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### The Problem of Evil

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## The Problem of Evil

*The garden of Eden.* In the garden of God's planting, mentioned in Genesis second chapter, and into which man was brought and made the keeper, were two special trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of this tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Lord said to Adam: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). Thus God's commandment to man; thus the challenge of law to man's obedience, the application of God's pre-determined test:

We will make an earth whereon these ⟨preexistent spirits of men⟩ may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; And they who keep their first estate ⟨i.e. preexistent spirit estate⟩ shall be added upon; . . . and they who keep their second estate ⟨man's earth estate⟩ shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever. (Abr. 3:24-26)

*Symbols of knowledge and life: The tree of death and the tree of life.* In the above symbols, together with the announced penalties to follow disobedience, we have assembled the great mysteries of this world—life, death, good, evil, the fact of man's agency—power to order his own course, to obey or disobey **God**; continued life for obedience, which is but conformation to the law of life; and death for disobedience, or departure from the conditions on which life is predicated. The tree of life was the symbol of eternal life, for later when man had partaken of the fruit of the tree of death—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—God is represented as saying, in effect, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, *and eat, and live for ever*;" let us send him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground,

and guard the tree of life by cherubims with a flaming sword. And so it was ordered (Gen. 3:22-25; italics added).

Death was symbolized in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (in the day thou eatest of it, thou shalt surely die), hence the tree of death. Death, we learn from scriptures other than Genesis, is both temporal and spiritual. What is here called temporal death is physical death, separation of the spirit and body, the dust returning to the earth whence it came; but the spirit, being a thing immortal, survives in conscious life and goes to the world of spirits. “Dust thou art, and [un]to dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19), was not written of the spirit of man. The spiritual death is disruption of the union of the soul of man with God, and hence spiritual death, since union with God is the source of man’s spiritual life. But while partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge would bring death, both spiritual (**separation from God—hence from good**) and temporal (**separation of spirit and body—physical death**); yet it would bring also the knowledge that would make men as Gods, to know good and evil; and so far become like Gods.<sup>a</sup>

*The world’s great mystery—the existence of evil.* Here let us face this world’s great mystery, the existence of evil, especially of moral evil, which one high in religious and philosophical thought speaks of as “the real riddle of existence—the problem which confounds all philosophy, aye, and all religion too.” He represents that the real riddle is “that evil should exist at all!” “Against this immovable barrier of the existence of evil,” he continues,

the waves of philosophy have dashed themselves unceasingly since the birthday of human thought, and have retired broken and powerless, without displacing the minutest fragment of the stubborn rock, without softening one feature of its dark and rugged surface.<sup>1</sup>

*Testimony from the Book of Mormon: Lehi on the eternity of evil.* In the Book of Mormon, which here we hold to be an ancient volume of American Scripture written by the inspiration of God in its prophets and seers, and translated also by the inspiration of God, is a master stroke of philosophy, as also an authoritative theological doctrine of highest value, the doctrine of necessary opposition in all things, the antinomies of the universe. This Book of Mormon treatise on necessary opposite existences, boldly carries the necessity of such existences to such an extreme that the sacred writer Lehi (of the first part

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<sup>a</sup>Roberts corrected Draft 2 to read *Gods*.

<sup>1</sup>Mansel, *Limits of Religious Thought*, 197.

of the fifth [*sic*] century B.C.), makes existence itself, and even the existence of God, to depend upon the fact of things existing in duality: “things to act and things to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:14). Opposite physical forces are seen in attraction and repulsion, the centripetal and centrifugal forces, the action and reaction of which hold the worlds in balance; in ~~the~~ chemistry, the composing and decomposing substances; in electricity, the positive and negative forces; and in the whole universe is to be seen what is called the antinomy, or opposites, of light and darkness, movement and repose, energy and matter, heat and cold, life and death; “the one and the multiple”; in the moral order, good and evil, joy and sorrow, courage and cowardice, righteousness and wickedness. And now Lehi’s statement of the case and his reasoning thereon, and his startling conclusion:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things **(i.e. in that event)** must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God. And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, *neither to act nor to be acted upon*; wherefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Ne. 2:11–13; italics added)

*This doctrine unique to modern revelations.* The antinomies of the universe—things in necessary duality, essential to the existence of things at all—is the doctrine of this passage. Who before this in ancient times taught this doctrine? Who of modern times, prior to 1830, the year in which the Book of Mormon was published, ever taught it? And especially whoever, either in ancient or modern times, ever carried the daring thought to the height of making existences of the universe and the universe itself, and even the existence of God, depend upon the existence of things in duality, in a necessary opposition in all things? I shall make bold to claim this as a uniqueness of the Nephite scripture. But pride of it is not in its uniqueness, but in the self-evident truth of it, and in the tremendous consequences that draw with it, and the light

it throws athwart the world's mystery of the existence of evil; the aid it is to philosophy; the aid it is to religion; the assistance it will afford in our exposition of the fall of man.

*Evil among the eternal things.* We can be assured from the Book of Mormon doctrine that evil as well as good is among the eternal things. The existence of evil did not begin with its appearance on our earth. Evil existed even in heaven; for Lucifer and many other spirits sinned there; rebelled against heaven's matchless King, waged "war," and were thrust out into the earth for their transgression.

Evil is not a created quality. It has always existed as the background of good. It is as eternal as goodness; it is as eternal as law; it is as eternal as the agency of intelligences. Sin, which is ~~active~~ *evil*, is transgression of law, and so long as the agency of intelligences and law have existed, the possibility of the transgression of law has existed; and as the agency of intelligences, and law have eternally existed, so, too, evil has existed eternally, either potentially or active, and will always so exist. Evil may not be referred to God for its origin. He is not its creator. Evil is one of those independent existences that is uncreate, and stands in the category of qualities of eternal things.<sup>2</sup> The good cannot exist without the antithesis of ~~the~~ evil, the foil on which it produces itself and becomes known. The existence of one implies the existence of the other; and conversely, the non-existence of the latter would imply the nonexistence of the former. It is from this basis that Lehi reached the conclusion that either his doctrine of the existence of opposites is true, or else there is no existence.

Lehi's conclusion is woven into the very fabric of the things of the universe. It cannot be otherwise. The opposite, the absence of one or

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<sup>2</sup>Lest some text-proofer should retort upon me and cite the words of Isaiah, "I make peace *and create evil*," the only text of scripture ascribing the creation of evil to God, I will anticipate so far as to say that it is quite generally agreed that no reference is made in the words of Isaiah to "moral evil"; but to such evils as may come as judgments upon people for their correction, such as famine, or tempest, or war; such an "evil" as would stand in natural antithesis to "peace," which word precedes, "I create evil," in the text—"I make peace and create"—the opposite to peace, "The evils of afflictions and punishments, but not the evil of sin" (*Catholic Bible*, comment on Isaiah 45:7). Meantime we have the clearest scriptural evidence that moral evil is not a product of God: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man," that is to say, God has nothing to do with the creation of moral evil, "but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (James 1:13-15). "The evil and the good are necessary co-relatives." Lodge, "Christianity and Science," 657.

the other member in a given series of antitheses is unthinkable. The fact of the **existence reality** of opposite existences must be recognized as a necessary truth, a truth the opposite of which is inconceivable.

*The testimony of a modern (Harvard) philosopher:* Since the publication of the Book of Mormon (spring of 1830), consideration of this subject of evil has been more frequent and fuller, but in none of these more recent discussions is to be found those who in consideration of the theme take on the coloring of Lehi's conclusions until you come to John Fiske, professor, historian and philosopher of Harvard fame, from whose writings is to be obtained full warrant for all that the Book of Mormon passage on opposite existences sets forth, and this in his great treatise on the "Mystery of Evil" (1899) and published in his *Studies in Religion*.

Mr. Fiske says:

Whatever exists is part of the dramatic whole, and this can quickly be proved. The goodness in the world—all that we love and praise and emulate—we are ready enough to admit into our scheme of things, and to rest upon it our belief in God. The misery, the pain, the wickedness, we would fain leave out. But if there were no such thing as evil, how could there be such a thing as goodness? Or to put it somewhat differently, if we had never known anything but goodness, how could we ever distinguish it from evil? How could we recognize it as good? How would its quality of goodness in any wise interest or concern us? This question goes down to the bottom of things, for it appeals to the fundamental conditions according to which conscious intelligence exists at all. Its answer will therefore be likely to help us. It will not enable us to solve the problem of evil, enshrouded as it is in a mystery impenetrable by finite intelligence, but it will help us to state the problem correctly; and surely this is no small help. In the mere work of purifying our intellectual vision there is that which heals and soothes us. To learn to see things without distortion is to prepare one's self for taking the world in the right mood, and in this we find strength and consolation. . . .

It is an undeniable fact that we cannot know anything whatever except as contrasted with something else. The contrast may be bold and sharp, or it may dwindle into a slight discrimination, but it must be there. If the figures on your canvas are indistinguishable from the background, there is surely no picture to be seen. Some element of unlikeness, some germ of antagonism, some chance for discrimination, is essential to every act of knowing. I might have illustrated this point concretely without all the foregoing explanation, but I have aimed at paying it the respect due to its vast importance. I have wished to show how the fact that we cannot know anything whatever except as contrasted with something else is a fact that is deeply rooted in the innermost structure of the human mind. It is not a superficial but a



fundamental truth, that if there were no colour but red it would be exactly the same thing as if there were no colour at all. . . .

If our palates had never come in contact with any tasteful thing save sugar, we should know no more of sweetness than of bitterness. If we had never felt physical pain, we could not recognize physical pleasure. For want of the contrasted background its pleasurable-ness would be nonexistent. And in just the same way it follows that without knowing that which is morally evil we could not possibly recognize that which is morally good. Of these antagonist correlatives, the one is unthinkable in the absence of the other. In a sinless and painless world, human conduct might possess more outward marks of perfection than any saint ever dreamed of; but the moral element would be lacking; the goodness would have no more significance in our conscious life than that load of atmosphere which we are always carrying about with us.

We are thus brought to a striking conclusion, the essential soundness of which cannot be gainsaid. In a happy world there must be sorrow and pain, and in a moral world the knowledge of evil is indispensable. The stern necessity for this has been proved to inhere in the innermost constitution of the human soul. It is part and parcel of the universe. To him who is disposed to cavil at the world which God has in such wise created, we may fairly put the question whether the prospect of escape from its ills would ever induce him to put off this human consciousness, and accept in exchange some form of existence unknown and inconceivable! The alternative is clear: on the one hand a world with sin and suffering, on the other hand an unthinkable world in which conscious life does not involve contrast.

The profound truth of Aristotle's remark is thus more forcibly than ever brought home to us. We do not find that evil has been interpolated into the universe from without; we find that, on the contrary, it is an indispensable part of the dramatic whole.<sup>3</sup>

*Summary of Fiske's contribution.* There can be no doubt that this is strong and direct support to the essential things in Lehi's philosophy. Let me throw the evidence of it in sight:

Whatever exists is part of the dramatic whole. . . . This question goes down to the bottom of things, for it appeals to the fundamental conditions according to which conscious intelligence exists at all; . . . It is an undeniable fact that we can not know anything whatever except as contrasted with something else; . . . If the figures on your canvas are indistinguishable from the background, there is surely no picture to be seen. . . . It is not a superficial but a fundamental truth that if there were no colour but red, it would be exactly the same thing as if there were no colour at all (so as to **the** good). . . . If we had

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<sup>3</sup>Fiske, *Studies in Religion*, 242-43, 249-52.

never felt physical pain, we could not recognize physical pleasure. . . . Without knowing that which is morally evil, we could not possibly recognize that which is morally good. . . . In a happy world there must be sorrow and pain, . . . and in a moral world the knowledge of evil is indispensable. . . . We do not find that evil has been interpolated into the universe from without; we find that, on the contrary, it is an indispensable part of the dramatic whole.<sup>4</sup>

*God did not create evil, nor is he responsible for it.* From this view of things we get a new conception of evil. It is not a created thing, it exists in the sum of things, in the constitution of things. It is “part of the dramatic whole.” As already suggested God is not the creator of evil. It is repulsive to every worthy thought of Deity to think so; and contrary to the unity and consistency of his attributes of righteousness and true holiness, and justice and love that he should be the author of evil, or the creator of the devil to produce evil, and be responsible for it in our world or in any other world, for in that case God would still be responsible for the existence of evil.

Evil rests upon the eternal nature of things, of existences in both their eternal positive and negative forms. God did not create space (i.e. expanse or extension in which things exist); God did not create duration—limitless time; God did *not* create matter—the stuff that things are made of, and that occupies space; God did not create force, or energy, or mind, or intelligence—the thing in Lehi’s philosophy which “acts.” All these are eternal things, and God working among these brings to pass changes and ordains events, these his creative acts. God is not the author of evil or wickedness; neither did he create the devils of this or of other worlds; such devils as exist are intelligences possessed of free moral agency, who chose to do evil and rebelled against good and against God, and have had perverse inclination to seek to induce other intelligences to follow their evil course. There is no more mystery about the existence *of devils, than there is about the existence* of evil men. Meanwhile, but apart from devils or evil-minded wicked men, evil exists eternally, active or potential, in the very constitution of things. By the side of the virtue of courage lurks the evil of danger, without which courage would be unknown. In the same way, good must have its background of evil, else it would never be known; to employ Fiske’s illustration: “If the figures on your canvas are indistinguishable from the background, there is surely no picture to be seen.” So it stands that evil is as eternal as good; as eternal as space, or duration or matter or force. God did not create any of these things, nor is he

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<sup>4</sup>Fiske, *Studies in Religion*, 242–43, 249–52.



responsible for them. He found himself, so to speak, coeternal with these other eternal things, and so works out his creative designs in harmony with those existences; not creating intelligences, but begetting intelligences, spirits. God is not responsible for the inner fact of them, the entity which ultimately determines the intellectual and moral character of spirits and of men, which are but spirits incarnate in human bodies. God is not responsible for their nature as if he had created them absolutely of nothing—intelligences, spirits, men; and created them as he would have them, measuring to each severally as he pleased to have them in intellectual degree and intensity of moral value. Had he so absolutely created them, he could have made the man of lowly degree the same as the man of highest degree: the man of brute mind and nature the same as the man of refined sentiment and aesthetic instincts. Why this inequality, if God absolutely created men, intelligence, spirit, body; and created them as he willed to have them, and could have had them different had he so willed? Why then did he not have them of higher grade all round? Why were not all the men made brave and all the women fair? The answer to all this is that God did all that could be done as the immanent, eternally, active, and creating and causing power in the universe under the limitations of other eternal existences such as we have previously enumerated, and including consideration of the intractableness of the material with which the Creator had to work. If that did not eventuate in the best conceivable of worlds, under the limitations of our human thinking, we may be assured that it has resulted in the best of possible worlds. And while this best possible world presents apparent limitation to the power of its Creator, such as he may not create space, nor matter, nor force, nor intelligence; nor annihilate evil, yet all the power that is, creative, or destructive, or controlling is his; he holds it, and hence he is all-powerful; all the might that exists is his; hence he is the Almighty; all the good that exists is his, hence he is the All Good; and the All Benevolent, and the All Loving One, for the same reason that he is the Almighty.

These are matters that affect our conceptions of God, and have now of a long time puzzled the minds of men leading to such troublesome questions as these.

*Troublesome problems: Antitheses of Epicurus.* If God is absolutely omnipotent, why does he not prevent evil? The fact that evil exists and persists, generally in the economy of the world, leads to the conclusion that the Deity is limited in power.

If God is absolutely benevolent or good why has he created a world where pain, sorrow, suffering, and death, are the common lot of men?

And the conclusion formed from such a question is that either the Creator is not benevolent, or that again he is limited in power. The most celebrated formula of these time-worn problems is known as the antitheses of Epicurus, namely:

- (1) Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent.
- (2) Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent!
- (3) Is he both able and willing? Then why is evil?

These questions are supposed to present an *impasse* to any harmony in the nature of Deity on the basis of his omnipotence, benevolence and the existence of evil. Yet in the light of our reflections in this chapter on evil, and especially in the light of the philosophy of Lehi in the Book of Mormon and John Fiske's faultless reasoning, the antitheses of Epicurus are not so formidable as might otherwise appear.

*Answer to Epicurus.* God may not be able to prevent evil and destroy the source of it, but he is not impotent, for he guides intelligences, notwithstanding evil, to kingdoms of peace and security. Evil is a means of progress, for progress is overcoming evil.

God may not be able, nor willing if he were able, to prevent evil, and yet he is not malevolent. For knowing that evil exists in the whole scheme of things as the necessary antithesis of good, and that one may not be destroyed without destroying both, why wreck the universe in order to prevent evil? And which if achieved would be the greatest of evils, since all things else would go with it.

"Why then is evil?" the last of the questions of Epicurus? The answer is, that it is a necessary and eternal part of "the dramatic whole," as set forth in both Lehi's philosophy and John Fiske's **faultless** reasoning. And the kingdom of righteousness wherein dwelleth peace, the beatific vision and hope of the faithful, is the kingdom to be won by the conquest over evil; and which never may be realized but by that conquest.

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Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Baring-Gould, *Origin and Development of Religious Belief* 2:22-23; Emerson, "Compensation"; Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 2:54-59; Gen. 1-3; 2 Ne. 2; and Alma 42. This chapter draws verbatim on many sections of Roberts's essay entitled "A Master Stroke of Philosophy in the Book of Mormon," *Deseret News*, Church Section, June 16, 1928, 5. For additional discussion about the problem of evil, see pages 607, 610-13 below.