

ETERNAL QUESTIONS

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Brother Erikos, a Forest Monk of the
Black Eagle Stoic Monastery

“to explore the eternal metaphysical questions of our time”

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“The Problem of Good & Evil”

“The notion of good and bad doesn't exist for me. I do good for one group of people. I do bad for another. That's the law of life. Black and white. The equilibrium.”¹

Jimmy Cherizier, better known as Barbecue,
a Port-au-Prince, Haiti, slumlord that controls
an alliance of nine gangs known as G-9

Haiti in 2023. Justice no longer exists. The country has not had a criminal trial in five years. In a densely squeezed neighborhood of shacks made of corrugated tin and scrap metal with dirt floors and open fires a sixty-year-old former domestic worker says, “We can't sleep well. There is no water—we get a little when it rains. There is no government presence here. We live like animals. The only way in and out is the sewer ... but you can get killed if you try and leave ... We are prisoners here. Animals have more value than we do.”²

The next day more than 80 people in the former domestic worker's neighborhood were killed when Barbecue forced out a rival gang lord. Barbecue's nickname, some say, was earned by the intimidation methods he once used against his rivals

¹ Jon Lee Anderson, “A Land Held Hostage,” *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2023, pp. 46-8

² *Ibid*, p. 53

and enemies. But, please note his comment about the law of life as black and white, polar opposites on the dynamic continuum he calls the "equilibrium." Unfortunately, the interviewer didn't follow up on his insight.

"God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger; but he takes various shapes, just as fire, when it is mingled with spices, is named according to the *aroma* of each."

Heraclitus (frag. 36, Burnet)

Death and destruction are the opposites of alive and well, and yet they are both essential to the proper functioning and well-being of nature. A tree dies. Its entire body from trunk to crown lies upon the ground, growing moss, playing host to a city of rodents and insects, and nourishing the soil beneath as it rots and disintegrates. A seedling nearby becomes a sapling growing tall in a shaft of sunshine piercing the forest canopy newly opened by the fallen tree.

What does all this mean to us human beings living in cities and towns, not as trees in forests? Does it truly matter to God whether you pursue death and destruction or virtue and caring? Can we just do and be whatever we want to do and be, and everything is beautiful in its own way? Does it matter whether you are a Haiti slum overlord or a Stoic philosopher? Perhaps not, if you view the phenomenon of existence from the perspective of God.

"To God all things are fair and good and right,
but men hold some things wrong and some right."

Heraclitus (frag. 61, Burnet)

As is clear from Barbecue's insight, both the slumlord and the Stoic philosopher have a fragment of God, a spark of the divine reason that makes us exceptional creatures regardless of where we align ourselves on the sides of good and evil. But if we have a spark of divinity within us why do we see some things wrong and some right? Because one little spark of reason cannot show us all of existence from the perspective of God.

This issue is called "The Problem of Good and Evil," but the first "problem" is navigating through all the differing definitions of what is good and what is evil. For example, Epicureans believe the highest good is pleasure whereas the Stoics believe it is virtue. We will set that ethical dilemma aside for the moment. Evil also has different meanings to different people, but we have Stanford University philosophers to thank for clarifying the matter:³

³ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concept-evil/>

There are two concepts of evil: one is broad; the other is narrow. The broad concept is “any bad state of affairs, wrongful actions or character flaw” commonly described as the theological problem of how a good God can allow evil in the world. The great English philosopher David Hume created a logical proof that evil is a problem that proves God does not exist. We'll discuss that when we get to the Stoic beliefs.

Within the “broad concept” of evil there are two further divisions of evil: Natural and Moral evils. Natural evils are occur in nature without human intention or meddling: Heat domes, earthquakes, lightening strikes, and a brain tumor would be considered natural evils. Moral evils are bad states of affairs perpetrated by human acts of commission or omission, such as murder or callous indifference to suffering.

Then, the “narrow concept” really focuses on just those evils that are “ascribed only to moral agents and their actions. For example, if only human beings are moral agents, then only human beings can perform evil actions.”⁴

Before we go on, let's make one thing clear. Stoics agree that only human beings are moral agents, but we do *not* see some things wrong and some right. We are cosmic optimists, and we believe that everything God does is right in the end. But even enlightened Stoics can struggle with physical, emotional, and psychic pains that we are not allowed to call evil—even though everyone else does. Are Stoics hiding behind a semantical slight of hand; or, is it really true that there is no evil in nature, only in the human will? Before we discover an answer to that let's spend a few minutes examining various beliefs about evil. What is it? Where does it come from? We're going to find that out right now.

Evil in the Abrahamic Faiths

Satan, Lucifer, Diabolos, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Iblis, the Devil. In Hebrew, the personification of evil is *ha-Satan*, the adversary. In the Garden of Eden of the biblical Genesis he begins as a snake who tempts Eve with an apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve, in turn, tempts Adam with this delicious new fruit, and the evil of disobeying God is carried forward—forever. Our beginning as human beings is identified by our first awareness of good and evil leading to our greatest hope, eternal life, and our greatest fear, the greatest evil, death.

We now know that other intelligent animals—such as the other great apes and elephants and dolphins—are also aware of death, but so far as we know we are the only ones to give it a name and life, and to further personalize it with silly drawings and scary stories.

⁴ *ibid*

Satan makes his next great appearance in the story of Job (c. 600 BCE)⁵ In this case we have an abundantly prosperous Job as the subject of a test between God and Satan. Satan claims the only reason Job loves God is because God has been so generous. If Job were sick and poor and grieving for death in his family he would curse God and hate him. God disagrees. He believes Job's love is genuine, and to prove he is right he allows Satan to physically and emotionally devastate Job. As we all know, Job was rather stoic about his misfortune, passed the test, and was rewarded with even greater abundance. Satan was sent packing.

In the Christian version of Satan he becomes not just an adversary to God but the personification of *all* evil for every one and thing. The afflicter of Job on a single wager now becomes the afflicter and tempter of all humankind *all the time*. Jesus himself was tempted by Satan when he hungry and was alone in the desert for forty days and nights. For his final temptation, Satan took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the power and wealth of the world. Satan could give him all of this if he would just bow down and worship him. Jesus demurred, of course.



"The Devil," National Library of Sweden

The Christian version of Satan gives him dominion over planet Earth, and the new contest between God and Satan is to see which of us follows God and which of us follows Satan. And, therein lies the plan of salvation, the one Jesus gave the world upon his death on the cross. Those who follow his teachings go to heaven and eternal life; those who worshiped the wrong gods go to hell and eternal damnation. Even if you were once a sinner; if you truly repent you can be saved.

Christian beliefs about evil and Satan follow the two concepts mentioned above: evil as an internal characteristic of the individual; or, evil personified as an external source of power exercised by Satan or one of his demon helpers. Those

⁵ Much of the information for this section is from my daily education in religion as a child, which was refreshed and increased by the World History Encyclopedia <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1685/the-origin-of-satan/>

who pursue a life of evil actions can eventually become possessed by one of Satan's demon, and these unfortunate souls are said to be devil-possessed.

Thousands, probably millions of innocent people around the world have been tortured, burned, drowned, and in other ways executed because they were possessed of Satan. (On a personal note, my own many-great-grandmother, Susannah North Martin, was hung as a witch in the Salem witch trials of 1692.) Good Christians, the righteous ones, those who follow the example of Jesus and reject Satan's temptations will be saved. They will either go to heaven when they die or they will go to heaven with Jesus when he comes to Earth again—depending on the specific rules and regulations of the differing forms of faith. Roman Catholics have their expectations; Seventh-Day Adventists have theirs.

Moving on. Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iblis> tell us that the Muslim version of *ha-Satan* goes by the name of "Iblis." When God commanded all the heavenly angels to bow to Adam and Eve, Iblis, the greatest of the angels, refused. He protested that since he was made of fire, which everyone knows is superior to clay, Adam and Eve should be bowing to him. This hubris God despised and threw Iblis out of heaven. But that wasn't all. He gave Iblis a punishment of eternal flames of Hell (how fitting for a being made of fire), but his punishment was suspended until judgment day.

In the mean time, Iblis could have his evil way with any human except the true believers. As we know, his first temptation was as the snake who tempted Eve in the Garden. Unfortunately, at this point the Muslim version of Satan gets a bit murky, because in the Qur'an, Iblis is identified as an angel or *jinni*. And from this ambiguity, a number of stories try to explain the confusing relationships of the *jinn*, Satan and angels. Note: For those who are interested in the stories of these special agents of evil and good see any number of websites on the internet.

Hindu and Buddhist Evil, Demons, and Hells

Hindu has neither a concept of evil nor an anthropomorphic entity equivalent to Satan.⁶ Those pesky matters are taken care of by reincarnation and karma. If you were good and learned your life lessons you evolve; if not, then you devolve. Ultimately, through many reincarnations we reach moksa, a state of liberation from the material world.

Buddhism is another and much more complicated story. One branch of Buddhist belief claims that evil is neither an internal characteristic nor a force outside of the individual. "Although kusala and akusala are sometimes translated as 'good'

⁶ <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/hindu-devil-rakshasas-asuras-shaitan-evil-demon-christianity-19856>

and 'evil,' this may be misleading....Kusala can be rendered generally as 'intelligent, skillful, contented, beneficial, good,' or 'that which removes affliction.' Akusala is defined in the opposite way, as in 'unintelligent, unskillful' and so on."⁷

However, The Tibetan version of Buddhism evolved on remote path leading to an isolated culture that was strictly ruled by the indigenous religion tradition of *Bon*. Before Buddhism, the Bon Priests performed rituals to propitiate local spirits and ensure the well-being of the dead in the afterlife. The priests of *Bon* adopted some of Buddhism, but never gave up their addiction to power over demons and death. As a result we find a very different and, IMO, pernicious form of belief.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that "Mara is the name of a devil king who rules over numerous devils who are in his retinue. He is described as the [enemy] of Shakyamuni Buddha and his teachings."⁸ Tibetan Buddhism teaches there are eight hot hells; the major hell, plus 128 subsidiary hells, that "lie beneath the ground of *Jambudvipa*...the eighth and lowest hell, the Avichi hell, or the hell of incessant suffering, is located twenty thousand yojanas beneath the ground [about 80 to 200,000 miles]."⁹ A few of the names of these hells are the "hell of repeated rebirth for torture," "hell of crushing," hell of great wailing," and so on. Although it's easy for most 21st century Westerners to laugh at such foolishness, fear acquired by those raised to believe in such things can be a paralyzing straitjacket. I was raised to believe in the Christian devil and Hell. Stoic philosophy took off my straitjacket.

The Source

Back before one primate evolved to become *homo sapiens* (the wise man), and shared in the divinity of reason; back before nature as God showed its goodness and greatness in granting free will to the wise man and thereby allowing evil to be freely chosen to exist in this world; and, back at the very beginning of existence, all existence, there was a law established that made it inevitable evil would some day make its home in our familiar world. It was a kindness, really, this law. It was a kindness that was as necessary as the dynamic continuum made existence possible.

Homer was wrong in saying, "Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!" He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe...

Heraclitus (frag. 42, Burnet trans.)

⁷ <https://www.learnreligions.com/buddhism-and-evil-449720>

⁸ <http://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Devil>

⁹ http://www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Eight_Hot_Hells

This law of kindness that every living thing knows is known without thinking, reason is irrelevant, and it lies at the very heart of being. "An animal's first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation, because nature from the outset endears it to itself, as Chrysippus affirms in the first book of his work *On Ends*: his exact words are, "The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof"; for it was not likely that nature should estrange the living thing from itself..."¹⁰

Of course, today we would expand this law to include every living organism, both flora and fauna. And, if we believe the universe is a neural network resembling a brain (see last month's issue); and, if we can believe that everything lies on a hierarchy of consciousness from atoms to cosmos (same issue); then, indeed everything shares in this law. Those of us who are Stoics know this law as the *Doctrine of Appropriation*, or *oikeiôsis*. It is the foundation of our ethics.

Before we go on, let us take a brief look at some early Greek ideas about the nature of evil in order to understand how *oikeiosis* can be viewed as the source. We first discover from Heraclitus that even God is subject to the laws of nature because God *is* the laws of nature. In fragment #29, Heraclitus, in his inimitable style says it this way: "The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out." Incidentally, the Erinyes were underworld deities of ancient Greek religion who had the hair of snakes, dog heads, black bodies, bat wings, and red eyes.

What does this mean? What does it mean when God itself is subject to its own laws, such as the physical actions of the sun, and presumably the planets that revolve around it? Well, it clearly shows we do not follow the Abrahamic belief that god is omnipotent. Its not an external deity that can manipulate the machinations of nature at will and with impunity. God, the Stoic god, places a limit on itself and shares its power with humanity. As Epictetus said, "...the power to make right use of the appearances of things, the gods have placed under our control...not even Zeus himself can get the better of my free will (*Discourses* 1:1)."

David Hume, the great English philosopher of the 18th century, believed he created an irrefutable argument proving god does not exist. This is what that argument would look like if paraphrased as a logical syllogism:

First premise: If an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-good god exists, then there would be no evil in the world;

Second premise: But there is evil in the world;

Conclusion: Therefore, god does not exist.

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, bk VII, 85, trans. R.D. Hicks (Harvard, 1991)

A Stoic rejects both of Hume's premises, therefore the argument is invalid. In the first premise, a god can be all-good and still grant free will to its most intelligent creatures. In the second premise, if evil is restricted only to moral evils, those evils performed by moral agents, humans acting without virtue, then yes. But, evil is commonly understood to include both natural and moral evils, so the argument fails.

The Stoic god may be all-knowing and all-good, but it is *not* all powerful. If it were then where is free will? The Stoic god has given us the power of choice, which includes the power to choose thoughts and actions that are of virtue or to choose thoughts and actions lacking in wisdom; and, if they are lacking in wisdom they are lacking in virtue. Evil, according to Stoics, is the absence of virtue. The highest good, as we know, is virtue. The absence of virtue is what we call evil. And because God gave us free will, we can choose what is good and only good because it is *always* good, virtue; or, we can choose lying, cheating, murder, and so on.

So why would anyone choose actions contrary to virtue? Because they believe it is in their best interests to do so. They believe they are simply following the law of survival, of pursuing what they need to say and do in order to survive and flourish. Because, as Chrysippus said, "The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof"; for it was not likely that nature should estrange the living thing from itself..."

Oikeiôsis

This is not going to become an essay of Stoic ethics, but it is important to be clear about my thesis that the source of evil begins with the foundation of Stoic ethics, *oikeiôsis*. From the *32 Principal Doctrines of the Stoa*¹¹ we find this definition:

Impulse is the movement of the soul toward or away from something according to whether it appears to be beneficial or harmful... A bird that sees a worm will immediately pick it up. Impulse follows presentation. A small child may do the same, but with experience will learn that the worm is of no use to its personal well being. Thus, whereas the bird will pick up the worm all its life, the human child changes, and in a few years the presentation of a worm no longer elicits the response of an impulse to pick it up. The reasoning soul does not assent to the presentation. No impulse, no action.

There are two stages of impulse beginning in our relationship with ourselves, followed by our relationship to others. The dearest thing each living thing knows

¹¹ This book can be found on the Eternal Questions website as a pdf file.

is its own self, and the primary impulse from birth onward is self preservation. How could Nature be benevolent or even survive if it created life forms that felt alien to their individual selves? Nature created the most basic impulse of all life forms to have an affinity to the self, to seek that which is appropriate to the survival of this self, and to avoid that which threatens its survival.

But is this definition of what is appropriate only valid for life forms? What about the natural evil of earthquakes? Is Nature exempt from *oikeiôsis*? Are earthquakes, one of a thousand examples from nature, appropriate? Yes. Plate tectonics is the theory that explains the movement of rigid lithospheric plates of the earth's crust over its mantle. Nature moves and breathes and lives. But when you add a rational faculty, the animal that understands good and evil, then you add the potential for evil when it turns away from what is good.

"The notion of good and bad doesn't exist for me. I do good for one group of people. I do bad for another. That's the law of life. Black and white. The equilibrium."

Barbecue, Haiti overlord

Stoics believe the good is virtue; evil is an act lacking virtue. Although Barbecue doesn't expressly define his notion of good, and the interviewer failed to prod him on the matter (he may have thought too much prodding would be unwise), we can only surmise by Barbecue's actions that for him the good has nothing to do with teaching or practicing virtue. He more likely believes that doing good for people is letting them live or sharing in the bounty of his ill-gotten "goods."

The second stage of *oikeiôsis* occurs when reason and socialization expands the soul and we learn social *oikeiôsis*. We come to know there are times when virtuous acts, such as duty and altruism, may be the only good, even when detrimental to self-preservation. The natural affinity we feel to our self, spanning the two stages of impulse, from self-preservation to other preservation, is the Doctrine of Appropriation (*oikeiôsis*). Unlike Plato's theory of an absolute good to which all values may be referred, *Oikeiôsis* is both naturalistic and physiological.

"...God has not only granted us these faculties [of reason] by which we may bear every event without being depressed or broken by it, but like a good king and a true father, has placed their exercise above restraint, compulsion, or hindrance, and wholly within our own control; nor has he reserved a power, even to himself, of hindering or restraining them."

Epictetus (*Discourses* bk 1, ch 6, 40)

Nature gave all of creation the Prime Directive: love yourself above all else. Then it gave homo the wise another directive that builds upon the first: taking care of

yourself above all else entails a choice: you may choose a path of virtue or one of vice. But remember: all actions have consequences and you will become what you do.

Rain falls on the righteous and wicked alike. Yes, but it is the inner choice of pursuing virtue or vice that makes all the difference. For a Stoic, the path of virtue is the direction of a life. And to a Stoic, it is the only life worth living.



IN OUR NEXT ISSUE we will begin a two-part series on "Knowing God by Other Means." This will be an introduction to interior explorations of the divine.

IN OUR LAST ISSUE, A CORRECTION: Regarding footnote 3 on page 4, the "alert reader" was in fact Paul Lanagan who must rightly be credited for bringing the article on the universe as a neural network to my attention. Apologies, my old friend.

OUTSIDE

"The Tarantula and the Wasp"

In the American Southwest there is a desert called the Mohave, and one of the creatures who lives in the Mohave Desert is a very hairy tarantula who grows up to eight inches in length, larger than a large man's fist. Even though tarantulas are spiders they don't build a web, they run down and catch their prey, such as grasshoppers, lizards and other small mammals, then they inject a paralyzing venom that has an enzyme that can liquefy internal organs. Once the organs are soft and drinkable the tarantula then sucks them out of a hole it makes in the skin. The tarantula is a greatly fiercesome looking thing, but if it were to bite a human the venom would hurt hardly more than the sting of a bee.

Now the tarantula has an enemy, a wasp called the Tarantula Hawk. Isn't that a cool name, Tarantula Hawk? After what I said about the tarantula maybe this is one of the good guys in nature. Or not. The wasp is attracted to the tarantula as a source of food for its babies. And, although the wasp is only two inches long, one-fourth of the size of the tarantula, the spider appears to have little defense against it.

So, the wasp stings its targeted victim with a paralyzing venom, then drags and shoves it into its waspy den, a hole burrowed in the desert dirt. After laying its eggs in the tarantula, the wasp kicks dirt into the burrow, seals the hole, and

goes away. Inside its grave, the paralyzed spider lies in its dark tomb, immobile, and I'm guessing it is in some way aware of the eggs of the Tarantula Hawk growing inside of it. Eventually the eggs hatch, of course, and then listen to what they do. The baby wasps rather cleverly eat first only the body parts that are useful and healthful, but not vital. The vital organs they save for last, and at last after having been eaten alive, the tarantula finally dies.

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QUOTE OF THE DAY

"...as material fortune is associated with the properties of the body,
so honour belongs to the soul."

Ptolemy (*Tetrabiblos* IV.1 (Loeb: p. 373))

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For the Readers

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If you have a question or comment for Brother Erikos go to the EQ website at <https://theEternalQuestions.org>. Please state your name, email address, the issue number, and the nature of your question or comment in 200 words or less.

Erik D. Wiegardt, GCDK
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