

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Ontology without Axiology?

A Review of Masao Abe's Account of the Problem of Good and Evil from a Western Philosophical Perspective

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Preface

THIS ESSAY IS a Western philosophical reflection on the Zen Buddhist account of the problem of the dualism of good and evil as expounded by Masao Abe. It will be done by way of a careful textual examination of Abe's recent book, *Zen and Western Thought*.

Masao Abe, the representative scholar of Zen Buddhism of the Kyoto school, argues that the "dualistic" perspective on ultimate reality in Western philosophy and religion (Christianity) fails to grasp the true meaning of "self-transcendence," and to this extent fails to solve the problem of human suffering. In other words, inasmuch as soteriology is fundamentally directed at the problem of good and evil, Western/Christian soteriology is systematically defective because it loses sight of the nondualism of the problem of good and evil.¹

Though Abe's approach to solving the problem of good and evil by virtue of the Buddhist nondualism is illuminating, I would propose that Christianity is not as defective at handling the problem as Abe would have us believe. First, Christian theology is not entirely based on the dualistic purview of the problem of good and evil as Abe conceives; and, second, the Christian understanding of ultimate reality in terms of the divine unity of a Supreme Being and the Good would seem to avail a better philosophical foundation for a posi-

¹ See Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed., William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989)

tive and creative soteriology at both the individual and social levels than would the Buddhist nondualistic doctrine of "Emptiness." That is, the problem of good and evil seems to be articulated more "positively" in Christian theology as formulated primarily in the Platonic tradition of Western philosophy than in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, inasmuch as the Platonic/Christian identification of Being and Good, i.e., the marriage of ontology and axiology, provides a more "positive" and "life-affirming" philosophy of values and meanings than the Buddhist philosophy of "Ontological Emptiness," which is, we shall argue, axiologically empty.

Further, just as Judaeo-Christianity conceives of God in terms of Being and the Good, Platonism likewise identifies Being with the Good. This Platonic-Christian inseparability of ontology and axiology seems to provide a more positive worldview than the Buddhist doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*, or dependent origination, and *sunyata*, or the nonsubstantiality of all things, a doctrine that entails the separation of ontology from axiology.²

Depending on whether the perennial question of good and evil is dealt with on the basis of the ontological Emptiness of Buddhism, or the ontological Being of Platonic Christianity, the axiological implication is either negative or positive. Given that the problem of good and evil is constitutive of the Buddhist way to Absolute Freedom (*moksha*) and the Christian way to Salvation, the Ultimate goals of these two religious paths may not be as divergent as they first seem to appear. But the difference in the doctrinal orientations of the two religions—one toward Emptiness and the other toward Being—may give rise to marked differences in their impact in the social-ethical spheres.

Though one can no doubt recognize the existence of both the individual and the social dimensions of soteriology (which is a Christian term) in Buddhism, one cannot but wonder how much emphasis has been placed on the socio-ethical aspect of soteriology in practice. Yet ironically, no other nonbuddhist philosophy seems to be more profoundly equipped than the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination in providing a theoretical basis for the social and even the cosmological dimensions of soteriology.

What is puzzling to my mind is that in Buddhism the ultimate concern seems to be ultimately an individualistic one, being fundamentally oriented to the individual liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) rather than to social-ethical transformation, as is the case in Christianity. But is this not precisely what separates Mahayana from Theravada Buddhism in their respective soteriological orientations? How then do we account for this gap between theory and practice in Buddhism? The truth is, let us submit, that even the seemingly socio-oriented soteriology of Mahayana Buddhism does not fulfill, in practice

² I will elaborate on this point in greater detail below.

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and reality, its goal of universal salvation. Why then does Buddhist *pratitya-samutpada*—philosophically convincing and sophisticated as it is in providing the theoretical foundation for a soteriology in socio-ethical terms—fail to produce the intended practical results? It is perhaps because the Buddhist ultimate goal is “Emptiness,” as Fritz Buri points out.

For what happens is that the interdependence of all things as implicated in the doctrine of dependent origination ends up in a wholesale “liquidation” into the One Infinite Ocean of Emptiness in which nothing really “is,” and to that extent, nothing has any values. And since there is no ontology of “being,” there needs not be any axiology to deal with. Thich Nhat Hanh has warned against this extreme emphasis on the Buddhist Emptiness that often becomes itself another “thing” to be attached to.³ In the same vein, Fritz Buri also points out the negative character of the Buddhist Emptiness:

The impressive greatness of Buddhism consists in this freedom from the world within the world. But therein also lies Buddhism’s problematic. Ultimate seriousness, engagement, and responsibility are difficult to realize in this attitude toward the world, in the idea Buddhists have about their own selves, and in their behaviour toward other beings. The Buddhist is in danger of withdrawing into ultimate *noncommitment* (italics mine). He can as easily refer to the connection of all things in no-thing-ness as they can, by regarding them as nothing, negate that connection.⁴

This extreme negative character of the Buddhist ultimate goal, i.e., Absolute Freedom from ontological, cosmological, and axiological discourses, is not to be based on anything or any being but Emptiness. Ultimate Reality as ontological Emptiness necessarily entails the emptying out all worldly matters, including, of course, the axiological question of what is good and evil upon which our ordinary everyday life is socio-ethically conducted.

My suggestion in this matter is that Buddhist ontological emptiness must not be empty of axiological matters. To be sure, Good and Evil may not, and

³ Thich Nhat Hanh says, “The Buddha emphasized the teachings of non-Atman (non-self). He said, ‘Things are empty of a separate, independent self. If you look for the self of a flower, you will see that it is empty.’ But when Buddhists began worshipping the idea of emptiness, he said, ‘It is worse if you get caught in the non-self of a flower than if you believe in the self of a flower’ ” (*Living Buddha, Living Christ* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1995], 54).

⁴ Fritz Buri, “History of Problems,” *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed., Paul O. Ingram, Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1986), 31.

should not, be conceived as substantial, objective entities, as Abe insists. But still, there *is*, as experiential facts, that which is good and evil, which cannot be simply dismissed as unreal or illusory. The distinction of Good and Evil cannot be disregarded as pointless as Abe argues. One cannot live in a complete axiological void as long as one lives in this phenomenal world, even if the ultimate reality of this world is, as Buddhism affirms, "ontologically void." Granted that this phenomenal world may ultimately be illusory, it is nonetheless a "transcendental illusion,"⁵ as Kant puts it; that is, to say, it is an illusion which cannot be dismissed but must be dealt with and lived through, even after it was detected as illusion.

Abe's Dualism of Ontology and Axiology

However imperative it may seem from the ethical point of view, it is, according to Buddhism, illusory to believe it possible to overcome evil with good and to thereby attain the highest good. Since good and evil are mutually negating principles with equal power, an ethical effort to overcome evil with good never succeeds and results in a serious dilemma. Realizing this existential dilemma innate in human existence and characterizing it in terms of original sin, Christians have propounded the necessity of faith in God who delivers man from sin through his redemptive activity. From a Christian perspective, God himself is Good with a capital "G," as can be noted in the Biblical statement, "No one is good, but God alone" (Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19). Since the law is the expression of God's will, obedience and disobedience to the law constitute man's good and evil. Moreover, it is emphasized, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21)⁶

Zen grasped the problem of good and evil not as a problem of free will, but as that of the *discriminating mind* (italics mine) which distinguishes the two dimensions of good and evil. Zen advocated that we must awaken to No-mind itself, which transcends all discrimination. This was the Zen position of Subjective "Nothingness" (*Mu*) which is not *U*.⁷

In the above passages Abe maintains that Buddhist philosophy provides a bet-

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965), A 297-298.

⁶ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 132.

⁷ Ibid. 115.

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ter solution to the problem of existential suffering on account of its nondualistic ontology of being/nonbeing and its correlative nondualistic axiology of good and evil, than does Western philosophy in the Platonic-Aristotelian and Christian tradition. Abe argues that because the latter is constituted by an ontological dualism of being and nonbeing and correlatively an axiological dualism of good and evil, it has difficulty in solving the problem of existential suffering. For the very cause of suffering is not to be rooted in any substantial, objective entity, but in the subjective "ignorance" of the nonsubstantiality and impermanence of things to which we attach ourselves. In Abe's view, this intrinsic limitation of human existence can only be transcended by "awakening into" the nonsubstantiality of the cause of suffering. In other words, one attains to the Absolute Freedom, *Nirvana*, by awakening into the Absolute Emptiness of all things.

I wonder if indeed the solution to the problem of good and evil can be found, as Abe asserts, in not clinging to the false belief that Good will conquer evil as Christianity does, but to awaken to the truth that good and evil have equal power, both of which must be ultimately transcended. If this is so then it follows that salvation lies not in participating in any active engagement or transformation but in the passive and negative activity of "emptying out" altogether the notion of the very existence of good and evil, for in reality, again according to Abe, "existence" is no more than our mental fabrication.⁸ Abe says:

To be emancipated from the existential antinomy of good and evil and to awaken to Emptiness prior to the opposition between good and evil. In the existential awakening to Emptiness, one can be master of, rather than enslaved by, good and evil. In this sense, the realization of true Emptiness is the basis for human freedom, creative activity, and ethical life.⁹

According to Abe then, good and evil are not objective entities either ontologically or axiologically, but are only an epistemological illusion in the existential dimension. Our discriminating mental activity is therefore the very source of evil, and for that reason, is itself evil because good and evil are not substantial but empty. My question is: how can one justify the evilness of the discriminating mind when in this evilish discriminating mind there is not just the notion of evil alone but also the notion of good? To put it another way, where does this idea of "good" come from if the discriminating mind is itself evil? If one is to recognize, as Buddhism does, the reality of the nondiscriminating mind,

⁸ Ibid. 132.

⁹ Ibid.

then there should not be, from the outset, the coexisting of such discriminating concepts as good and evil. The answer to this question may be this: A truly enlightened, thus truly liberated person, may be free from "epistemological" query about what is good and evil, and thus he/she does not have to worry about "doing" or "acting" good or bad. Just "to be" itself for the enlightened is Transcendently Good, meaning transcending from both the relative good and evil. And both the means and end of this status of the "Transcendent Good" for Buddhism are Emptiness.

Would the individual awakening to the ontological nonexistence of good and evil alone suffice us to solve the phenomenal, socio-ethical problems in the world as Abe says that Buddhism teaches? In other words, would illusory phenomenal matters such as social justice and social transformation for the peace of the world be simply dissolved into the world of Empty *Nirvana*, the Eternal Peace, and Tranquility, if each individual awakens into the illusoriness of the very desire or need for social peace? Granted that individual awakening into the Emptiness of *Nirvana* and the dependent origination of all samsaric and phenomenal matters would indeed solve the problem, then when would it happen? Lin-chi would say, "here and now," otherwise "never." Lin-chi was indeed right only if "here and now" were understood not as merely an individual awakening alone, but also as social and cosmological awakening, in which individual awakening is included. And who would be in charge of, or responsible for, leading all sentient beings to *Nirvana* if not members of the existing sentient community who are yet to be awakened? It seems to be a matter of priority. By this I mean that although the idea of individual awakening into the nonexistence of good and evil may well lead the world to Liberation from suffering; but in reality the world has not yet been awakened as a whole.

It is worth noting that the Buddha's Third Noble Truth, the cessation of *Dukkha* leading to *Nirvana*, does not seem to be much of a social concept when, in fact, the Gautama Buddha, the noble awakened one, did not stay in *Nirvana* of the Eternal bliss of Peace, but rather made his "samsaric turn" back to the phenomenal world to show the way to liberation by becoming involved with worldly matters. In other words, the Buddha's personal awakening to the nonexistence of good and evil led him to get involved with the very samsaric, worldly matters of good and evil. His personal experience of Enlightenment and Freedom was embodied in the very samsaric world with his Great Compassion for others. To this extent, the Buddha's personal and individual awakening into Absolute Freedom was from beginning to end an ontologically and axiologically social concept. The Absolute Freedom and Enlightenment of the Buddha was a social as well as an individual affair.

I would like to draw attention to the point that though the idea of the great

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Compassion, a social concept in essence, is an integral part of Buddhism, an attempt to characterize Buddhism, as a socially oriented religion on account of this idea of Compassion needs to be qualified. The reason is that in Buddhism the very nature of the Compassion for others is directed to the Emptiness of all things in which neither individual nor social salvation has contextual being.

How could one be emancipated from the existential ontology of good and evil without going "through" and living "with" good and evil? How could anyone make an "ontological leap" of Emptiness from the existential and axiological antinomy of good and evil by "doing away" with the latter? Let us take a moment to reflect on Abe's logic of negativity versus positivity, which he applied to the characterization of Eastern and Western religions, respectively. I find this logic difficult to sustain. According to Abe, Positivity is the Ultimate character of Western religion which holds the belief that the positive principle of good overcomes the negative principle of evil, whereas Negativity is the Ultimate principle of Buddhism. But this contradicts what he says:

By contrast, in the East, especially in Taoism and Buddhism, negative principles are not secondary but *co-equal* (italics mine) to the positive principles and *even may be said to be primary and central*. (italics mine)¹⁰

. . . In short, the ultimate, which is beyond the opposition between positive and negative, is realized in the East in terms of negativity and in the West in terms of positivity.¹¹

How is it possible that the negative principle is co-equal to the positive principle and at the same time "primary" and "central"? If it were primary, then is it not another principle to be distinguishable from the one that it is primary to? I suspect that Abe's answer would make more sense if it were rectified as follows, i.e., that either the negative principle is co-equal with the positive principle in a relative sense, or the negative is primary or central to the positive in the absolute sense. If this is the case, then is not the negative principle (Emptiness) another illusory product of the positive/negative dualistic thinking? Does it not then lead to the paradoxical result that the Buddhist negative ultimate of Emptiness and the Christian positive ultimate of the Absolute Good are virtually the same and they differ only in the choice of words?

I suggest that if the Buddhist ultimate is Emptiness, then it should not be cast in such transcendental language as "beyond" the "opposition of the posi-

¹⁰ Ibid. 133.

¹¹ Ibid.

tive and negative," but should instead be included in the recognition that both the positive and the negative are the Ultimate, inasmuch as both are ontologically and axiologically empty.

Abe also says, "although ethically speaking, good should have priority over evil; ontologically and existentially speaking, good is not stronger than evil, and good and evil have at least equal strength in their endless struggle with each other. Accordingly, it is necessary for Buddhists to overcome the good-evil dichotomy itself and return to their original nature prior to the divergence between good and evil."¹² My question regarding this passage is: what makes the "original nature prior to the divergence between good and evil" the "Absolute Good"? What is the point of endeavoring to name the unnamable and uncharacterizable Emptiness "Absolute Good" when indeed Emptiness is empty of good and evil? In other words, why does an axiological vocabulary, as "Absolute Good" have to be used in the ontological context if the Ultimate is neither good nor evil but Emptiness? As I see it, if the Buddhist Emptiness is meant to be absolutely empty of everything, then even the axiological matters of good and evil should not be brought into the scene. We should simply say that there is no Good, not only good in the axiological sense of the relative good and evil, but even the Absolute Good whether it is "prior to" or "beyond" the relative good and evil. Abe argues that Christian belief in the Supreme Good, i.e., God, who eventually overcomes and conquers evil, is illusory. But how is it existentially possible to separate ethical from ontological matters?

Let us examine how Buddhist moral codes deal with the problem of good and evil. There is no doubt that the Buddha acknowledges the "existence" of good and evil when he admonishes us: "Do what is good, and do not do what is evil. Keep your mind pure, this is the teaching of Buddha."¹³ Buddhist ethics seems as strongly oriented toward practice as any other religion, and tremendous self-discipline is required in treading the Noble Eightfold Path. In the existential sense, the life of Gautama Buddha was indeed no more than the embodiment of his moral and ethical teachings. In other words, the means (moral life) and its end (the Transcendental Freedom) are not separable. Kalupahana articulates this point well:

Furthermore, the relationship between the Buddha's conceptions of the way and its goal could not be understood in terms of the popular

¹² Abe, "Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed., Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 142.

¹³ *Dhammapada* 183.

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theories of teleology or instrumentalism. These theories assume that the path is important and relevant only insofar as it leads to the desired goal. Once the goal is reached, the path becomes irrelevant. For the Buddha, the moral life that leads to ultimate freedom, or nirvana, does not become irrelevant once freedom is achieved.¹⁴

There is no doubt that Buddhism, being one of the noblest religions of the world, admonishes the good, and in fact the whole teachings of the Buddha's *Dhammapada* is about practicing good and avoiding evil. What I would like to point out is that perhaps the extreme emphasis on *Sunyata* in Zen Buddhist tradition may have led to deviation from the original teachings of the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*. Buddhism is not deprived of the moral teachings of good and evil. There are such moral teachings in Buddhism, which are not to be taken as a mere illusory fabrication of the mind as some misinterpreters of Buddhism may hold. Kalupahana says:

It may be noted that the Buddha, who came after *Purana*, made a distinction between merit and demerit on the one hand, and good (*kusala*) and bad (*akusala*) on the other. For the sake of the unenlightened, he allowed the idea that merit and demerit can be accumulated. However, the enlightened one, he maintained, is one who has renounced the ideas of merit and demerit, although not the concepts of good and bad. Promoting good was part of the ultimate teachings of the Buddha.¹⁵

Buddhism engages in no different moral and ethical discourses than other religions such as Christianity. Nirvana, the Ultimate Freedom, the Goal of Buddhism, is constituted by moral practices, i.e., doing good and avoiding evil. The Buddha's original central teaching of nonsubstantiality and *pratitya-samutpada* are at heart ethical discourses. The Noble Eightfold Path is all about the "right" (not in any relative sense but in the absolute sense) ways to be liberated from the "wrong" ways of living. If the Eightfold Path is not *ipso facto* axiological in nature, then what else could it be?

I am not saying that Abe is unaware of the moral teachings of the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*. He actually affirms it when he says, "The emphasis on the solidarity between humanity and nature does not mean that Buddhism is indifferent to human ethics. In the *Dhammapada*, one of the oldest Buddhist scriptures, there is a well-known stanza: Not to commit evil, /But to do all

¹⁴ Kalupahana, *Ethics in Early Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 18.

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that is good, and to purify one's heart—This is the teaching of all the Buddhas."¹⁶ Though Abe well acknowledges the existence and the significance of the moral teachings of the Buddha, his account of them does not seem to be central to his account of the *Dhammapada* when he says:

The point of this stanza lies precisely in the third line, that is, "to purify one's heart," and the first and the second lines, "Not to commit evils, But to do all that is good," *should be understood from the third line.* (Italics mine) And "to purify one's heart" even from the dualistic view of good and evil. Eventually the text enjoins us "to awaken to the purity of one's original nature" or "to awaken to the original purity of one's nature" which is beyond the duality of good and evil. The problem of good and evil must be coped with on the basis of awakening to the original purity of one's nature—that is, the teaching of all Buddhas.¹⁷

"To purify one's heart, not to commit evils, but to do all that is good" is the core of Abe's reading of the *Dhammapada*. I wonder whether Abe misreads the point of the *Dhammapada* whose emphasis is solely on the "practice" of "morality," i.e., "doing" good and "avoiding" evil. This is certainly not a matter of theory, nor even a matter of mere "existential-epistemological awakening" to the nonexistence of good and evil, but most emphatically a matter of conduct. In the above passage Abe's emphasis is clearly placed on the role of active awakening into the nondualism of good and evil as the primary factor in the Buddha's teachings.

I also disagree with Abe's equalization of the Buddhist "original purity of one's nature prior to good and evil" to the Judeo-Christian idea of the Good prior to the Fall of Adam when he says:

This Buddhist notion of "the original purity of one's nature," roughly speaking, may be taken to be somewhat equivalent to the state of Adam before eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. It is to be back where, according to Genesis, "God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." Therefore, God blessed Adam because he was good. Does the term "good" in this connection simply mean good in the ethical sense? I do not think so. The term "good" God used to evaluate his act of creation is not good as distinguished from evil, but the original goodness prior to the duality between good and evil, that is, the original goodness prior to man's

¹⁶ Abe, "Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," 141-142.

¹⁷ Ibid. 142.

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corruption of the primordially good nature of mankind and the world. *It is good not in the ethical sense, but in the ontological sense. The goodness of Adam as created by God is, roughly speaking, equivalent to the original purity of one's nature as understood in Buddhism* (italics mine). "The original face at the very moment of not thinking of good and evil" requested by the sixth Zen patriarch, Hui-neng, is simply another term for one's original nature, which is pure, beyond good and evil? Thus Buddhism often refers to our original nature as "Buddha-nature," the awakening to which provides the basis for human ethics to be properly established.¹⁸

I would maintain that the Christian Original Good cannot be taken as equivalent to the Buddhist "original purity" in Abe's sense, for the Christian Original Good was not that which was "empty" of anything at all, but that which was "Being," and which by virtue of "being" good, evil was already impregnated with it as its dialectical counterpart. Nor can the Christian Good be the "ontological" good as Abe reads. "Good" and "Evil," by definition, are not ontological but axiological concepts. And if the Good is thought of in terms of ontological Emptiness, then why bother calling it good at all?

I would like to draw attention to the point that Abe's "original purity prior to the discernment of good and evil" that the Buddhists seek as their ultimate goal cannot be sustained with full justifications without the acknowledgement of the duality of good and evil. As a matter of fact, it is only after acknowledging the duality and then overcoming it that the original purity can be of any value. In other words, one cannot expect the ontology to be separable from the axiology. Therefore, I find it difficult to make sense out of Abe's "original" purity unless there is to be found a "valuational," "axiological" connotation to it.

Abe's insistence on the necessity of the separation of the ontological good from the axiological good for the sake of preserving "the Original Purity of one's nature" would be better served by claiming the inseparability of ontology and axiology, thus providing the theoretical basis for a "positive" account of phenomenal and mundane matters and socio-ethical concerns. And this is where the merit of the Western, Platonic philosophy shines. For Plato, ontology is axiology and axiology is ontology. As Abe also sees it, the Christian Ultimate, God, is the Absolute Good. Both the Being and the Goodness of God are God's characters. I disagree with Abe's contention that axiology for Christianity is more fundamental than ontology. Abe says:

My understanding is that when Christianity emphasizes the one God

¹⁸ Ibid. 142-43.

who is the ruler of the universe and history, who is the absolute good and eternal life, who can overcome death and evil, etc., this is not simply an ontological issue, but rather an axiological issue. In Christianity the most significant point is not the issue of being and non-being, but the question of what I as a human being ought to do. (*italics mine*)¹⁹

For my understanding of Christianity, axiology and ontology co-exist with equal weight and require each other as dialectical complements, "like the two broken halves of the same coin which necessarily fit each other's cavities and bulges."²⁰ However in Buddhism, according to Abe, ontology has priority over axiology. Still I do not see any sense of "priority" in Buddha's teaching of Emptiness. If Emptiness is truly empty and to that extent enables us to live our life in the most fulfilling manner, then neither ontology nor axiology should be comparable in any manner whatsoever. My view is that both ontology and axiology must be considered equal partners in the dialectical sense. The difference between Buddhism and Christianity in this regard is that while the former takes it as a negative term, the latter a positive one.

Was the Fall of Eve²¹ an Accidental Sin or Necessary Enlightenment?

Another point I would like to draw attention is that the Buddhist Emptiness cannot be characterized in any specific, concrete manner except as "nihil" whereas the Christian Being is characterized as being in some specific way such as being the Good. Abe says:

In the ethical dimension, it functions as the source of *evil* as the privation of good. But in the religious dimension peculiar to Christianity, which is based on personal God, *nihil* is not merely a privation of good, but is rather the source of sin as the rebellion against the will of God, the negative principle in human life which constantly tries to undermine God's essential goodness.²²

I disagree with the above argument that in Judeo-Christianity, "nihil" is the source of sin. It seems to me that Evil was not caused by "nihil" but by

¹⁹ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 192.

²⁰ I owe this expression to J. N. Findlay from his *The Transcendence of the Cave* (New York: Allen Unwin, 1969), 68.

²¹ It is to be noted that it was Eve not Adam who took the initiative in violating the Divine commandments. Adam played a passive role to be persuaded by his spouse, Eve, who actively and courageously embodied her desire to attain Divine Knowledge.

²² Abe, Masao, *Zen and Western Thought*, 123.

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“something,” i.e., human desire, the will to attain Divine Wisdom by going beyond human finitude. What made Eve fall prey to the proposition of the serpent was her desire to obtain Divine Wisdom. The Book of Genesis reads:

“You will not surely die” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened.²³

It was human desire or will, not “nihil,” that was condemned as a deadly sin by Christianity. I would like to draw attention to several points here: first, it was Eve, not Adam, to whom the serpent approached. Why? Perhaps the cunning serpent knew that Eve, not Adam, had a desire to go beyond human finitude? Secondly, Eve had not only the desire to obtain the Divine Wisdom but also compassion for her other, her fellow human, so that she shared the Divine Wisdom with her other, i.e., Adam. And Eve’s compassion for her other may be likened to the Bodhisattva’s compassion for all sentient beings in Buddhism. My point is that there is no textual ground upon which Abe’s argument for “nihil” as the cause of sin in Judeo-Christianity can stand.

In line with the story of the Fall, it may also be worth noting that Buddhism encourages the attainment of Transcendental Wisdom in order to attain Freedom from suffering, whereas Judeo-Christianity prohibits it. The spiritual history of Judeo-Christianity may indeed be summed up in term of a dialectical tension between human desire/will to become like God and God’s prohibition of it. But is this not the very dialectical tension that is also behind the human striving to grasp the unattainable, transcendental Good? In other words, is it not the case that in each moment of the spiritual journey to the ultimate goal (perfection/liberation) there is already implicit in it the goal itself? I presume that both Christianity and Buddhism agree on this matter. If for Buddhism Enlightenment (the goal) is already attained here and now, the same is for Christianity. Jesus says, “Be ye perfect as the Father in Heaven is perfect,” and “The Kingdom of Heaven is in and among us.”

Returning to our original discussion, Abe holds that by means of negative annihilation Buddhists try to go beyond the duality of good and evil so as to be awakened into *Sunyata*, S in which both good and evil are transcended. As long as we remain in duality, we are involved in and limited by it. Abe says, “There is no final rest in the realm of good and evil. To attain the abode of

²³ *Genesis*, 3: 4–7.

final rest, we must go beyond the dichotomy of good and evil and return to the root and source from which good and evil emerged."²⁴ "Abiding in the final rest" is not an exclusively Buddhist idea. Christianity also shares this idea of going beyond the world of good and evil to the abode of the final rest depicted as the Kingdom of God. No secular matters such as marriage are expected to exist in the Transcendent Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said, "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage: they will be like the angels in Heaven."²⁵ Whatever be the nature of the final rest, whether it be the "empty" rest of the Buddhist Emptiness or the "rich" rest of the Christian Kingdom of Heaven, what I believe to be at issue here is not the end itself, but rather the means to the end. Depending on whether the means is taken in a positive or a negative term, the meaning of the end can be quite different. In Buddhism, the end is to be attained by means of a passive attitude, i.e., neglect of social engagement, whereas in Christianity, it is to be consummated by means of active social change as well as individualistic change²⁶ directed to the final goal of the Kingdom of God, which is Absolute Being, not Emptiness. It may not be unjust to say that Buddhism by and large overlooks the awareness and appreciation of the social dimension of ontological rest.

Nondualism of the Christian Idea of the Good

Being the complete counter-concept to *u*, *mu* is more than privation of *u*, a stronger form of negativity than "nonbeing" as understood in the West. Further, *u* and *mu* are completely antagonistic principles and therefore inseparable from one another, and thus constitute an antinomy, a self-contradiction. The Buddhist idea of *Sunyata* shows that standpoint realized through overcoming that antinomic, self-contradictory oneness of *u* and *mu*.²⁷

The above passage seems to suggest that Western intellectual discourse on the ontological priority of Being over the negative principle of *Sunyata* is an illusion, and that the Zen understanding of the co-equality of the positive and negative principles in the dialectical structure of *Sunyata*²⁸ is the solution to

²⁴ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 123.

²⁵ *Gospel According to Matthew*, 22:30.

²⁶ It goes without saying that in the Christian tradition there have also been passive, renunciative, and spiritually emphasized disciplines practiced by such brothers and sisters like St. Francis and St. Teresa. The mystical tradition of Christianity such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme also shares the spiritual negativity with Buddhism.

²⁷ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 127.

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the problem of good and evil. U (being) has no ontological priority to Mu (nonbeing). I would like to point out that Abe's account of the "dualistic" nature of good and evil of Christianity is a misunderstanding. As St. Augustine rightly said that evil has no "being" of its own, but if it does, then only to the extent that it is a privation of the Good.

As far as evil being the "privation" of the good, it has no place to stand alone as an independent entity against the good, but has only a parasitic, and perhaps to that extent illusory and not substantial existence upon the good. In other words, as far as the Christian conception is concerned, good and evil are nondualistic. St. Augustine elaborates this point in his *Confessions*:

It was made clear to me also that even those things that are subject to decay are good. If they were of the supreme order of goodness, they could not become corrupt; but neither could they become corrupt unless they were in some way good. For if they were supremely good, it would not be possible for them to be corrupted. On the other hand, if they were entirely without good, there would be nothing in them that could become corrupt. For corruption is harmful, but unless it diminished what is good, it could do no harm. The conclusion then must be either that corruption does no harm—which is not possible; or that everything which is corrupted is deprived of good—which is beyond doubt. But if they are deprived of all good, they will not exist at all So it became obvious to me that all that you have made is good, and that there are no substances whatsoever that were not made by you. And because you did not make them all equal, each single thing is good and collectively they are very good, for our God made his whole creation very good So we must conclude that *if things are deprived of all good, they cease altogether to be; and this means that as long as they are, they are good. Therefore, whatever is, is good and evil, the origin of which I was trying to find, is not a substance, because if it were substance, it would be good* (italics mine).²⁹

Recapitulating the above phrases, according to Augustine, there *is no evil* because whatever is is good because whatever is is a creation of God who is Good. So there is no place for evil in Christianity. Thus Evil cannot "be." Evil thus is "Privatio Boni." The Evil in Christianity has no "substance" of its own as Plotinus and Augustine painstakingly elaborated. Though the problem of Theodicy expounded by Augustine is still problematic, the very idea that there "is" only good, and evil "is not" is an invincible fortress against

²⁹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 148.

the accusation of being dualistic. So it is a misconception on Abe's part to render to Christianity the "dualism" of good and evil.

Life and Death vs. Good and Evil?

Abe says,

In Zen the ontological aspect, the question of being and nonbeing, life and death, is much more central than the issue of good and evil. On the other hand, in Christianity the issue of good and evil is much more strongly emphasized than the question of being and non-being."³⁰

I find it difficult to be persuaded that the primary concerns for the Buddhists are life and death, or Being and nonbeing, whereas the primary concerns for Christianity are good and evil. Indeed, it seems that in Zen ontology is central. But in Abe's view, that is not the case in Christianity, where the axiological issue of good and evil is emphasized more strongly than ontology. I question whether the matter of being and nonbeing can be thought of separately from good and evil. In other words whether the ontology of our existence can make sense at all without the axiology of good and evil from the perspective of the existential dimension of daily life. How could a mode of being be at all within a total axiological vacuum? Does not this way of thinking result in a dualism of axiology and ontology? It seems that the separation of axiology from ontology is another form of dualism that Buddhism itself abhors so much. How then can Buddhism be exempt from being trapped in the dualistic view of ontology and axiology? Ironically, then, we find no dualism of ontology and axiology in Christianity and Platonic philosophy. Again, I would like to emphasize that Christianity is not as dualistic as Abe understands it from the Zen Buddhist point of view.³¹

Another disagreement with Abe's account of the Western conception of ontology and axiology is that giving concrete and specific characteristic to "Being" does not make for the dualism of ontology and axiology. Quite to the contrary, concreteness, specificity, and particularity are essential to ontology. Being must "be in some way or other," otherwise, it would be a "lifeless" and "insipid" nihil that is indeed being praised as the final goal of Buddhism, i.e., Emptiness.

Lao-tzu seems to share this Buddhist idea of Emptiness as the "characterless" and "unnamable" Ultimate whose center is not moving, like the center of the wheel that remains motionless. "It is the empty space which makes a ves-

³⁰ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 193. ³¹ I will elaborate in more detail below.

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sel useful.”³² Indeed, there is profound truth to the Taoist conception of the Tao as Nonbeing (Emptiness). However, I would like to point out that by the same token, the reversal of the idea of the usefulness of useless is also true. What makes the empty space useful is the “nonemptiness” of things that co-exist with the former. Emptiness (*Mu*) requires Being just as much as Being (*U*) requires Emptiness. They are the two sides of the same token which require each other. Thus the one-sided emphasis on the truth of Emptiness is myopic and needs to be opened dialectically to the “fusion of the horizon.”

Abe is right, though, in saying that good and evil are not “ontological matters but ethical matters.” Indeed, good and evil are value-concepts, not ontological concepts. However, this does not necessarily justify the Buddhist disdain of value-related matters as mere illusions. Our world, being phenomenally conditioned, cannot but be sustained by value-oriented life alone. Whether the ultimate reality is ontological Emptiness or ontological Being, phenomenal matters cannot but be articulated axiologically. Otherwise, even the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, the very disciplines whose features are phenomenal and axiological, would not make sense. Often times the radical teachings of Zen Buddhism on annihilating our moral codes can easily be misleading. For example, Lin-chi’s radical admonition: “Do not do anything at all, not to ‘pursue’ anything at all even if it were Nirvana,” or “Kill the Buddha.”³³

There is indeed enlightening insight to the truth of the noble teachings of the Buddha in Lin-chi’s radical renunciation of moral codes. However, it may be questioned whether the annihilation was meant to be ultimately for the affirmation or negation of the samsaric, phenomenal, and moral life. The *Dhammapada* is all about the Buddha’s “moral” teachings in this phenomenal life, which can hardly be thought of as “negation” or “renunciation” of social and ethical matters. J. N. Findlay also shares this point when he states:

The goal of a perennial philosophy is not to confine its limits to showing the transcendent vision of the Good in a mystical, immediate experience of emptiness. The values in the mundane world must not be ironed out, but rather they must enrich the variety of richness of

³² Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, “Thirty spokes share the wheel’s hub; It is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel; It is the space within that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room; It is the holes which make it useful. Therefore profit comes from what is there; Usefulness comes from what is not there,” trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), Chapter 11.

³³ Lin-chi, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*, trans. Burton Watson (Shambhala, Boston, 1993), verse 19, p. 52.

mundane life in which the supra-mundane world is shone through.³⁴

Good and Evil cannot be viewed as an individual concept alone and to that extent cannot be just an "ontological" concept as Abe argues. It has necessarily social and ethical implications. As I see it, the communally-oriented Western philosophical idea of the Good which entails the axiology of good and evil, seems more appealing than the Buddhist individually-oriented ontological Emptiness of good and evil. As Hegel criticizes Kantian ethics as a one-sided-individualistic ethics, so must the Buddhist ethics be critically and positively exposed to the communal, socio-ethical dimension. Otherwise, Buddhism would be lost in the eternal, indistinguishable darkness of Emptiness where "all cows are black."

Lacking any ethical concepts and thus to risk violating the norms, customs, and values of the phenomenal, worldly sphere is the very weakness and danger of Buddhism. I agree with J. N. Findlay when he says, "Any philosophy that ultimately lacks on the clarity on the matter of values must not be taken to be genuine."³⁵

Christianity and Western Philosophy have paid much attention to axiology, and the reason for this, in my mind, is that the Ultimate for Christianity is not Emptiness but Being in terms of God, who has a distinctively "axiological" character, i.e., the Supreme Good. The marriage of ontology and axiology in Christianity may be a more persuasive philosophy than the Buddhist's philosophy of Emptiness. However, it goes without saying that Christianity has difficulty in dealing with the problem of good and evil, i.e., the problem of theodicy. If God is the Author and the Preserver of Good and is the only Creator, then whence does evil come and who is responsible for evil? This problem of theodicy has been a major theological problem in Christianity and has been dealt with by many theologians, notably, Augustine and Irenaeus.³⁶

Since the aim of this paper is not a detailed elaboration of Christian theodicy, I shall leave the problem behind. Although Christian theodicy is as difficult a problem as the Buddhist Emptiness of Nirvana, there is a way of dealing with this issue of good and evil in Christianity because this world with its fundamental positive values is a creation of God who is Good, and therefore this world is good, and humans as the creation of the Good God are to be blessed to live in it. Though the sins of Eve and Adam degraded the first blessings, nevertheless the goodness of worldly matters is still preserved. Unlike the Bud-

³⁴ J. N. Findlay, *Transcendence of the Cave*, 198.

³⁵ J. N. Findlay, *The Discipline of the Cave* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 55.

³⁶ For a detailed elaboration of this subject, see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York and San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1952).

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dhist Samsara, this world for Christianity is not illusory; it is not to be negated or annihilated but to be valued positively because it is the creation of God, if Plotinus is right. This unity of the Judaic conception of God the Creator and Greek philosophy, i.e., the Platonic philosophy of Being as the Supreme Good—the marriage of ontology with axiology—has made Christianity a life-affirming religion.

A Defense of Platonism from the Accusation of Dualism: The Marriage of Ontology and Axiology

We have seen how the antinomy of ontology and axiology in Buddhism has made it difficult for it to affirm this-worldly values. I would like to demonstrate now how a Western philosophy in the Platonic tradition, which is admittedly dualistic may in the end provide a more adequate solution than Buddhism to the problem under consideration.

This may sound puzzling to those who are apt to think of Platonism as a life-negating philosophy inasmuch as the latter is characterized by the disdain of the bodily, earthly world in favor of the other-world.³⁷ In spite of its ostensibly dualistic orientation, there seems to me no better philosophy than Platonism with its identification of being and values to provide a positive account of the apparent reality of this-world.

Plato saw Being as identical with Good. To this extent he may be said to have solved the antinomic view of the relation between Being and Good, i.e., between ontology and axiology. For Plato, the Idea of the Good as the vision to which all beings aspire, is the central part of his philosophy. What distinguishes Plato's philosophy from Zen Buddhism is that the *eidos* (Form) is internally related to the Good; in other words, ontology and axiology are inseparable. Since Christianity believes God as the Supreme Being and therefore the Good is the creation of God, the world is expected to be good though it may not be perfectly good. In light of this Platonic account of the goodness of the world, J. N. Findlay argues that the limitedness and one-sidedness of this life must not be removed or devalued:

³⁷ It is commonly acknowledged that the Platonic dualism of Intelligible and Sensible worlds is something that should not have been done, and thus has to be overcome. The this-worldly matters are the copies of the otherworldly *eide* (Forms) so the former is belittled in the overwhelming empowerment of the latter. Often times, and for the right reason, this disparagement of this-worldliness of Plato has been a target of harsh criticism by other schools of philosophy. However, it is to be noted that though early Platonism may deserve this criticism, the developments in middle and later Platonism on this issue must not be overlooked.

The this-world embodiments of types and values are, moreover, only embodiments of one type or value at the cost of not embodying another; sacrifice, one-sidedness, limitations is of the essence of this-world existence. This radical one-sidedness of realization can, of course, not be removed by any series, or system of embodiments, however varied or prolonged.³⁸

As Buddhist Emptiness transcends relative good and evil, so does Platonic Good transcend all other forms of good such as truth, beauty, being, and essence in the ever changing world of instantiation.³⁹ The question at issue is, then, which philosophy would provide us with a more positive philosophical theory about the world of *Samsara*? I am inclined to say that it is Western philosophy in spite of its dualism, and not the nondualistic philosophy of Buddhism. And yet, I must admit, neither the Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination and Emptiness nor the Platonic doctrine of the Idea of the Good is capable of providing a completely satisfying approach to the problem under consideration. Perhaps the truth lies in the middle way between the two.

Abe may argue that the Buddhist *Sunyata* does not belittle worldly values—his contention that ontology, not axiology, is fundamental to the Buddhist Dharma notwithstanding. He says that “in the awakening to the boundless openness of *Sunyata* and the relativization and reversion of the good-evil distinction, the basis of the ethical life is not destroyed but is rather preserved, clarified, and strengthened.”⁴⁰ But this is a rather dangerous ethical stance because it obscures the moral distinction of right and wrong. The basis of the ethical life is not “preserved, clarified, or strengthened” on the “relativization of the good-evil distinction,” but is rather obscured by it. Indeed it seems to leave the door wide open to the perversion and misuse of the Vast Openness of *Sunyata*. I would like to maintain that there “is” such a thing as right and wrong in the phenomenal world. Although what is right and wrong may be taken as relative, being relative does in no way justify the total annihilation of moral standards. The Original Purity of one’s nature must not be misused for the justification of moral laxity and illness. For truly enlightened Buddhists, which, I am afraid, must be counted in the minority, going beyond good and evil may be fine. But the reality is that most humans are not enlightened and may never be. I am not, of course, suggesting here that one must give up the faith in the possibility of attaining Enlightenment in the here-and-now, as Lin-

³⁸ J. N. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 180.

³⁹ See Plato’s *Republic*, VI, 509-b.

⁴⁰ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 152.

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chi so often exhorted his students.⁴¹ Ironically, though, the Buddhist relativism based as it is on the belief in *Sunyata* and as aiming at transcending good and evil may yet be the very cause of its own subversion.

Thus the "transcendence" of relative good and evil must not be taken to mean the "violation" or "annihilation" of the existing social norms of good and evil, though it may ultimately be illusory as long as it does not empty itself altogether into Emptiness. The transcendence of good and evil in the samsaric, illusory, and phenomenal world must be understood in the Hegelian sense of "sublation." In other words, transcendence must include within itself what it transcends, i.e., the relative good and evil. In order for one to go beyond the relative good and evil, one must deal with the good and evil, not avoiding them or annihilating them altogether. J. N. Findlay says:

As Hegel rightly saw, absolutes and infinities that merely lie beyond the conditioned and finite, are also merely another case of the conditioned and finite: the true absolute must *embrace and annul the conditioned and finite* (italics mine), must leave no place for anything beyond itself. This is not necessarily a pantheistic opinion: it is rather, as Hegel said of Spinozism, an acosmistic one, one that annuls the cosmos.⁴²

Findlay warns against this negative attitude toward the relativistic good and evil in Buddhistic solipsism. Findlay is not unaware of the positive meaning of the Buddhist Emptiness. He seems right, however, in warning against the possibility of the misuse of Emptiness. In other words, though the phenomenal, relative good and evil are as illusory as samsara, by the same token they are also as real as samsara insofar as one must live with them and through them.

I maintain that the transcendence of good and evil must be encouraged as a goal but not as the means to annihilate social engagements. Being liberated from good and evil thus must not mean, "violating" social ethics, as Jesus is said to have come to this world not to abolish but to fulfill the law of the world. But with a true understanding of the conditioned and imperfect nature of social ethics, and by means of a positive and active investigation of and participation in the samsaric and phenomenal world, one can truly become free and thus transcend relative good and evil. If perfection in the mundane world is presupposed as a necessary condition for perfection beyond this world, then this mundane life is to be "worked out" and not to be "ironed out," as Findlay says.

⁴¹ I have discussed the problem of gradualism and subitism in Mahayana Buddhism in *The Eastern Buddhist*, 29-1 (1996), 66-84.

⁴² J. N. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 182.

Though Zen Buddhism may argue that Buddhism does not negate Samsara as illusory, as the Madyamika school affirms the identification of Samsara with Nirvana, I would like to maintain that the Buddhist view of Samsara can only be positive if Nirvana is taken to be positive, i.e., not "empty." But the very nature of *Nirvana* is Emptiness, the Negative Ultimate. Thus insofar as the Buddhist Ultimate is negative, the nondualism of *Samsara* and *Nirvana* does not seem to make Buddhism a life-affirming religion. In defense of Buddhism as life-negating religion, Abe says:

Nirvana is not a negative or *lifeless state* such as the mere annihilation of human passion would suggest, but an existential awakening to egolessness, *anatta* or *anatman*, attained through liberation from craving, the attachment to the dualistic view which distinguishes between pleasure as something to be sought after and suffering as something to be avoided.⁴³

Abe says that Buddhist ethics are beyond good and evil and thus value-transcendent because they "transcend" all axiological matters and are only ontological. So the relative good and evil in this world is altogether emptied out into the Absolute Good which is Nothingness. This is where Christianity and Zen Buddhism take their different axiological turns. Christianity examines, develops, and investigates the axiological matters of this world, and this axiology necessarily produces the social consciousness of otherness. Findlay rightly points out that the Platonic Cave World (which may be equivalent to the Buddhist world of *Samsara* of ignorance) is the world with Others; i.e., it is not a solipsistic world but a "societal" world in which one finds oneself with other cave fellows.

Though Zen Buddhism says that social concern and social engagement are important in the perspective of Nirvana, encompassing as it does the totality of "all" sentient beings, its over-emphasis on the individual awakening to the True Self of Emptiness delays the concrete social awakening to Enlightenment with others. This lack of social consciousness seems to be characteristic of Asian philosophy/religion in general. Hegel articulates this problem as follows:

The principal cultus for human beings [in this religion] is the uniting of oneself with this nothing, divesting oneself of all consciousness, of all passions. This cultus consists of transposing oneself into this abstraction, into this complete solitude, this total emptiness, this renunciation, into the nothing.⁴⁴

⁴³ Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 206.

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Conclusion

Though the Buddhist "Emptiness" of Nirvana and the Platonic-Christian "Richness" of Being may not be radically different in so far as they both are referred to the characterization of the Absolute Freedom in which one finds one's salvation, nevertheless there are important differences between them. This is so because *Nirvana*, the final goal of Buddhism, is a nullification of mundane things in the world.

J. N. Findlay, though acknowledging the valuative meaning of the Buddhist Emptiness, is critical of the Buddhist tendency of belittling and denigrating ordinary experience and relationships.⁴⁵ In emphasizing ontological Emptiness as the ultimate reality, Buddhism is deficient in giving an "axiological" account of the "richness" of the mundane life in the phenomenal world.

Findlay argues that the religious ultimate reality, which is best described in terms of negativity in both East and West on account of its transcendent characterization, must not result in the nullification of ordinary values, experiences and expressions in this world. Findlay says that Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, which make the end of transcendentalism a mere illusion, is no less detrimental than Western philosophical nihilism. Findlay thus writes:

While in the West it has been mainly professed by philosophers, in the East it has had an authentic religious existence, where, to the passion for transcending existence, has been added the passion for putting an end to the restless movement of consciousness, to the endless variegation and frustration of conscious life, and to its basic differentiation into an objective and subjective aspect.⁴⁶

Findlay's criticism of Buddhist negativity seems fair to the extent that, although the nondualism of *Samsara* and *Nirvana* held by Mahayana Buddhism is not much different from Findlay's Hegelian reading of the nondualism of the universal and the particular, nevertheless it is distinctively the Buddhistic character that the "negativity" is a fundamental category of the ultimate, whereas Christianity can be characterized as a religion of rich color.

One may argue that in the mystical, apophatic tradition of Christianity, the

⁴⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, one-volume edition, The Lectures of 1827, ed., Peter C. Hodgson and trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. N. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 256.

⁴⁵ See, J. N. Findlay, *Values and Intentions* (New York: Allen & Unwin: 1961), 406-407.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 406.

“negativity” is undoubtedly present as the most appropriate way of describing the unknowable God, as, for example, in the case of Meister Eckhart’s kenotic theology. I maintain, however, that even the Eckhartian kenotic theology is not equivalent to the Buddhist ontological Emptiness. The reason is that in Buddhism there is really nothing “ontologically” to be emptied from the outset, whereas in the Eckhartian *kenosis*, God, the Father who empties himself in the form of human, Jesus, is an “ontological being.”

The recent attempts to assimilate Buddhist Emptiness into Christian Kenosis by some comparative scholars such as Steve Odin is mistaken to the extent that the fundamental difference between the Buddhist ontological Emptiness and the Christian Kenosis is overlooked. Christian “Kenosis” is a personification of divinity; that is to say, God as Being, not as emptiness, became another being in a person, Jesus. And this Divinity as Being is not completely “emptied out” of Divinity into Humanity, but is also “preserved” in Jesus’ Humanity. If this were not the case, then the Nicene Creed of “Jesus being both Divine and Human” would have lost its Christian identity. Thus I maintain that such attempt at the metaphysical comparability between Christianity and Buddhism in terms of Emptiness/Kenosis cannot be sustained as a valid approach.⁴⁷

I conclude from the above discussion that the Western philosophy of Platonism and Christianity seems to provide a more adequate solution to the problem of good and evil than does the Zen Buddhist tradition of Buddhism. This is so primarily because the former does not do away with the contingency and finitude of things in the world. When contingency and finitude are eliminated, the reality and value of things will be eliminated along with them. Let me conclude this essay by quoting Findlay again:

It is because of this superbly outgoing, sensuous trend that Christianity is so much a religion of rich color. Its characteristic spirit shines from the many-coloured walls of San Vitale and Sant’ Apollinare in Classe, but it shines equally from the stained glass of York and Cologne and the Sainte Chapelle. It is the spirit of a religion that believes in a transfiguration, rather than doing away with, of this-worldly things, a rendering of man and society pervious to the light of heaven, yet coloured with all the glorious shades of earth.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For the discussion on the Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Kenosis, See Steve Odin, “Kenosis as a Foundation of Buddhist/Christian Dialogue,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 20-1 (1987): 71-86.

⁴⁸ J. N. Findlay, “Religion and Its Three Paradigmatic Instances,” *Religious Studies*, Vol. II (1975), 225.