

**Chad Meister**

*Evil: A Guide for the Perplexed.*

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Evil has been deemed many things—and no-thing. In some circles, it is said to be its own, animating force; in others, an illusion or something dependent upon, and a perversion of, the good. Evil may be redeemable or not; necessary or not; ultimately addressed or not. It may be the death-knell for any omnipotent, morally perfect Divine Being (the theodicy question) or addressed and vanquished by that Being. Evil may entail certain key attributes (inexcusability, intentional harm, blatant disregard for others) that limit its applicability. Or it may embrace protean, inclusive ones that expand its reach and field. For some, evil is rooted in semantics and linguistics; for others, within the cosmos and the stirrings, desires, and prohibitions by whatever is called divine. In an exam, students inevitably talk about natural and moral evil; clever ones greatly nuance these categories and perhaps add others (existential, gratuitous, useless, horrendous, genocidal, bureaucratic, Machiavellian, and so on).

Some acts may be thought universally evil, but one's era, religion, culture, law, and society play important roles in encoding, deciding, and maintaining the alleged evilness of certain acts, institutions, individual human beings, or other entities. Here, too, there is much debate. In the Middle Ages, animals were sometimes tried and executed for playing some role in malice and suffering. Are all human beings potentially evil? Is it a state that one chooses or becomes? Can those judged to be evil redeem themselves? Is the term itself evil, sowing discord and a false sense of privilege or status to those proclaimed good, the light, the godly? How do atheists or Buddhists name and perceive evil, if at all?

Continuum's *Guide for the Perplexed* series includes titles devoted specifically to many key philosophical and religious thinkers, but ultimately any challenging subject, person, or writer. They are intended to be concise, readable, and lucid. While we are all inevitably perplexed, and about some areas more than others, evil would be at the top of many people's lists. Such texts inevitably have their intrinsic strengths and weaknesses. Experts, perhaps pointing to longer tomes, may highlight lack of nuance or sufficient depth in such introductory texts. The sheer volume, extent and breadth of those who have written on evil further complicates the aim of also being concise and readable. Can anyone write such a work on evil for the perplexed? This would seem to require deep, interdisciplinary, and interfaith knowledge, humility, and circumspection. As its author, Chad Meister, appropriately jokes (after establishing his credentials on the topic), '... I wonder if a better subtitle for this book might be a *Guide by the Perplexed!*' (vi).

Meister is a Professor of Philosophy at Bethel College. Among his other works, he is the co-editor of *God is Great, God is Good*. He is also a forthcoming editor of a six-volume work on the *History of Evil*. The latter book obviously reveals the depth and breadth Meister brings to this work, while the former volume provides a certain context for Meister's own treatment of evil. As a theologian who also writes in this area, this is by no means a criticism. It does remind

us, however, that such a guide could be substantially different if a secular philosopher or Taoist or Sufi were its author. Meister is cognizant of these issues. He writes that ‘This is a philosophical work on evil’ (vi) and helpfully includes chapters on evil in Buddhism and Hinduism and evil from atheist/secular perspectives. His aim is to be fairly balanced and open while critically engaging with issues like evil and karma or evil and evolution.

The work is certainly useful as an introduction to the complexity and mystery of studies on evil. It is logically arranged in seven chapters. In addition to those noted above, chapters include the meaning of evil; types of evil; theodicy; God’s hiddenness; and the relationship of evil, justice, and the afterlife. The suggested readings at the end of each chapter are appropriate and helpfully summarized. I also praise Meister’s intention to include areas of praxis, with suggestions (107–8) that close the book’s predominantly theoretical and philosophical focus on evil.

There are moments in the book, however, that too tidily “solve” some dilemmas or aim to be accessible to the reader where mystery, messiness, question marks, and yes, perplexity, would have been more useful. In regards to divine hiddenness, Meister ends one section writing that acknowledging ‘it could be a great good to a great many people’ (56). This is a claim that would not be echoed in the majority of memoirs and testimonies of suffering and atrocity. Echoing Marilyn McCord Adams, furthermore, Meister also treads down the dangerous road of implying that evils may even be ‘desired in some cases’ (105) in the context of the afterlife. He includes a saccharine quotation from Mother Teresa: ‘In light of heaven, the worst suffering in this earth ...is no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel’ (105). For those who have experienced or even read about testimonies from the gulags and Shoah, perhaps only Mother Teresa could make such a statement and not be chastised; perhaps. While Meister includes a short analysis of the fictional novel *Silence*, on the whole, examples of evil given are often very theoretical, fictional, banal, or in list form (as quoted from McCord Adams, 96). Introductory readers, then, do not hear the actual words of survivors/victims, even though such victims are often the most (unfortunately) privileged to speak on atrocity, evil, and suffering. Their virtual silence in such a work is all too common, save for a few exceptions like Melissa Raphael’s *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*; Rafael Luévano’s *Woman-Killing in Juárez: Theodicy at the Border*; D. Z. Phillips’ *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*; and my *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology*.

In sacrificing needed complexity for accessibility, Meister adds the “relevant point” from Sirius Black (of *Harry Potter* fame) who remarks that we all have light and dark in us and that the world ‘isn’t split into good people and death eaters’ (42). On the surface, this seems like a pretty harmless quote, and a philosopher quoting a line from a *Harry Potter* book would seem to be the essence of what a work in the *Guide for the Perplexed* series should do. But here, the actual witnesses to evil are deeply divided. Sirius Black may echo the famous lines of a Solzhenitsyn, but clashes greatly with the views of a Wiesel and Levi, a theist and atheist respectively, who felt it was slander to punish the innocent by association with the guilty. Echoing Pelagius, Sirius Black, adds: ‘What matters is the part we choose to act on. That’s who we really are’ (42–3). The quote is fitting for Black, a hero who was accused and imprisoned in Azkaban for a crime he did not commit. Meister is right to emphasize one’s role and choice, but questions of the initial nature of the human person and how that links with a Divine creator are

surprisingly not followed up here. If human beings are equally light and darkness, what does that entail when it comes to the world and God?

Before closing with a brief discussion of Meister's own theodicy, a few words on his treatment of evil in atheist, Hindu, and Buddhist thought. On the whole, the chapter on Buddhism and Hinduism is very useful, as Meister impressively touches on a range of issues in a short space. His critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of evil from a worldview that includes karma and rebirth is thought-provoking. The same can be said of his chapter on atheism, though more empathy and openness to the reasonableness of atheism in some contexts is needed. Here, again, witness testimonies would have been fruitful, inundating the believer with horrific images, unanswered questions, and demanding long periods of silence.

Meister also sketches his own theodicy of fulfilment, which employs elements of a free-will and soul-making theodicy but with 'a redemptive component' (40) for all sentient beings (43). As Meister notes, this is not new, but the third component is crucial as so many in this world suffer uselessly and anonymously. There are a number of complications and problems here as well, especially the question of whether such afterlife redemption comes too late for some. While I look forward to Meister's expansion of his theodicy in the future, the present work could be even further improved by not just trying to be a guide for, or even by, the perplexed, but to perplex further. God, and especially the victims who cannot accept any tidy answers, deserve that much at least.

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