

14 Badness

This chapter describes the problem of badness, and the responses that people have to it. This chapter does not solve the problem of badness. I cannot explain why there is so much badness, why there is such strong badness (strong evil), and why there is so much strong badness (strong evil). I deal with the problem as best I can. I am pretty sure nobody else, nor any religion, can explain either.

The problem of badness is a theme in all important world views. Sometimes the problem of evil is called the problem of "theodicy" ("god justice") but I avoid the term here. As of August 2012, you could find good summaries on the Internet, especially in Wikipedia, by looking for both "the problem of evil" and "theodicy".

Evil is worse than bad, and the two are qualitatively different. Usually we can deal with bad. Often we can reverse "bad effects", as in setting a broken arm. In contrast, usually evil cannot be reversed or fully remedied. Evil cannot be undone. Most clear instances of evil are carried out by sentient moral beings (people) but some things in non-human nature are so bad that I can only think of them as evil, such as parasites. As I was writing this, Ivan the gorilla died. If you would like an example of evil, search him for what was done to him. In this chapter, I lump all this together as "badness". I do not define bad, evil, or badness. Here I focus on people.

What we consider badness varies by our society, culture, history, economy, political situation, etc. This does not mean badness is only a convention and does not really exist. It is real. What we consider a song, bird, river, mountain, scientific method, philosophical method, or person varies according to our society etc. but that does not mean there are not birds, rivers, mountains, scientists, thinkers, or people. We can pick apart and bolster anything. I do not consider this question further here.

The problem of badness consists of several closely related problems, such as badness that comes from the bad will of sentient beings, from neglect, accident in nature, the inevitable mix-up of the evolutionary process; whether badness can be corrected; what difference it makes if badness is done to innocents or to people who should know better; etc. I don't sort them out here. I consider the items below to be the worst kinds of badness. Unfairness as such is not necessarily too bad. It depends on the degree. The world is unfair, and we have to deal with it. That is part of being a moral being in the real world. What matters is how we respond to unfairness.

- The exploitation of innocents, such as innocent children for sex slavery or the destruction of nature.
- Some people live in such bad conditions, or are afflicted with such bad physical or mental conditions, that they almost doomed to fail spiritually.
- Betrayal of a moral public trust, such as of a priest, academic, or politician.
- Strong oppressing weak.

- Not giving people a chance to succeed or fail, such as when children get cancer.
- Extended intense suffering, as with some kinds of cancer, burns, mental disease, or emotional coercion.
- Deliberate use of ideas that we know to be false and detrimental, such as bad religion, such as religion that leads to terrorism.
- Unfair play when fair play is possible.
- Indecency.

This chapter is easier to understand if you have already read the previous chapter on decent people. This chapter repeats a little from that chapter but not much.

Explanations.

The following ways of thinking about badness overlap. People combine ways as part of how they think about the world and respond to the world, that is, in their religion. People are not always consistent but they are more consistent than we might expect. I reject the Devil, so I omit explanations of badness that rely on the Devil. I do mention him for completeness. Some of these ideas try to explain badness, some offer comfort with which to endure badness, and some suggest what to do in the face of badness or after badness without necessarily explaining badness. Often the ideas are all mixed up. I don't try to sort it out here with each idea.

Unexplainable. Badness is unexplainable. Learn to deal with it if you can.

Random. The world is very largely random. Bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people, because the world has many random events. The world is not a large person with whom we are in a moral relation so we should not expect the world to make sense in terms of badness and goodness. We try to correct the badness according to our own moral character.

Mixed Moral Beings. Evolved sentient-moral beings are inevitably mixed moral beings, and so do some bad things.

Inevitable in the Evolutionary Process. To evolve sentient-moral beings with the capacity for good, it is necessary to use a process that allows for the evolution of badness, the persistence of badness, and the recurrence of badness. If this explanation is combined with Deism, it implies limits on God's ability. We can get around the limits by arguing also that some badness is necessary for the full development of sentient-moral beings, and God set the level of badness at about that level. See below. This addition is not fully satisfying in cases of terrible badness to innocent beings who cannot recover and learn.

Badness is an Illusion. Badness is merely a judgment from the point of view of an evolved being. It is not an absolute attribute of any acts or events. Beings that had evolved differently than the people on this planet would have different judgments about badness. Within a particular evolved moral system, beings

do make judgments of good and bad. But we should not mistake those judgments for anything more than a feeling within a particular context. Anteaters would say ants are delicious. Lions think killing a beautiful gazelle is a beautiful thing in itself. This point of view does not take fully into account the logic of good, bad, and evil.

God's Will. That there is badness is simply God's will. The degree of badness, and on whom it falls, is also God's will. There is nothing we can do about it. We deal with it if we can. To people who do not believe in God, this response seems like a variation of "unexplainable", but it does differ to people who believe in God. To explain why badness is part of God's will, believers have to go to some of the other explanations for badness.

Bad is Part of God Too. Nearly all deists agree that God is mostly good. God might be part bad as well. The badness that we see is as much an expression of God's character as the good. Good depends on bad, and bad depends on good, because they are part of God's character. This idea does not insure that goodness prevails over badness, or that there is more goodness than badness. Most people who argue for a link between goodness and God, or even between badness and God, also take for granted that goodness prevails. People who argue that both aspects are in God's character nearly always assume that the good side prevails.

Free Will. Badness results from freedom of the will. Beings with free will can choose to do bad things, and sometimes do. This response is a problem for scientists who do not believe in free will. It is a problem for people who believe in God because then they have to be clear about why having truly free will means being able to choose badness. It is not clear if badness is a by-product of free will or it is an intrinsic part of free will. For a cutesy statement of this explanation, along with the inevitable evasion, see the charming movie "Time Bandits".

Necessary for Morality. We could learn some morality without badness but a real sense of morality can only grow if we encounter true badness. Of course, we have to survive the badness, both physically and spiritually; but most people do survive and do grow. This point of view implies a being who planned the degree of badness so that it would be at the right level. People who think badness is simply an illusion cannot use this argument. This issue is so important that it gets another section of its own below.

God Provides Badness to Teach Lessons. This explanation does not differ from "Necessary for Morality" except in two ways: It explicitly mentions God as the source of the lessons. It implies that God might tailor the lessons to the abilities and needs of particular people: "God does not send us anything more than we can stand". Of course, sometimes the world does send us more than we can stand, and does break us. Deists have to explain that additional problem.

Good Exceeds Bad. This idea is not so much an explanation as a comfort. It can be in an explanation when combined with other ideas, such as below. If we could quantify good and bad, we would find that good exceeds bad, probably by quite a bit. Except for a few people in miserable situations, life is worth living even if it is not fair.

God Converts Bad. God might have had to tolerate some badness in the world because of free will and to use the process of evolution, but God also provided means for people to overcome all the badness and

to convert it to good. Moreover, the total sum of good gained through allowing sum bad far exceeds the total sum of badness needed to achieve the good. Once we see that the total sum of good exceeds the total sum of bad, then we see that God did not tolerate badness but anticipated and used badness to make even greater good. This elaboration on the idea that God converts bad is a bit dangerous because it implies that good depends on badness to become fully good, and that God depends on badness to achieve full goodness. It lends strength to the idea that badness is a part of God.

Collective Punishment. God punishes and rewards collectively. Collective punishment by definition can't fall selectively only on the people who deserve it. Some of us suffer because of the bad deeds of others. In the end, if we all correct our behavior, we are also rewarded, and the reward more than makes up for the punishment that we suffered. Even if we personally do not live long enough to reap the reward, our families do. If we go along with God, the total good is greater than the total bad, although it might not seem that way when we are going through a bad patch.

Mutual Healing. I include this category largely as a matter of person inclination and because of the case of Ivan the gorilla. See the movie "Bennie and Joon" and an episode of "Star Trek TNG" called "Tin Man". Among a long string of babysitting movies that feature mutual healing, the 2011 movie "The Sitter" has a man in his twenties and three children healing each other and a few friends along the way too. Badness wounds people. Sometimes people are just born wounded or develop wounded. Wounded people can heal each other. Sometimes only another wounded person can heal this wounded person. Sometimes wounded people are better after mutual healing than they would have been if not wounded in the first place. Badness does hurt but it also provides the opportunities for healing and for being a better person than otherwise.

Non-Autonomy. People are not autonomous but we often mistakenly think we are. "No man (person) is an island". Because we are tied to people, and better off tied to people, we suffer badness. We suffer when they suffer, and we suffer because we are connected to other people who do bad things. Without some badness, we would never learn the important lesson of being connected, and never fully develop into personhood. Hopefully, the gain from learning our personhood exceeds the loss from badness.

Tests. God allows badness so as to test us. It is not clear if God is testing us so God can find out about us, we can find out about ourselves, other people can find out about us, as part of teaching us lessons, or all the options.

Materialism. Badness results because this world is made up of material stuff rather than spiritual stuff. This explanation is not always clear about why material stuff is more likely to lead to badness, and why some spiritual beings are bad. See later chapters.

Finitude. Badness results because all beings in this world are finite, finite beings must choose among limited alternatives, and finite beings cannot express the great (or infinite) heart needed to be truly good. This argument can be combined with materialism because material beings are necessarily finite.

Absence of Good. We think of badness as a positive thing-in-itself such as killing an innocent animal or imprisoning Ivan the gorilla. This is a mistake, and leads to further mistakes. Badness is a lack of good. It is emptiness, and leads to emptiness, such as the isolation we feel from other people when we have

done something wrong, especially when we have hurt them. This explanation was important in Medieval philosophy, and was combined with finitude and materialism, when God was considered infinite and full. This explanation is not very important now.

Become Like Me. Badness comes of wanting to make the world into your own image, or wanting to make the world something you are comfortable with. This idea is related to the idea that Satan (the Devil) fell through the sin of pride, and that humans do the same. This idea still lives in modern fiction but in a different form. Badness comes of people working too hard, people wanting to surround themselves with stuff that reflects their narrow tastes and makes them comfortable, and people hanging out only with other people like themselves. In the movie series "The Matrix", the Devil, Agent Smith, wanted to remake the world into something he was comfortable with. In the end, he wanted to remake the world entirely into his own image.

Justice Comes after Death. Badness exists in this world but it will all be corrected after we die, when good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell, and some people go to purgatory. This account by itself is not an explanation for badness, it only makes badness more tolerable. Sometimes that is all we need from an explanation.

Due Reward Does Come in this Lifetime. We dwell too much on cases of badness and do not pay enough attention to cases of just reward. People with talent and who work hard are rewarded. Even people who have suffered badness can be rewarded if they work hard enough and if they develop their talents. Think of the inspiring stories of handicapped people and wounded soldiers. People get what they deserve. If a person has not gotten much, that is because he-she has not tried hard enough and so doesn't deserve it. Before dismissing this account as self-service for rich people, consider how true it often is. It is important in the development of the work ethic and of some forms of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Devil's Rebellion. Badness came because an extremely powerful supernatural agent decided to put himself ahead of God's plan, thereby disrupted God's plan, and corrupted the intended state of affairs on this planet, and maybe on other planets. Each element in this explanation is doubtful, but I do not go into a critique. Even in religions that are not simply theistic such as Christianity and Islam, variations of this argument can be used when a supernatural being "goes against" the major religious goodness, as in the stories of the enemies of the Buddha(s) and bodhisattvas.

Human Rebellion and Poor Choice. This explanation is more than that free will sometimes leads to bad choices. At some time, people made a bad choice that somehow tainted the entire situation on this world and for all the people on this world for a long time. The bad choice of people sometimes can be linked to the bad agency of the Devil, as in Christianity and Islam. Again, each link in the logic is doubtful but I do not critique it here.

Karma, Exact Version with Reincarnation. If we are confined to this lifetime, it is hard to make sense of badness. If we are reborn, it is much easier. Karma has become such a common idea in the West that I don't define it here. I say more about it in a later chapter on Hinduism. The idea of karma elaborates on the basic idea of "what comes round, goes round". There really is moral justice and social justice. If we act badly now, it will come back to (haunt us) later. Likewise if we act well now, we will eventually get a

reward. Sometimes the reward or punishment returns sooner, sometimes later, sometimes in this life, and sometimes in the next life.

The most powerful use of karma for explaining badness comes when it is combined with reincarnation. What good we do affects our next lives, so we might be poor now, but, if we suffer badness well and do good, we can be reborn rich and able to help other people in the next life. If we do bad now, we can be reborn as a poor person or a mangy dog in the next life. This account is partly an explanation for badness, and partly, like the idea of heaven, it is a way to give comfort so we can endure badness. It is an explanation because the badness we encounter in this life is the result of badness that we did in past lives. In the rigid account, karma keeps a ledger in which each deeds moral quality, and its degree, is recorded, and rewarded exactly.

Karma, Poetic Version. Poetic justice is often better than exact justice. We would not necessarily learn about life, and become better people, if the acts of our previous lives put us in a horrible situation in this life. We could not get over badness if somehow karma did not lead us to see how to overcome badness. Karma would just perpetuate whatever good or bad was already in the world. Karma can lead us to situations that not only expiate our previous bad acts, or benefit from our previous good acts, but also to learn. A rich abusive person might be born into a family of church people devoted to community service or might be born into a poor family exploited by rich people. A good person might be born where he-she can see how good acts do help people, such as in a family of successful civil servants. In this version of karma, the world as a whole might be getting better continually.

The two versions of karma have a distinct flavor and imply distinct mechanisms. The exact version is like a natural deterministic mechanical law from physics, and does not require any high spiritual being as a judge. What you do has results, and that is that. But the exact version is hard for people to accept, even in religions like Buddhism. The poetic version does seem to require a high spiritual being to carry out but this being need not be God.

Almost all versions of karma take for granted that the universe (Dharma) is moral and makes sense. What happens to us according to what we do is based on good and bad. If karma did not have this base in morality, it would not make sense as a response to badness. It would not be much of an aid for making sense of the universe. The universe need not have a thinking moral personal god for karma to be based in morality. Morality runs according to rules, strict or poetic. As long as what happens to us according to our deeds follows morality, then karma can work. Religions that take morally-based karma for granted do not usually explain why the universe is intrinsically moral. Keep in mind that karma and reincarnation require that the universe be intrinsically moral; the idea is needed for the later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

Even though logically karma does not need an intelligent agent behind it, people still think morally-based karma works better with some intelligent agent. I think a desire to link karma with a moral agent persists because our sense of morality evolved along with our sense of persons.

Karma could be based on rules other than morality, and people could have multiple lives not based on karma but on other principles or on no principles at all. In these cases, karma offers little as a response to the problem of badness. No major religion accepts these alternatives. So I leave them alone here.

Playful Illusion. This account is related to the kind of cosmic mythology found in the Bhagavad Gita. This account can be related to the scientific idea that badness is an illusion, and to the Medieval Christian idea that badness is a deficit of goodness, but I do not do those exercises here. This account requires the idea of multiple lives. Badness does feel bad when it happens, it can change this life, and badness feels absolutely bad when we are suffering it. But that need not be the case. It might be that we encounter serious badness now in this life but encounter serious goodness in the next. It might be that the badness and goodness balance out, or that goodness is actually much more than the badness. We need the badness to appreciate all the goodness. Badness is a relative illusion in the overall scheme of things even if it is real enough now in this life. The true overall situation is joy to the world. This account can easily combine with the explanation through karma.

Not Important 1. Goodness and badness do exist, they are not illusions, but they just are not important. They are not nearly as important as most people think they are. They are not nearly as important as most religions make them out to be. A lot is going on in the world. Goodness and badness don't apply, or apply only weakly, to the vast majority of what is going on. If we look for goodness and badness first, then likely we will miss what is really important. For example, I probably make too much of natural evil, and thereby might miss the way that behavioral interaction evolves. All the "Not Important" ideas are relevant to Taoism and some forms of Buddhism.

Not Important 2: Stop Dwelling. Goodness and badness are real but we need to stop dwelling on them, even when we have been a victim personally, and even when we have a good case. You do not need to invite other people to use you as a doormat. Simply stop thinking about it and get on to better and more useful activities. In evolutionary terms, morality is not the only thing going on in evolutionary success. If you dwell on morality, or on any one aspect of evolutionary success, then you will likely get out of balance and fail, even if you are technically correct on this point. Seek the overall balance. Seek grace. Don't be primed to look for morality.

Not Important 3: No Government Policies. In particular, don't base government policies on moral issues. Don't make many rules. Rules focus attention on specific aspects of relations and do not allow the flexibility that people need to find the best balance, grace, and evolutionary success. A state based on morality is bound to fail. A state that does not seek to promote morality is likely to lead to the best living and thus to the best morality. However, we should not seek to minimize the role of morality in the state so we can indirectly achieve greatest morality. That is only to shoot ourselves in a big circle. We should just simply minimize formal morality, and trust in the outcome. We should minimize formal morality even if, at first, the outcome does not lead to greater moral action. Not to stress morality is not the same as saying "anything goes" or "there are no rules for people 'in the know'". To use non-stress as an excuse for indulgence is another kind of stress and another morality in disguise.

Badness is Temporary and So Slightly Less Real.

The material in this section belongs in the list of explanations for badness but it takes so long to explain that it is best by itself. The material here is important for a better understanding of karma and rebirth.

Suppose God wants us all to be good decent people but he wants us to choose that way through our free will. Few of us choose this path right away. Most of us have to learn decency and goodness. While we are learning, we cause badness. We can only learn by encountering badness. We learn best when we encounter badness that is strong but not so strong as to break us right away. Some of us don't learn in one lifetime. Some of us get broken in this lifetime, and so can't learn.

If God is fair and consistent, he has to keep giving us chances until we choose to be good decent people of our own free will. The situation is like the movie "Groundhog Day" in which Bill Murray keeps waking up to the same day over and over. At first, he acts selfishly and badly; as long as he acts that way, the bad and selfish world keeps repeating itself. Eventually he gets bored with being a jerk, and begins to act well. He helps people and improves their lives. When he finally chooses selfless helping of his own free will, then he stops repeating the same day, and he can go on to his normal life. Some people get the idea in this lifetime, and so do not need to be reborn. If necessary, some people keep getting reborn until they do get the idea. They people who do get it might not cease being reborn. They might get reborn so as to help the people who do not get it yet, and because being reborn can be fun.

Badness is real but it is not permanent. It lasts only so long as we do not choose to be good decent people, and only so long as we are reborn into a struggle against good and against bad. When we finally realize that we will act well, then badness is no longer important, it is no longer as real as it once was. It is still real, but not as real. It has its own less reality, like bad but not like evil.

The beings who stay to help us, or who come back to help us, are like the saints in Christianity or like the bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism.

Goodness and Badness (Good and Evil) Need Each Other.

This section belongs in the list of explanations but is best raised to stand by itself. This section expands on a topic mentioned above. The main point is to see how people use the coming together of goodness and badness to excuse evil, and that the argument is weak.

We can say that goodness and badness need each other in four ways:

(1) As a matter of plain fact, both goodness and badness exist together in this world. We never find one without the other. Even if we do explain their presence together through evolution (item 2), we do not explain away their presence together; and so we are still stuck with the fact. Just because goodness and badness evolved together does not mean it is an accident without meaning. We just don't know what to make of the meaning. Before modern evolutionary theory, their presence together could not be explained except "metaphysically" (item 4), and could not be explained away. I do not consider this point much in this section. I take it up below in my response to badness.

(2) The ability for morality (goodness) could not evolve without the ability for immorality (badness), and vice versa. The process of evolution leads to badness as well as to sentient-moral-aesthetic beings. I explained how this is so in Chapter Three on evolution, and so do not explain again here.

(3) Nearly all of us have to learn to be good. We learn to be good by facing badness. By this logic, the harsher the badness that we face, the better that we learn to be – at least as long as we are not broken. Goodness that is good without going through the fire of badness is not the highest good. Goodness only becomes the highest truest good by rising above the flames of badness. A lot of badness that would seem to sour the world is turned into even greater good through the efforts of good people or through the efforts of people learning to be good. True goodness always manages to turn badness into even greater goodness. God always manages to turn badness into even greater goodness. The presence of badness leads to even more goodness than if there were no badness at all. This is an idea that people often use to excuse evil.

(4) The idea of goodness implies the idea of badness, and vice versa. If we can think of one, we can think of the other, and we have to think of the other. The reality of one implies the reality of the other, the being of one implies the being of the other. Goodness and badness are “metaphysically” bound. In myth, this idea can be expressed by having the symbolic good deity and the symbolic bad deity as siblings, as Jesus and the Devil are sometimes portrayed as siblings, both sons of God. This is another idea that people often use to excuse evil. This is the idea that people often have in the back of their heads when they think of evil as a presence.

Just as I use circumstantial evidence to conclude that God exists and made this world, so a reasonable person might use similar circumstantial evidence to conclude that goodness and badness need each other. Even more, God foresaw that goodness needs badness to be truly good, and put the right amount of badness into the world to get the most goodness out.

While appealing, I am scared of this idea. I dislike the idea that God creates badness for any reason. I dislike the idea that good and evil imply each other and are bound together. This attitude raises badness to a metaphysical force. It turns badness into goodness. It allows people to take the side of badness, and to do bad things, while excusing it as really good or “really like God”.

As a matter of another fact, good does not always need evil to be good. (A) An old couple befriends a child who is not related to them and who might not advance as far without some help. Their help allows the child to grow intellectually, socially, and athletically. The child would not have suffered without their help, except in a theoretical way from comparative deprivation of what he-she might have been, so there was no active bad. Still, their help is a positive good. (B) When a strong storm comes, volunteers help the victims, and people donate to charity to help the victims. The hurt is badness but it is not usually evil. The goodness arises in response to the badness but the badness does not cause the good. The same can be said when people get cancer or get bitten by a poisonous snake.

Badness and evil can occur without a response from good. Examples are not needed. In a social group, many kinds of badness have to be met with goodness or the group could not cohere, but that fact does not mean good and bad are mutually dependent. (C) Good people have to protect innocent people from harm, or the group would fall apart, but that need does not mean good guys and bad guys are somehow mutually dependent. If the bad guys would stop hurting innocent people, good guys would still be there. (D) If bad guys stopped stealing, honest people would still be there, and would find other ways to express their honesty, such as by generous sharing.

People do overcome some kinds of badness, and thus make even more good out of situations than might have been without the badness, but not always. The point of evil is that it cannot be undone. When a bad parent kills a good parent, what can be done to overcome the evil to make the situation even better than if no evil had asserted in the first place? Good people can step in to help the children but that is not the same as making goodness even greater than if the parents had lived. We can learn to be at least somewhat good without confronting evil by responding properly to scenarios such as A, B, C, and D above. We do learn to be even more good when dealing with evil, such as when trying to make up for child abuse and war. The fact that we learn to be better does not necessarily make up for the child abuse and the war. We should not start evil so we can learn to be even better. We should not murder the parents of the family next door, but spare the children, so the neighbors can respond with kindness that the neighbors would not otherwise know was in them. Even when good responds to bad and helps as much as it can, it does not make the total sum of goodness exceed the total sum of badness. Even when good people learn very much from badness, and do some great things, that does not necessarily make the total sum of goodness exceed the total sum of badness, and it does not excuse the badness. Because of his horrible experiences in the concentration camps of World War 2, Eli Wiesel stepped up to begin great acts; that does not excuse the Holocaust, and it does not mean the total sum of goodness exceeded the total sum of evil when Wiesel and other good people learned and stepped up as a result. I am not sure which cases count as God making good out of evil, leading people to learn to be even better as a result of evil, and making the total sum of good exceed the total sum of evil. Maybe sending Jesus or another prophet counts as such a case, as the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis argued. Even if it does, I am very unhappy arguing that we are better off as a result of evil such as child abuse and war, and I am even unhappier arguing that God sent child abuse and war so that we would be better off by overcoming them.

If we wish to make a person better by being bad to him-her, how would we do it so as to get the best results? Who can gauge what to do? Even in the Book of Job in the Tanakh (Old Testament), Job was not beset with evils to make him better but to test a man who was already very good. For the average Joe, should we put him out of work, put him in a car accident, break his arm, give him herpes, give him cancer that takes years to cure, or give him incurable cancer? Can we give his children cancer as a way to make him better? What if we put so much on him that he breaks, and we end up with worse evil than before? Using evil to make good does not make sense even if sometimes people do make good out of evil.

It is realistic, and a sign of maturity, to accept that goodness and badness, including evil, appear in this world, and often appear together. It is a blessing when you can see how a good response can make a silk purse of goodness out of a sow's ear of badness. When you think goodness and badness are spiritual siblings, we can do even greater good by doing some badness, or God sends badness so we can learn to be even better, then you have veered into weirdness, and likely veered into illness. It is good to think about these issues, but keep to common sense, dignity, and humanity.

When combined with other ideas, the idea that we can get more goodness through badness can be quite bad. The other ideas include reincarnation, life is a game, the badness that is in each of our hearts, and symbiosis between good guys (decent people) and bad guys (indecent people). I discuss this situation later in the book.

There is an exception to avoiding the idea that we can get more good through evil. Art, including movies, TV, and literature, should explore this theme. It does us good to look at and get over it. This theme is fairly common now in drama about serial killers and criminal masterminds. Sometimes it is combined with the idea that the bad guy and the hero secretly want the same thing, at least for now, and what they want is more than a bit bad; this is a version of symbiosis. For example, to better chase the bad guy, the hero might want to get a dedicated good police officer out of the way, and the bad guy kills the police officer so that the two might be locked in more pure combat. The Joker sometimes helps out Batman with a little bit of “hanky-panky” so the Batman is free to devote his attention to the Joker.

All Good is from God; All Badness is from Us.

I have heard people in all the major theistic religions repeat this “slogan”. I understand it, but I am also boggled by it. It doesn’t make sense. Clearly people originate some goodness and badness. Because God made the world, and the world is overall good, it makes a kind-of sense to say that all good comes from God; but it can make no sense that every good act comes only from God. To say this implies that people are bad, or evil, in a way that goes against the clear evidence of our senses and against the idea that God created us with the capacity for good. It implies a depravity that goes against common sense and against the idea of God’s creation.

To believe this slogan goes against the idea of free will. It denies a gift of God. If we can do only bad, and we must rely on God for every good act that we do, then we have no free will. We cannot be judged. We cannot be sent to heaven or condemned to hell. Even if our only act of free will is to consent to let God work through us, still we need at least that much free will. That much free will implies more free will. Either you accept that we have free will and that we can do good on our own, or you deny that we can do good, deny that we have free will, deny the grace of God, and deny the creation of God.

Too often, people who repeat this slogan use it to avoid personal responsibility and to make other people feel confused, guilty, and weak so they can control other people. Even when they say they personally cannot do good, only God can do good, still they personally can see what is good-and-from-God while other people can’t see what is good and can’t sense the will of God. As a result of their superior insight, the people who repeat this slogan have a right to tell other people how to behave, and, in fact, they are better than other people. By restricting good to God, and having the only access to God, they also have a monopoly on what is good and what is of God. The more they deny in theory that good cannot come from people but only from God, the more they manipulate other people in practice, and the more they expose their hypocrisy. Thankfully, other people rarely believe them.

I understand the piety that goes into such a slogan, at least for some people. In this case, piety is not an affirmation of God but is an effective denial of God and his gift of free will and responsibility. This kind of piety is really blasphemy by the standards of most theology, although inadvertent and well-intentioned blasphemy. Sometimes we have to rise above one kind of piety to accept the gifts of God, in this case the gifts of free will and responsibility, so as to achieve another higher kind of piety.

Beyond Good and Evil.

This section is optional, and is a bit of self-indulgence. This section explains an attitude toward goodness and badness, an attitude associated with the thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote in the late 1800s. The attitude lingers in the background of disputes even when we don't recognize the attitude. It is at the heart of what people fear about modern science, especially Darwinism, and modern philosophy. People fear this attitude erodes all morality. The attitude is coded in the slogan "might makes right".

When people face the facts that badness is an intrinsic part of this world, and that goodness and badness often go together, they get uneasy. When people see that other people use goodness as a tool of their own self-interest, they get annoyed with the whole idea of goodness, and the whole idea of good versus evil. The vast majority of life is run without reference to strong ideas of good and evil. When we invoke good and evil, usually something even worse is about to happen. It makes sense to think of a situation beyond both good and evil where people can just get on with their lives.

The title of this section is also the title of a book by Nietzsche. When most people hear the phrase, they think of something sinister, and usually should. In the first Harry Potter book, "The Philosopher's Stone", Voldemort, Tom Riddle, tries to win over Harry by saying there is no real good and bad, there is only power. Good and bad are illusions. In Western literature, this idea is a common delusion of bad guys. In the case of Tom Riddle, power clearly was on the side of badness. So, the message is not really "beyond good and evil" but "lay down your sense of morality so as to act badly without feeling bad". Whenever anybody talks about "beyond morality" or "beyond naïve simpleminded good and bad" usually it ends up serving bad. Good people do not try to soar above morality.

(1) Nietzsche meant the phrase in other ways. Nietzsche protested against simple minded morality that wants black and white "goody goody" ideas of good and bad. Nietzsche was not a simple relativist, and he would not excuse people who used relativism to their own advantage. He would not enable users. He demanded some intelligence and awareness in human life. Unfortunately, Nietzsche has been used by "bad guys" to excuse their bad behavior; Tom Riddle was echoing the misuse of Nietzsche.

(2) Nietzsche argued against using morality to serve other ends in disguise. The middle class and upper middle class use morality when they are smug in their success and their moral superiority. The poor use morality when they invoke morality not because they really think it is correct to help them but because they want stuff, they want people to enable their reproduction, and they want other people to enable their irresponsibility.

(3) Nietzsche argued against morality-in-disguise that hurt society by enabling bad behavior, protecting people who should be weeded out, and diverting resources away from people who deserved more. Helping the poor often enabled bad and weak people to carry on at the expense of good smart people. Ideas about morality did not often come from strong successful people but from weak failed people who wanted a tool to use.

(4) As a special case of three, Nietzsche called the morality that came from the lower classes "slave morality", and said Christianity propagates slave morality. Nietzsche thought of all simple-minded morality, and all morality used as a tool, as slave morality. Even the middle and upper classes acted as slaves when they used the idea of good-and-evil in self interest.

(5) As a consequence of all the points so far, Nietzsche rejected the distinction between good and evil but did not reject the distinction between good and bad. There is bad but there is not necessarily evil. Evil is not a useful category and might be an illusion foisted on us by people that wish to promote slave morality for their own sake. The distinction between good and bad is much like the distinction between practical versus impractical or useful versus wasteful. Substituting “evil” for “bad” changes the perspective. It makes contrasts deeper and creepier. It makes it harder for ordinary practical people to argue against a position. It forces a moral perspective out of something that should not necessarily be argued in moral terms. It raises simple minded morality into a cosmic force.

(6) Nietzsche saw another kind of behavior which he far preferred to simple minded morality, slave morality, or the morality of good versus evil. It is the behavior of noble heroic people. Although Nietzsche did not call it morality, he clearly had in mind that kind of behavior as “true morality” as opposed to slave morality. Heroic people think in terms of good and bad rather than in terms of good versus evil. People should seek heroic morality. People cannot seek heroic morality as long as they are duped by appeals to simple minded slave morality. People cannot seek true heroic morality as long as they are caught in the trap of good versus “evil”.

(7) Although Nietzsche came before the modern theory of evolution, he understood that the sense of morality must have arisen somehow out of other needs. In particular, morality must have arisen out of manipulating other people. Power plays a role in his ideas similar to that of natural selection. If morality came out of power, then power is older and deeper than morality. Power is what it is all about. Power is what we should pay attention to.

(8) Because it so often does happen in real life, we think power automatically leads to bad behavior. But, for Nietzsche, unlike for Tom Riddle, this need not be so. Power is power. It can promote other ends, including goodness. “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people”. Power is a tool. The struggle for power led to the birth of heroic behavior. Heroic morality could not arise in any other way. Nietzsche wanted to make sure that the search for power led to the cultivation of heroic morality rather than slave morality.

I admire Nietzsche but I dislike the misuses to which he has been put. I dislike anybody using morality as a tool and I dislike slave morality. I dislike whining and I dislike enabling. I admire heroic morality, and I think heroic morality approaches the ideal morality of “do unto others” and “applies equally” that Jesus taught, tempered with empathy for the down-and-out and the excluded that Jesus also taught.

My response to the idea that “might makes right” repeats my argument from the evolution of morality. If it were simply true that “might makes right”, then there would be no need for “right”, there would be no need for morality, and there would be no morality. Morality would be redundant. It would be an irritating middle step between having power and getting what you want. Even if morality were an additional tool of power sometimes, it would be a greater burden to power at other times. Powerful people would not need it, and it would not arise. There would be only power. The capacity for morality would not have evolved.

Whining people on the lower end of society (slaves) can get away with using morality as a tool often, too often, but they should not be able to get away with it forever. In full morality, responsibility comes along with rights, and the people who use morality as a tool to get enabled eventually have to come to grips with responsibility. The people who get cajoled into enabling eventually wake up to full morality including

responsibility, and stop enabling, not only because it is hurtful to them but also because it is hurtful to the enabled people and it is the wrong thing to do.

Powerful people and rich people are not necessarily good people. Being successful is not a sign of moral status. Nietzsche did not make this mistake but many people promote the ideology of “success is a sign of God’s grace and our moral superiority” as their way of using morality as a tool. They combine this idea with a hatred of slaves and slave morality, and define all opponents as slaves with slave morality. The idea that success indicates moral superiority is as wrong as slave morality. It is a kind of slave morality in reflection. Living in the Romantic era, we should not be susceptible to this mistake but the evolved allure of success is so strong that we do make it anyway. We like to think that successful people are also better people, and that we are one of them.

Once we allow that morality is real, we have to see that it has its own logic, the logic of “do unto others” and “applies equally”. Power, and slave mentality, can make use of the feeling for morality and can twist it, but they cannot change the root logic and they cannot get rid of it entirely either. Once we have morality and develop a feel for the root logic of morality, then morality does not simply serve might or serve slaves. Might does not make right. Whining does not make right. Right makes right even if right can be twisted and misused.

I am not sure how Nietzsche would respond to my response. Because I think true morality and heroic morality go together often, I hope he would be sympathetic.

My Response to Badness.

I do not offer a comprehensive explanation of badness. I only repeat what I said before.

Regardless of the questions above, the overall response is the same. Right here, right now, you strive to act well and to avoid acting badly. Whatever the metaphysical background, this is the only consistent response. Even if you believe that goodness and badness need each other, or if you strive to get beyond good and evil, still you do good right here and right now, and don’t obsess about it. This answer is so simple that there is no point elaborating on it. As for the details, I can offer some opinions:

God does not test us. God did not put extra badness into the world as a test.

Some badness is inherent in the evolutionary process, and some badness necessarily arises because we have free will. We have enough free will to choose good too.

I don’t know if there is more good than bad in the world, or if the world is better overall because there is some badness. I don’t know if God put just the right amount of badness into the world to make sure the sum total of goodness is greatest. I doubt it very much.

God created the world knowing there would be some badness. I am not sure if this implies a limit on God’s powers. I do not know if God could have created the world so there would be more badness than there is now or less badness. If God could have chosen a different level of badness, I don’t know why he chose this level of badness.

The badness in the world allows us to learn to be better. There is enough badness in the world already for us to learn to be better without adding any more badness. We can help others deal when they face badness, and should.

God foresaw that we could learn from the badness that is an intrinsic part of the world. God allowed the world to have some badness so that we would learn from the badness and so be even better people. I do not know if God put just the right kind and amount of badness in the world, or put too little or too much. I do not know if God feels responsible for the badness that breaks people.

Sometimes we feel that we encounter incidents of badness, or bad people, to teach us in particular, as an individual, lessons, and so make us better. We feel as if God steers badness towards us so that we will learn and so be better, rather like a teacher tailors lessons for particular students. This scheme is not the same as God testing us. This feeling is likely false, although it might be true in some very small number of cases. God set up the world so that it would automatically teach all the lessons that we need. There is enough variety in the world, including enough bad people and bad incidents, so we can learn to be good without God having to micromanage our lives.

I doubt we keep getting reborn until we are all good decent useful people. Maybe some people who got a really raw deal in this lifetime do get another chance. Most people learn a little goodness but not a lot of goodness, and they just disappear when they die.

When we think about goodness and badness, we have to keep in mind free will and the real riskiness of the world. If God tailor-made a plan for everybody so that everybody would eventually learn to be a fully decent good person, that situation would not quite defeat free will and the real risk of the world, but it almost would. If everybody were kept around long enough so that eventually everybody learned to be a good decent person, even through their own choice, that situation would not quite defeat free will and the real risk of the world, but it almost would. If we know it will last long enough until all of us are as good as good can be, then there is no real free will and no real risk. This outcome is comforting, and it might be what a Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva would like, but it is not consistent with what I think about how people are and how the real risky world is. If badness is just an illusion, then there is no free will and there is no real risk to the world.