

Evil as the Good? A Reply to Brook Ziporyn

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I was surprised to receive this lengthy response to my short review—yet not displeased, for the important question is, of course, how much Professor Ziporyn’s reply helps to clarify the issues at stake, which we agree deserve to be pursued. One of the many admirable aspects of his *Evil and/or/as the Good* is that, in addition to presenting the Tiantai ethical position in its historical context, it argues forcefully for the validity and relevance of that approach today. Moreover, I am pleased at the way Ziporyn’s response focuses the argument of his rich and dense book, so I welcome this opportunity to continue the discussion. And perhaps those who have read this far will also be pleased that I am able to present my main concerns somewhat more concisely.

Ziporyn begins with the relationship between ultimate and provisional truth, usually the crux of the matter from a Mahāyāna perspective. In response to a point I make—that ethically the nondual ‘ultimate’ point of view needs to be supplemented by a provisional ‘lower truth’ that distinguishes between good and evil—he emphasizes that according to Tiantai “conventional truth and ultimate truth are actually *identical*” (his italics) and that the conventional truth embraces all possible assertions, beliefs, and positions. Later, he elaborates that “provisional truth is a portion of ultimate truth, in a peculiar omniscient sort of whole/part relation in which each part in fact contains the whole.” The important term remains *identity*, for according to Tiantai “the idea that two entities might be mutually implicative and dependent, not adventitiously but in their nature, and yet not identical, is logically impossible.” Ethically, of course, this means something more than the interdependence of good and evil: it is not only that “the most horrible evils are ineradicable, built into the absolute unchangeable nature of all existence, and fully and eternally present even in Buddhahood,” but that “greed, anger, and delusion would be seen to be identical with Buddhahood, in accordance with precisely this Tiantai doctrine of the interpenetration of good and evil.”

As in the original review, my main point is that this emphasis on the identity of conventional truth and ultimate truth is an important insight, but one that turns out to be quite problematic ethically. Its value is mostly epistemological and metaphysical: it helps us escape from the kind of dualism that often postulates some ‘higher’ transcendental reality corresponding to a ‘higher’ ultimate truth. Instead, the ‘higher’ is not separate from the provisional and conventional, but the truth (whether realized or not) is that the whole ‘ultimate’ is completely contained within each conventional part or provisional position.

Dōgen somewhere makes the point that the goal is not to eradicate concepts (which is a dualistic approach to practice, seeking a purified mind that transcends language) but to *liberate* concepts. What becomes important is our ability to move

(and play) freely among the multiplicity of linguistic possibilities—in Ziporyn’s terms, to ‘recontextualize’ without getting stuck in any particular context or conceptual system. Nothing is lacking in any of these possibilities; in terms of Indra’s Net, each node manifests the whole. We are not liberated *from* language, except in the sense that we are not trapped in any particular language game; rather, we are liberated *in* language. We should not blame the victim: the problem is not language itself, but our tendencies to cling to some concepts, et cetera, more than others—including, for example, our dualistic tendency to discriminate between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in order to identify with the former by annihilating the latter (a very timely topic, unfortunately).

But good and evil for Ziporyn are more than interdependent. He claims that they are *identical*, and that is where difficulties arise. The epistemological point about the identity of the two truths becomes more problematical when we move into ethics, where the ‘cash value’ is somewhat more obvious and immediate, in the sense that we need ethics to help us cope with moral choices that we find ourselves required to make in daily life, in circumstances not always of our own choosing.

One way to make my point is that this usage of the English term ‘identical’ is misleading. Yes, good and evil are conceptually dependent upon each other in the sense that each gains its meaning only by negating the other; but this does not mean that they are identical in the sense that a compassionate action is equivalent to a hateful act of violent aggression. We need to understand their interdependence, but we also need to discriminate between them. Yes, we can say that each node in Indra’s Net is identical with all the other nodes in the sense that each is both a cause of the whole net and an effect of the whole, so all the nodes are mutually implicative; yet each node is also different from all the others by virtue of its own particular location, and in fact each gains its own perspective and meaning by being both-identical-with-and-different-from all the other nodes. As this suggests, our concept of identity has no meaning except in relation to difference, and vice versa—an important point for comparative philosophers, inasmuch as we often tend to focus too much on one side at the expense of the other.

That this overemphasis on identity is a problem for Tiantai, at least as formulated by Ziporyn, becomes evident in some rather incongruous examples he uses later: “One could just as legitimately use the term ‘Christian’ or ‘Buddhist’ or ‘Spaniard’ or ‘plumber’ to designate greed, anger, and delusion—and likewise to designate Buddhahood—for, indeed, all these terms are interpenetrative and end up meaning each other.” Well, yes, recontextualization does reveal how the meaning of terms is not fixed, being dependent upon a chain of differences that, in principle, can encompass everything. But to follow this chain until (as Ziporyn himself puts it) the very distinction between denotation and connotation is effaced, so that ‘Spaniard’ ends up meaning ‘greed, anger, and delusion’ is, in the end, not very helpful. It really voids the use of such concepts in everyday life—the life where, again, ethical choices regularly impose themselves upon us. Without a complementary emphasis on difference, this sense of identity, having been stretched so far, becomes as mean-

ingless and delusive as the other extreme, the more usual emphasis on the differentiating 'self-nature' of individual things.

Likewise, Ziporyn describes the situation of someone who has

a mysterious inner directive to wear fried eggs on his head because he believed this alone would make him look dignified. When the identities of "egg" and "head" are exploded in the Tiantai manner—"egg," it turns out, cannot help but mean "any object," and "head" turns out to mean "any part of the body"—he would come to see that the compulsory directive he had been previously interpreting to mean this, and only this (although still fully present and still absolutely compulsory), actually meant, say, "wear some object somewhere on your body," and could be satisfied in all sorts of less cumbersome ways.

Again, such a counterintuitive understanding of identity that involves this kind of recontextualization is of very limited value to us ethically.

To clarify further the ethical implications of this problem, let us return to the relationship between good and evil. Their duality is in fact a great example of our need for *both* identity and difference. Good and evil are identical insofar as they are an indivisible pair: each gains meaning only by being the opposite of the other. Yet they are also, and obviously, different, and woe to anyone in everyday life who does not understand this. But of course we all (or almost all) do understand it, whether or not we try to live in accordance with that understanding.

This is all quite straightforward, and I doubt that Ziporyn would disagree with it. I am less sure that his defense of Tiantai accords with its implications. Here is the crucial ethical question, as I see it: *if good and evil are in principle identical, how do we decide, as we go about our daily lives, what needs to be recontextualized?* When there is an infinity of perspectives, each of which encompasses the whole, then how do we know that Hitler's actions need to be recontextualized (in the way that Ziporyn does in his response), and not Gandhi's, or Martin Luther King's, or, for that matter, Shākyamuni Buddha's?

The identity of good and evil implies that all of their actions can be recontextualized, yet that is too general to help us ethically. The point of Tiantai ethics, as expounded by Ziporyn, is that instead of denying or rejecting evil we can recontextualize it—but how do we know that something is evil and needs recontextualization, when good and evil have been identified? He says that "we cannot help redeeming—recontextualizing—the past, in terms of whatever values and desiderata happen to be holding sway at the present moment, however frivolous and fleeting" and that "this deed and this impulse are already there to be responded to." In the course of a day, however, I probably have many thousands of impulses, some of which I act upon and many of which I don't—so how am I to distinguish the 'evil' ones that should be redeemed?

Ziporyn again: "In the case of 'evil' actions, 'not to do it again' is indeed the type of recontextualization that Tiantai writers will most frequently recommend." I am somewhat relieved to hear it, but also puzzled: how does Tiantai get from the identity of good and evil to this discrimination between them? We don't say in response

to good actions: “do not do it again.” The point is that something else has been imported here, another standard of good-and-evil that does not derive from the identity-and-recontextualization principle; at least, I do not see how it could be so derived, given the claim of identity between good and evil.

Ziporyn also points out that Tiantai ethical theory can be “almost shockingly gung ho” in recommending the strenuous use of force to combat evil. The standard of morality presupposed here presumably derives from more familiar Buddhist teachings about ethical action and its tendency to relieve suffering. Ziporyn’s book mentions (p. 271) that Zhili emphasizes two levels pertaining to practice: one in which evil is cut off and good realized, and another in which there is nothing to be cut off or realized. If the Tiantai position is that we also need this other level, one which presupposes a *distinction* between good and evil, then what are we arguing about? For that is precisely my argument: yes, we need to appreciate the ‘identity’ of good and evil, but not at the price of their difference, which we need just as much, although philosophically their difference may not be as interesting.

There is much more that could be said in response to Ziporyn’s essay but perhaps does not need to be said. The questions above notwithstanding, there is much to agree with and appreciate in his text. Let me conclude by responding briefly to two smaller issues.

Ziporyn’s discussion of the Holocaust seems to be motivated by my question “What punch line could ‘redeem’ the Holocaust?” which he quotes twice. He takes this as ascribing “a callous moral transcendentalism to me,” which, let me emphasize, was not my intention: I find nothing callous and certainly nothing transcendentalist in either the book or his response to my review. For those who have not read the book, however, it may be helpful to explain that my reference to ‘punch line’ follows upon Ziporyn’s own usage of the distinction between set-up and punch line, in discussing how ethical recontextualization functions using the metaphor of a joke. When he claims, in his response, that everything is the punch line of everything else, then I think we have another example of how the concept of identity, by expanding like a balloon to encompass everything, loses all meaning. If everything functions as set-up and punch line to everything else, and vice versa, then the metaphor collapses under its own weight; it really is of no use anymore.

Another bit from my review (also quoted twice by Ziporyn) extrapolates his position in an imagined conversation with Hitler: “Mr. Hitler, you do not need to discard your tendency to kill all Jews; rather, you should contemplate it as identical with enlightened wisdom. . . .” I now wonder if this way of making my point is somewhat crass, but in context it is important to know that here, too, my language follows upon Ziporyn’s book discussion of how to deal with a serial-killing cannibal who is having trouble with his man-eating tendencies:

[W]e need not eliminate them [such tendencies]; rather, we must learn to develop them fully—for *only by this means* will we truly overcome them. I should not strive to discard my tendency to kill and eat strangers; rather, I should contemplate it as identical to the Three Truths—either while doing it or while wishing to do it. . . . [W]hile enjoying gnaw-

ing on someone's liver, I can discern in this act also the infinite sorrow of the victim, the rage of the authorities, my remorse in the electric chair, and my terror at death. . . . (pp. 374–375)

In response, Ziporyn points out that by changing case from the first person (“I should not strive”) to the second person (“you do not need”), I have misrepresented his point. I accept this correction. Nevertheless, I still think that this kind of extreme example refutes itself as an adequate response to that extreme kind of moral situation. In his reply, he emphasizes the “transformation from literal murder to metaphorical murder” and then goes on to abolish the distinction between the two types of murder, which leads to a problematic conclusion: “True, this would still in some very special circumstances allow for ‘literal’ murder to take place, but these would be statistically insignificant if the force of the obsession were no longer in effect.” I am not sure I understand this, but, on the face of it, it falls back into the old problem that follows from identifying good and evil. Often we just need to emphasize the more familiar, if sometimes misleading, distinction we need to make between them.

“Enlightenment means not the overcoming of evil so as to manifest good but the full manifestation and realization of both good and evil” (*Evil and/or/as the Good*, p. 301). Yes, we need to realize how evil is part of the great scheme of things, whether we like it or not; but no, we should play no part in helping evil to manifest more fully. There are already enough other people busy doing that.

This might be a good way to end, but I cannot do so without emphasizing again how insightful and thought-provoking Ziporyn's book is. Our discussion touches on only a few of the important topics it addresses. Those who find these issues interesting will benefit from reading it.

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