

# Evil

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson covers evil. The problem of evil is a haunting dilemma for humanity. The etymology of the word can be traced back to the Indo-European root “wap,” which means simply “evil” or “bad.” Usually, an Indo-European root points to other meanings that are connected to the modern terms through a web of other signifiers. But when you get down to it, evil is just evil. This lesson looks at how evil is regarded among some of the religions of world. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

### 1. Evil

### 2. Judgment

### 3. Evil in Eastern Religions

#### 3a. Hinduism

#### 3b. Confucianism

#### 3c. Taoism

## 1. Evil

Although evil seems to poke its head into every era and every culture, it has been predominantly a topic of concern, study, and analysis in the west among the monotheistic religions. However, polytheistic religions, such as certain ancient Egyptian religions, also had references to the forces of evil, sometimes in the form of gods.



### DID YOU KNOW

One such god is Set, the god of storms and chaos. In many sects, he was terribly feared, not trusted because he chose to remain separated from the other gods. This hints at the dualism between good and evil.

This sharp dualism between good and evil—particularly emphasized in the Jewish and Christian traditions—is also a characteristic of Zoroastrianism, one of the ancient Persian religions from the region of present-day Iran.

Its founder was a man named Zoroaster who wanted to simplify the Pantheon of gods. He divided the system up into what he believed to be two oppositional forces represented by Ahura Mazda, known as “illuminating

wisdom,” and Angra Mainyu, or “destructive spirit.” This dualistic element of the Zoroastrian religion, after serving as the state religion for a few hundred years, had various influences on the monotheistic religions.

Analyzing this problem of evil in the light of notions of God as an omnipotent, beneficent creator is known as **theodicy**. It’s a philosophical, theological attempt to justify God’s goodness despite the reality of evil. There are many attempts at this, but theodicies generally try to show that God is not responsible for evil and that evil manifests when goodness is corrupted by individuals.

One key force or factor in this structure of dualism is the idea of individual **free will**, a doctrine explicated in great detail by certain Christian theologians beginning with Saint Augustine in the fourth century in the Common Era. The doctrine of free will suggests that, as individuals created by God, humans have the freedom to choose and decide how to behave. This is the freedom to choose between what is right and what is wrong and between good and evil.

In his 1940 book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes, “When we act from ourselves alone, that is, from God in ourselves, we are collaborators in or live instruments of creation, and that is why such an act undoes with backward mutters of dissevering power, the uncreative spell which Adam laid upon his species.”

This has to do with an abuse of free will. It’s the idea that mankind made a fatal error by disobeying God’s command in the Garden of Eden. It’s a story of Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, being cast out of paradise, and becoming subject to illness, old age, and death.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Theodicy

A philosophical attempt to justify God’s goodness despite the reality of evil.

##### Free Will

The ability to choose between good and evil, prominent in the religious philosophy of Augustine.

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## 2. Judgment

Following this, a person’s future destination in either the realm of Heaven or Hell will ultimately be determined by God’s judgment of his or her actions in life on **Judgment Day**, the day on which God will call human beings to account for their sins and other misdeeds.

With regard to the problem of evil, the complex relationship between God’s creation and God’s judgment is often understood as a single act. This interpretation highlights God’s goodness and omnibenevolence.

In Judaism, the day of judgment is recognized every year as Rosh Hashanah, and God’s final verdict is sealed on the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur. This is a day of fasting and praying to God as repentance for any and all wrongdoings.

As noted in the beginning, all religions grapple with the problem of evil. The other Abrahamic tradition that we haven’t mentioned yet is Islam, which also emphasizes God, or Allah, as omnibenevolent and a just creator. Evil is something that arises from people’s actions independent of God and ultimately a corrupted force.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Judgment Day

The day on which God will call all human beings to account for their sins and other misdeeds.

## 3. Evil in Eastern Religions

In the Eastern religions, very generally, evil is understood as ignorance and illusion. Any Western dualisms between good and evil don't directly apply. In Buddhism, for example, it's the structure and the deep roots of suffering that might be considered evil in the sense that they obstruct the path toward enlightenment. Ultimately, suffering is caused by the endless clinging and grasping for identity, which is constantly changing and in flux. Being impermanent, any identity, the associated experience of suffering, and even notions of evil are mere illusions.

### 3a. Hinduism

In Hinduism, any idea of evil has to do with actions or karma. Actions that are impure might cause one to endure the rounds of reincarnation. Karma determines how things unfold, for better or for worse. Free actions are often misinformed and misguided. Then this brings further interpretations that are inaccurate, producing negative results. This hinders spiritual development. In this sense, they could therefore be termed evil. Because humans are ignorant of Brahman—the ultimate source and divine principle of being—and of Atman—our true selfhood—which is identical with Brahman, we grasp onto what we think is real, such as our images of selfhood and even ideas and conceptions of good and evil.

### 3b. Confucianism

Some interpreters of Confucian thought understand evil as anything that corrupts the harmony, balance, strength, and integrity of society. Any manifestations of evil are nevertheless opportunities to reaffirm the values of order, discipline, respect for authority, and the stabilizing force of healthy relationships in society. These are some of the foundational principles of Confucianism.

### 3c. Taoism

The notion of evil according to Taoism, or for someone who is following the path of the Tao, might be understood a little bit differently. Any corruption of the pure state of nature, known as the **uncarved block**, might be considered the unfortunate work of society. The path of a Taoist would, therefore, include disregarding any such negative, evil influences.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Uncarved Block

In Taoism, the original state of the human mind, before and independent of experience.



#### SUMMARY

This lesson started out talking about **evil** with reference to ancient Egyptian religions. Set, the god of the chaos and destruction, was regarded as evil because he had made the choice to separate himself from the other gods. Other conceptions of evil are not dissimilar. In Zoroastrianism, there was a separation between two forces. This was the beginning of a dualistic structure of thought with regard to evil, which had a big influence upon the monotheistic religions. You looked at the example from Judaism of Lucifer, who also desired autonomy from God and as a result became separated. This is often thought to be the origin of sin and evil. This lesson also covered disobeying divine authority in terms of Adam and Eve and how this was related to the idea of free will. Evil, free will, and **judgment** all play together in the monotheistic religions. You also looked at Judgment Day and the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. **Evil in Eastern religions** is looked at a little differently. Evil is really regarded as something of an illusion. It is something that either obstructs the path to enlightenment or something that disrupts the order and balance and harmony of society.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Free Will

The ability to choose between good and evil, prominent in the religious philosophy of Augustine.

### Judgment Day

The day on which God will call all human beings to account for their sins and other misdeeds.

### Theodicy

A philosophical attempt to justify God's goodness despite the reality of evil.

### Uncarved Block

In Taoism, the original state of the human mind, before and independent of experience.