyth is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

meaning to itself. He exemplified that nothing means the absence of prejudice, a necessary preliminary almost in a meditative sense to seeing clearly. At the end, “the nothing” becomes almost a positive entity, once the veil of illusion is stripped away within which we normally live. So, there are various reasons to be unhappy with at least a strong form of the negative theory, that evil is nothingness: it mixes up incompatible cases, as the efforts at finding literary examples show; it can be not much more than an elaborate way of saying we don’t like evil, it’s mean; and in the form it confuses ontology with morality, leaving no room for an active force of evil. And nothingness in itself is often not equivalent at all to anything what we call ‘evil’.<sup>13</sup>

Deriving from the preceding paragraphs, it seems existentialism cornered us to a stalemate, providing no solution to the problem of evil except hounding us with the idea of grandeur and of nothingness. It is all based on one’s existence and self-interpretation with no objective or absolute truth. It presupposes a false *synthetic a priori* type of truth about the world which can be known immediately by rational intuition of each subjective individual existing at that time and yet which may not be appreciated by another existing being, since each of them interpret based on their own experience. Hence, to eliminate evil which is nothingness will only result to nothingness even one may call it ‘peace’ but to find out later that it has a total new meaning and value depending on another individual being existing and experiencing it at a particular time.

In other words, the experience of existence shapes ones view of evil rather than the essence of evil has any significance that may affect our lives. If evil has no significance, then evil is viewed as nothing. Nothing is by nature evil and evil is by nature nothing. Evil is nothing or at least it

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<sup>13</sup> Forsyth N., ‘Evil and Literature: Grandeur and Nothingness’ in *Understanding Evil: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Sönser Breen, Margaret (Ed.) Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2003, XIII, at p. 4.

leads to nothingness and thus there is nothing to be solved or nothing as a solution to solve the problem of evil. Nothing to be achieved including peace. What a dread this philosophy points us to for it will only leads to the devaluation of human lives and a concept of negating any goodness.

## SECULAR HUMANISM<sup>14</sup>

Secular humanism can be traced back to the philosophy of the Sophists in the age of the classical Greece around 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> B.C. Its emphasis that “*Man is the measure of all things*” was famously propounded by Protagoras. This humanistic philosophy remains agnostic about the existence of the supernatural but remain loyal that any true knowledge can only be verified by man alone. Subsequently, humanism was developed by other Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Democritus and Aristotle. Since then, it had gradually influence the western world that the critical method of thinking rests upon science by which can only be obtained by human intellect. It strongly oppose to any kind of supernatural revelation such as the teachings from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Since the European Renaissance, the authority of the Bible and especially the institution of the Roman Catholic Church rapidly loose its grip over the final source of knowledge. Philosophers, authors and even artists expressed their thoughts either through writings or drawings insisting that man through his own efforts could attain the good and peaceful life, without preoccupying themselves with personal salvation for the life thereafter.

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<sup>14</sup> Much confusion surrounds the use of the word ‘humanism’. Here, we only concentrate on the humanism as a philosophy that is concerned with merely human interest. Thus, we refer secular humanism (much overlaps with atheistic humanism) as those who offer an alternative to religious orthodoxies based upon man-centered ideals.

Thereon, this philosophy continues to make inroads into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was in the early 60s, philosophy of secular humanism successfully permeates into public philosophy of almost every significant area of endeavor in the western world. Now it is entrenched as part of economics, education, music, medicine and politics. It is endemic in society, affecting even in ethics and theology. As a matter of fact, secular humanism is itself also a religion. Hence, it is of no wonder why this worldview was recognized by the judiciary of the United States, both at the state and at the federal level<sup>15</sup>.

Presently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, secular humanism has now unfathomably grown with a strong footing and provides inspiration to both atheists and agnostics, who are seeking a humanistic ethical life stance, without reference to a god. The Council of Secular Humanism, a New York based non-profit organization, through its websites<sup>16</sup> and writings<sup>17</sup> stalwartly advocate and defend a nonreligious life stance rooted in science, naturalistic philosophy, and humanist ethics and to serve and support adherents of that life stance. Their main philosophy is to reject any form of supernatural and authoritarian beliefs. They affirm that man must take responsibility for their own lives and the communities and world. To them, secular humanism only emphasizes reason and scientific inquiry, individual freedom and responsibility, human values and compassion, and the need for tolerance and cooperation.

Without further going through each contemporary humanists' writings or the declarations of Humanist Manifestos I and II, this philosophy principally against the existence of God or any

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<sup>15</sup> *Ohio v. Whisner*, 47 Ohio St. 2nd. 181 (1976); see also *Torcasso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=main&page=about>

<sup>17</sup> Especially through its periodicals e.g. *Free Inquiry* and *Secular Humanists Bulletin*.

absolute morality. Secular humanism intensely endorses man as the Supreme Being in the universe, just as what Bertrand Russell described man as ‘*the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value*’. Generally, to sum up the worldview of all the secular humanists, they all have a common core principles reflected in at least five basic beliefs:

1. The denial of the existence of God and the rejection of all theistic religions.
2. Consequently, naturalism is essential to humanism i.e. everything in the universe, including evil, must be explainable in terms of natural laws alone. There is nothing beyond the natural realm.
3. Evolution is the only way to explain origins. Living things are evolved purely by naturalistic means.
4. There are no absolutes. Hence, ethical relativism rules secular humanism. Since there is no God, there cannot be any God-given moral values. It is for humanity to decide its own values.
5. Man is the measure of all things and thus self-sufficient. All humanists believe human beings can solve their own problems (including evil) without divine help.

It should be noted that not all humanists believe the human race is immortal, but all hold that humanity’s survival depends on personal behavior and responsibility. Not all believe that science and technology are the means of saving humankind, but all do believe human reason and secular education are the only hope if the race is to endure<sup>18</sup>. To them, it is not God but man alone that set up the standard of what is good and able to overcome evil.

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<sup>18</sup> For a clearer summary of secular humanist declaration, see Geisler, Norman L.: *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999 (Baker Reference Library), S. 341.

If secular humanism is to be continuously given a legal recognition as a worldview in a modern society, then it should be able to sufficiently and convincingly explain the problem of evil and its solution to deal with the unrelenting evil faces by mankind. How is this secular humanistic philosophy going to provide a solution to overcome evil when it does not believe in a supreme being who lay down an objective standard of what is good and evil? The fact is when it does not possess an objective standard, how is it able to conclude an event is truly considered as 'evil'? How are they able to identify the moment of true peace? How is the secular humanist able to rightfully determine that within a set of measurement, it can positively quantify an activity or event had fallen short of 'goodness'? Or at least, could such an atheistic philosophy satisfactorily prove that an event is the deprivation of 'goodness' and passing towards a gradation of recognized standard of 'evil'? In reverse, before it can show such event is moving towards the band of 'evilness' within a scale of morality, how does the humanist philosopher correctly calibrate which event falls under the band of 'goodness'?

If true knowledge can only be verified by man alone, how does one really know which human got the right knowledge of what is good and evil? What is peace and misery? The other human may disagree with him and thus lead to a protracted argument of what constitute evil. For example, there will never be a definite answer of what is ethical or unethical if secular humanism is the foundation of an economic activity. When there are no standard of good and evil for those businessmen or big corporation, exploiting cheap labor force whilst risking their employees' health in a hazardous environment and minimizing loss, it is just part of a glorified Monopoly game, as long they are within the laws made by fallible man. Engrossed with maximizing profit,

these businessmen may argue that the man-made law provides a fair contractual term for these labors as all reasonable information had given to them and every man has the free-will of choosing his own destiny of happiness in the job of their own choosing. Well, nobody force them to work in such an environment anyway. In other words, those economic law influenced by secular humanism is regarded as fair and only man can decide the pursuit of happiness without any religion telling them what is evil and good. However, there is no objective standard for these fallible lawmakers to base on when deciding what is evil or good, except relying on the subjective interpretation of a group of legislators from time to time and yet without a universal and absolute timeless standard of good and evil. One's man peace is another man's stress (evil).

It is easy to understand why the secular humanist rejects the idea that evil and morality as defined by religion or some supernatural being. To them, religion are by itself an ideology made by man, and thus in turn such religious teachings of what is evil are justified by man themselves. However, this is a self defeating argument. The secular humanistic ideologies, just like religions are also made and justified by man, thus having no absolute authority from outside the realm of fallible human being to decide what is true nature of 'evil' or 'goodness'. Since man himself created religions, they are no different from secular humanist who insist that man are ultimately the measure of all things, including what is evil and its solution.

On the other hand, secular humanists may argue that the difference is religions are far more rigid than the secular humanism. Only if such rigidity of religious dogmas is taken away, much room of flexibility will be given to man within his own time and geographical surroundings to decide what is evil and good. Hence, as Farrow wrote, '*secularization, intones the sociologist, is the*



*process by which religious ideas and institutions lose their public significance. Secular principles are those that operate without any appeal to religious beliefs or justification, that indeed are uncontaminated by any such beliefs or justifications*<sup>19</sup>. Basically, it implies that secular standard of good and evil must remain uncontaminated or unadulterated by the rigidity of religious bigotry.

Again, the argument on the rigidity of religion is self defeating. Firstly, the strict argument that all religions are rigid is by itself rigid as it operates absolutely without regard to the justification of religious belief. The fact that secular humanism is not flexible to take cognizance the possibility of good religious explanation of evil and its solution to overcome evil is by itself rigid. Thus, the similarity of rigidity between secular humanism and religious beliefs is no ground to justify that man is the ultimate measure of all things, including evil and goodness. Second, since the humanist argued that religious beliefs are the product of man themselves, thus causes rigidity and bigotry; it makes no difference to secular humanism which is also the product of fallible man themselves. As long as any ideologies produced by closed-mindedness man with intolerable subjective view, the same redolence of bigotry and rigidity comes into play.

Theistic worldview, especially Christianity believes that there is a God who created man. It was Adam and Eve that chose to sin against God and eventually causes man to live in a fallen world. God is the measure of all things, including what is evil in His sight and have the power to provide the solution to overcome evil. Without God, man cannot distinguish between evil and goodness. Without an absolute morality, man will forever be shifting the standards of evil and goodness. Ultimately, there can never be what is correctly defined as justice or righteousness. If

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<sup>19</sup> Farrow, Douglas 'Three Meanings of Secular', First Thing, May 2003 p. 20

secular humanism is extremely flexible for man to be the decider of all things, uncontaminated by the rigidity of absolute religious measure of what is evil, it can even one day in future lead to the masses who think that evil is nothing. As man, they may like the existentialists, decides that evil is nothing or leads to nothingness. When evil is nothing, peace has no meaning. Since peace is the absence of evil, it would be incomprehensible that something good is an absence of nothing bad.

Man as the ultimate measure of all things, may wrongly appraise evil to a naught and hence there is nothing to be solved or nothing as a solution to rectify the problem of evil. Such extolment of man may consequently leads to the devaluation of man themselves if there are nothing scornful of evil upon man, since it is plausible for man to ultimately negate any goodness or evil. In summary, such veneration of man as the irrefutable ultimate arbiters of value only demonstrate that the secular humanistic worldview on evil is defective and no absolute moral value structures can be created to solve the evils. Hence, such humanistic worldview only will lead to despair and meaningless of life.

## PANTHEISM [BUDDHISM]<sup>20</sup>

At hindsight, pantheism as in Hinduism is often thought as the belief in many gods. Like the Eastern pantheism, there are Western pantheistic systems (such as Spinoza and Plotinus) types of pantheism. Most brands of Buddhism are also enmeshed with the ideology of pantheism. However, pure Buddhism may argue that it does not even come close to ‘theism’ or ‘pantheism’

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<sup>20</sup> Many brands of Buddhism as well as Hinduism fall under the category of pantheism. Although we shall investigate more on Buddhism under this category, some mention of Hinduism will be mentioned to further explore the illusive view of evil as considered by pantheists.

for the fact that Buddha himself does not even believe in the existence of any single god, let alone many gods.

One of the famous quotes of Buddha is *“Believe in nothing, no matter where you have read it or who has said it, not even I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reasons and your own common sense”*. The fact Buddha taught his disciples to believe in nothing would involve also the disbelief in the existence of God. This vague and ambiguous statement seems to display Buddha’s lack of commitment to absolute truth of what he knew or should know. Anyway, it is a contradicting and self-defeating statement. The statement telling others not to believe in what he said would mean that if anyone does not believe in that statement, would end up believing in what Buddha actually taught because that person rejected that particular statement telling him not to believe in Buddha’s sayings. This statement is a cycle that leads one to nowhere. In other words, one cannot even get any absolute answer about the problem of evil or the solution from Buddha. If it follows a disbelief in god due to Buddha’s instruction to believe in nothing, then likewise the existence of evil should be doubted. In that regard, whatever solution towards peace cannot be believed? Similar to Hinduism, evil may just be an illusion. However, for the Buddhists, evil may be real only if each individual subjectively believes and agrees with his or her own reasons and common sense. To some extent, it sounds close to the relativity concepts of existentialism but with some religious overtones.

Here, all discussion on pantheistic view of evil is only with reference to the brand of Buddhism that adheres to the pantheistic worldview and mainly on the overall Buddhist’s worldview of evil. Generally, all pantheisms are actually forms of monism, not pluralism. In other words, they

hold that reality is ultimately one, not many. More precisely, the many exist in the one rather than the one in the many. Simply means pantheists believe that God encompasses all there is.

Basically, there are several distinctive elements involved in pantheism. Their fundamental belief on the nature of God is that God in whatever form is non-personal. In other words, personality, consciousness, knowledge, and so forth, are only lower levels of manifestation. The highest level of reality is beyond personality. It consists of absolute simplicity. Creation is not ex nihilo, as in theism; it is ex Deo (out of God). There is only one “substance” in the universe and everything is an emanation of it. In contrast to theism which holds that God is beyond the universe and separate from it, the pantheist believes that God and the universe are one. God is the All and the All is God. Some pantheists speak of the world as an illusion. In this sense the world is not God; it is nothing. But whatever reality exists in the universe is the reality of God.

Since the world to the pantheist is an illusion, consequently their worldview of evil is something that is seemed unreal. In the stricter forms of pantheism, evil is a mere illusion, an error of mortal mind. Evil seems to be real, but it is not. It is due to the deception of our senses; it is a result of thinking partially rather than wholistically about reality. The Whole is actually good; it only seems evil if one is looking at a part separate from the Whole.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed above, there is no clear concept of evil to Buddhism. The key terms, ‘Buddhism’ and ‘evil, are so ambiguous that it can be truly said both that there is and that there is not a concept of evil in Buddhism. There are some concepts of evil in Buddhism; but there is no

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<sup>21</sup> Geisler, Norman L. & Feinberg, Paul D.: Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Baker Book House, 1980, S. 279

concept of evil in the strongest and most distinctive sense in which we use this term. The term 'Buddhism' itself suggests a more unitary phenomenon than actually exists.<sup>22</sup> It is often said that Buddhism has no concept of radical evil. In Buddhism, the "problem of evil" does not raise an exigent concern. After all, suffering is a normal part of life. Only the nature of suffering is determined by how one responds to it. In that sense, one should not concern with the absence of peace?

It does not mean that Buddhists are oblivious about evil and suffering in the world. Whilst ascribe to the concept that suffering is not evil, Buddhists acknowledge that some pain is inevitable in life. Birth, sickness, aging, and death are painful process of life. It is obviously painful to experience unhappiness and displeasure; it is emotionally painful to want something and not be able to obtain it; it is regretfully painful to have something and lose it; it is upsettingly painful when a pleasurable experience ends. Whether this is a playing of semantics or the lack of English equivalent to the definition of 'suffering' and 'evil', the solution to rid of these 'sufferings' or 'necessary evil' is to get out of the endless cycle of death and rebirth. This is what Buddha and Buddhists are seeking when they achieved enlightenment as a way out of samsara i.e. the endless reincarnation or the 'continuous flow' of the cycle of birth.

Their ultimate goal is Nirvana – a condition free of suffering and no less. Nirvana is viewed as a condition where one is freed from bondage to worldly existence. If a person attained Nirvana, and not subsequently lost it, when he dies he will not be reborn, but will cease to exist. This is considered as a great prize, and unavailable by any other means other than following the

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<sup>22</sup> Southwold, Martin "*Buddhism and Evil*" in David Parkin (ed.), *The Anthropology of Evil* (Blackwell, 1985) p. 128.

Buddhist way.<sup>23</sup> One may even argue that this aspiration to enter into extinction compound with the nihilistic worldview because denying the value of existence may equate with the goal of existence to be denied.<sup>24</sup> Hence, Buddhists' ultimate solution to the problem of evil is to get out of the cycle of reincarnation is the self denial of one's existence. Yet many Buddhists find this solution to getting out of this problem of evil seem to be too remote. Most considered that this Nirvana is unattainable until one is reborn in a period of the next Buddha, Maitri, about 2,500 years from now. Since the attainment of this Nirvana has become too remote, it is said that many think that their immediate goal is to collect as many merit points, through good deed and by training the mind will help them to get 'a better rebirth'. This means that they will reborn into beings with better spiritual abilities which enable them to make greater progress along the long path to Nirvana.<sup>25</sup>

For the Hindus and according to its Hindu texts, the Upanishads claimed that the way out of this endless cycle of death and rebirth was to realize that one's individual self or soul (atman) is a part of the world soul (Brahman). But for Buddha's solution to end this cycle, as some scholars argued, was to realize that there is no self, no atman. If there is no self, there is nothing to reincarnate, nothing to endure this endless cycle.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Southwold, M. "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion", New Series, Vol. 13, No. 3, (Sep., 1978) p. 363.

<sup>24</sup> Buddhists would object to this a notion of annihilation. Although Gautama never gave a precise description of nirvana, but his closest reply was: "There is disciples, a condition, where there is neither earth nor water, neither air nor light, neither limitless space, nor limitless time, neither any kind of being, neither ideation nor non-ideation, neither this world nor that world. There is neither arising nor passing-away, nor dying, neither cause nor effect, neither change nor standstill." - see Davis Taylor and Clark Offner, *The World's Religions*, Norman Anderson, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Supra n. 23, p. 364.

<sup>26</sup> Others scholars argue that Buddha refused to answer questions about the self, and that to deny the existence of the self is just as much of an obstacle as is the self.

However, even if there is "evil" in Buddhism, it is the greed, anger, and delusion that give rise to samsara. Human nature is not evil, per se, but it can give rise to suffering. The goal of the Buddha's dharma is not to eliminate all suffering or to create a perfect life or world, but to learn how best to deal with the suffering that is a normal part of human life.

The nature of sufferings depends on how a person responds to it and brings out the 'goodness' of evil. Is this the strength of Buddhism? It is not clear whether good and evil are conceptually dependent upon each other in the sense that each gains its meaning only by negating the other, whilst on the other hand each is necessary to bring out the essential attributes that necessitates this natural universe.

Martin Southwold of Department of Social Anthropology at University of Manchester explained, "Buddhism views 'evil' in the weak sense rather than in the strong sense i.e. there is no difference between a radical evil and a sheer badness. The practical difference between the two senses reflects less or more readiness to forgive. But what, then might cause some to refuse to forgive what others would forgive? To forgive is to re-admit the wrongdoer to community; to refuse is to exclude him. Forgiveness is commonly in the spirit of 'forgive that ye may be forgiven': hence those who are most aware of their need for forgiveness, of their own proneness to sin, should be most forgiving. The stiff-necked and authoritarian would be unforgiving, and most ready to speak of radical evil".<sup>27</sup>

Since Buddhism view is for one to be self-aware and locates the source of wrongdoing, it actually teaches one to see the roots of wrongdoing within oneself. In other cultures these are

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<sup>27</sup> Supra n. 22, p. 139.

blamed on external occult agencies, which can easily then be seen as alien in themselves, and as possessing the evildoers; which facilitates seeing the evildoer as an enemy to be destroyed.

One may say that in Buddhism, the strong sense of evil does not exist but in a weaker sense, suffering as part of evil is inevitable and thus to get out of this is to work oneself towards Nirvana. According to karma, Buddhists believe that whatever good deed a being does will inexorably bring him happy consequences: it is the notions of just deserts made into an inexorable law of nature. The condition of life into which a being is reborn is determined by the causal efficacy of the good and evil deeds that he has done in his previous lives, particularly the last.<sup>28</sup> However, unless karma can be sufficiently demonstrated that it can naturally with precision trigger the consequences of each thoughts and action of every being (intentionally or accidentally), it will be credulous on the part of the Buddhists to believe that based on the absence of a personal God, the nature by itself can decide the just and appropriate reward or punishment as the 'right effect' for all the deeds done. Even the potential 'right effect' is not disclosed to or agreed by everyone whether it is just consequences for each and every individually or collectively causes.

This flawed worldview on evil all begins when they do not acknowledge the reality of evil. Even assuming they recognize suffering as necessary evil part of life, such admission will never lead them to their intended destination or for that matter, peace is unattainable.

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<sup>28</sup> Southwold, M. *"Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism"*, (Manchester University Press, 1983) p. 46.



## CONCLUSION

Truly indeed, there are paradoxes to the problem of evil as viewed by existentialism, secular humanism and pantheism, in particular Buddhism. Existentialism has no final means of discerning between good and evil or of granting moral significance to man, except merely allow each individual existing at that existing time to decide which existing act is evil or good. Hence, it would be impossible for them to understand true absolute suffering, sickness or death. In the end culture existing at that moment in time has to say that suffering is normal, a part of reality, which may be eventually changed by the next generation and/or of other culture.

The secular humanists would go further and argue that suffering is a necessary part of the evolutionary process. This involves a natural selection through survival of the fittest i.e. the strong survive and the weak get crushed. The mechanisms of change gradually develop and improve the condition of earth. Whilst suffering becomes a good, it may be a necessary sacrifice of some for the benefit of all. Secular humanists laments that the evolutionary process of improvement on the human race seems to have stopped due to the perception that natural selection disappear in these modern times. This is because advance medicine and technology makes it possible for the weak to survive and pass on their genes to future generations. This causes irrational demand that handicapped babies, the mentally retarded, the unwanted and fragile elderly be eliminated: they would no longer be able to breed, nor would they be a drain on society.

Both the existentialists and the secular humanist face a more difficult problem. In order to

identify something as objectively evil, there must be an external perfect standard of good for all time. How can we say it is wrong for two airline jets hit the World Trade Towers or anyone to torture and murder babies for amusement if there is no moral law that stands above every individual? A universal moral law points to a moral lawgiver. Theist identifies this lawgiver as God. If there is no universal objective moral standard, all we have are subjective opinions based on individual culture during the time he or she existed. It would be impossible to define an act as evil.

For the pantheist, evil is nothing but an illusion. There is ultimately no distinction between good or evil. Cruelty and compassion are not ultimately different. One dare not envisage how those ascribe to this worldview may inflict real pain and say it is not evil in the real sense. Specifically for the Buddhist the source of evil as moral wrong is within the person, but the source of evil is external to man. The early Christians understood the nature of evil to be ultimately an extrinsic power foreign and hostile to the rightful conditions and human existence. There is thus a difference between the Christian affirmation and the Buddhist rejection of the externality of the source of 'evil'.<sup>29</sup> Generally, to escape evil is to get out of the cycle of reincarnation and ultimately enter nirvana. To obtain easy passage for a better rebirth is to do much good deed. This is a clear indication of the weakness of Buddhism's view of the problem of evil as one will never have any assurance that it will attain (or at least moving towards) 'salvation' or nirvana.

In addition, Buddhists believes that all sentient beings are subject to evil in its various forms until they attain Nirvana. The evil they are subject to may be external and physical (natural or man-made), such as floods, accidents, nuclear war, etc., or they may be experienced in one's

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<sup>29</sup> Supra at n. 22, p. 137.

body in the form of illness. They may be psychological, such as pain or mental anguish. The evil may be moral, such as jealousy, hypocrisy, ingratitude, etc. Or the evil which affects and afflicts us may be social and political, such as poverty, injustice, inequality or the lack of freedom.<sup>30</sup> Though they may acknowledge these natural evils as part of suffering in life, it seems that there is no concrete solution to evil. There is no conscious reward when one attains nirvana or punishment as a fulfillment of justice to those evil doers. This is because there is no hell in the Buddhist concept of punishment. The Buddha denounced some of the superstitious popular beliefs about hell held by the people at the time. For instance, Buddha said: "When the average ignorant person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a Hell (*patala*) under the ocean, he is making a statement which is false and without basis. The word "hell" is a term for painful bodily sensations".<sup>31</sup> Due to this lack of assurance, some argued that those adhere to this worldview may easily be disappointed when finding themselves in a life which is not a 'better rebirth'. Hence, he or she may make no endeavor to good works or even prone to suicide.

The Christian theistic worldview believes in a personal God who upholds justice. Christians do not have this problem of uncertainty in regard to good and evil, and its existence. God's own attributes is one of perfect goodness, justice and holiness, which indirectly defines for us what is good and right. All behavior must be measured against His character and in the light of the final judgment, when all the actions, words and thoughts of men will be seen for what they are.

Unlike the logical inconsistency of the other three worldviews, Christian theism provides a simple and yet rational answers for the existence of evil. The Bible traces it all back to the fall of

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<sup>30</sup> Kongaswela Piyaratana, *The Concept of Evil in Buddhism*, Dialogue & Alliance Vol. 8, No. 2 • Fall/Winter 1994, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

man. Paul in Romans 5:12 explained, “... *just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.*” Hence, as a consequence, everyone deserves death<sup>32</sup>. Due to the fall of humankind, natural disaster, disease, premature death and unethical behavior are its direct result of the curse on creation.<sup>33</sup> This fallen world will not be righted until Christ returns and thereon a new heaven and earth where all evil will be wiped off as described in Revelation 21-22. At the moment, no one is guaranteed a trouble-free life. In the meantime, evil is somewhat necessary for us to appreciate that this world is want of goodness. Otherwise, we will never know what goodness is or how to appreciate goodness when it comes. Without God, we will never comprehend the standard of perfect righteousness or realize there is a lack of righteousness.

God's righteousness is expressed in the Scriptures, and man, made to reflect that righteousness, is called to obey God's law and judge his life against it. All men are created with a moral conscience, the law of God written on the heart, but this can become confused or hardened, either by cultural tradition or by the individual's sinful choices. Beyond this, however, we have an absolute basis for knowing what is good and what is evil, for we can check all man's ideas against God's character and law. On the spiritual realm, God gave us the wisdom from the Holy Spirit to distinguish between what is evil and true peace. Unlike the world's incoherent philosophy, only through God's Word and the Spirit, we experience true peace. Jesus once said, “*Peace, I leave with you; not as the world gives, do I give to you ...*”<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, it is a paradox on the problem of evil in the worldview of existentialism, secular

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<sup>32</sup> Romans 6:23.

<sup>33</sup> See Genesis 3; Romans 8.

<sup>34</sup> John 14:27.

humanism and pantheism. A paradox which only heading towards confusion, meaningless, despair and utterly void of peace.

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