

Article

Reviving Manichaeism with the Evil God Challenge

Zoheir Bagheri Noaparast 

Department of Education Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa; zoheir@sun.ac.za

Abstract

In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, the evil God challenge has been developed by several authors as a parody argument. Proponents of this challenge contend that, given the goods in our world, the hypothesis of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent God or the Evil God is absurd. Similarly, they argue, we should conclude that the hypothesis of a good God is also absurd due to the evils present in our world. This paper argues that, with the aid of this challenge and other contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion, one can make the case that a reintroduction of Manichaeism into philosophy of religion is worthwhile. This argument will propose that, considering our total evidence, the Good-God and the Evil-God demonstrate a similar level of support. Additionally, under a reconstructed Manichaean hypothesis, good and evil are seen as mutually explanatory. Furthermore, the natural order can be understood within this framework. Therefore, the Manichaean hypothesis could serve as a viable alternative to monotheistic theism; it can account for the co-existence of good and evil and is compatible with the observed order in nature.

Keywords: Manichaeism; evil-god hypothesis; the problem of evil; the problem of good; dualism



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1. Introduction

Manichaeism originated in the third century CE with its founder Mani (216–274/7 CE). Growing to maturity under the Sasanian monarchs Ardashir I (r. 224–40) and Shapur I (r. 240–72), Mani styled his movement “the Religion of Light” and envisaged it as a universal faith (Baker-Brian 2011, p. 5). At the heart of Manichaean cosmology lies an original, eternal dualism: two co-eternal principles of Light (spirit, good) and Darkness (matter, evil) dwelling in perfect separation until Darkness, drawn by the radiance of Light, attacked and intermixed their substances in a cosmic conflict (Coyle 2009, p. xiv). Manichaean eschatology envisaged a climactic end-time when, through the Elect’s ritual actions, as much Light as possible had been reclaimed; the material universe would then dissolve, with Darkness confined to its own realm—though a residue of Light would remain irretrievably bound, a testament to evil’s persistence despite final victory (Baker-Brian 2011, p. 67). In this paper, setting aside the historical, liturgical, and soteriological features of ancient Manichaeism, I treat the Manichaean hypothesis (MH) strictly as a hypothesis that rivals theism in explaining order, good, and evil.

Manichaeism, as a dualist religion, gained significant followers, and Saint Augustine was once among the followers of Mani; however, he later criticized the dualism of Mani and defended Christian theism. While the explanatory power of good and evil in the world was initially among the attractions of Manichaeism for Augustine, he later thought that

dualism is false, and instead, by adopting a privation theory of evil, one should abandon dualism and instead accept Christian theism:

Therefore, whatsoever is, is good. Evil, then, the origin of which I had been seeking, has no substance at all; for if it were a substance, it would be good. For either it would be an incorruptible substance and so a supreme good, or a corruptible substance, which could not be corrupted unless it were good. I understood, therefore, and it was made clear to me that thou madest all things good, nor is there any substance at all not made by thee. And because all that thou madest is not equal, each by itself is good, and the sum of all of them is very good, for our God made all things very good. (Augustine 1927, Book VII, Chapter XII)

Any dualist theory claiming there is a separate origin for evil and good views the privation theory of evil as a challenge. Another challenge for dualists is explaining the apparent harmony and order in the universe. If our world is a battleground between good and evil, visualizing an orderly world becomes difficult. Some argue that while Manichaeism better explains the presence of evil, it fails to account for the universe's order. As Hume's *Philo* concludes in the dialogues, although Manichaeism offers a stronger explanation of good and evil than theories that posit a wholly good or wholly evil God, the universe's order suggests that a God or gods without a moral character might be more plausible:

Here the Manichaeian system occurs as a proper hypothesis to solve the difficulty: And no doubt, in some respects, it is very specious, and has more probability than the common hypothesis, by giving a plausible account of the strange mixture of good and ill, which appears in life. But if we consider, on the other hand, the perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe, we shall not discover in it any marks of the combat of a malevolent with a benevolent being. There is indeed an opposition of pains and pleasures in the feelings of sensible creatures: But are not all the operations of nature carried on by an opposition of principles, of hot and cold, moist and dry, light and heavy? The true conclusion is, that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy. There may be four hypotheses framed concerning the first causes of the universe; that they are endowed with perfect goodness, that they have perfect malice, that they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, that they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (Hume 2007, p. 86)

This paper will follow Philo's argument that, when comparing theism and MH, the latter seems to be in a better position in explaining the mixture of good and evil in the world. However, it will also argue against *Philo* by showing that there are ways that MH can be compatible with the order in the world. To do this, MH will be contrasted with the good God hypothesis (GGH) and the evil God hypothesis (EGH). The paper will examine recent debates around the evil God challenge (EGC) and the problem of evil, suggesting that, given these discussions, MH and its rivalry with theism should be taken seriously. First, we will analyze how EGC can weaken the epistemic probability of GGH while strengthening the epistemic probability of MH. Although this analysis focuses on *a posteriori* reasoning, we will also explore whether MH might be further supported and become a competitor

to GGH through *a priori* reasoning. To achieve this, we will consider plausible scenarios where MH can explain the apparent order in the universe.

2. Manichean Hypothesis and the Evil God Challenge

EGC has been introduced and defended by various authors (e.g., [Cahn 1977](#); [Millican 1989](#); [Law 2010, 2019](#); [Collins 2019](#)). Proponents of this challenge argue that any argument put forth to prove that a good God (GG) exists, or at least make it reasonable to believe in GG, can also be utilized to prove the evil God (EG) or demonstrate that it is reasonable to accept the EG. This is not to assume that theists must concede the symmetry between GGH and EGH. There are, in fact, some theistic attempts at undermining the very idea of symmetry between GGH and EGH (see [Lancaster-Thomas 2018](#)). However, as defenders of EGC have shown, theodicies for the GG can be closely mirrored by proponents of EG, for example, soul-breaking reverse-theodicies (see [Law 2019](#)), and through these reverse theodicies, the proponents of EGC offer explanations of why good exists. This paper relies on approximate evidential symmetry, which is sufficient for our comparative evaluation.

Additionally, supporters of EGC assert that belief in EG is absurd, and considering the similarities between the two, proponents of GG should acknowledge that belief in GG is likewise absurd. The problem of evil holds a significant position among advocates of EGC. By parodying this problem, they have introduced what is now known as ‘the problem of good’: If there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent God, then why is there so much good in our world? The problem of good serves as the primary reason why Stephen Law deems EGH absurd,

Of course, few, if any, of us believe the evil-god hypothesis. *Prima facie*, not only is there little reason to suppose such a being exists, there is also overwhelming evidence against his existence. When presented with the evil-god hypothesis, most of us immediately dismiss it as absurd, typically because we consider the problem of good decisive. ([Law 2010](#), p. 357)

And yet almost everyone considers the suggestion that the universe is the creation of an Evil God absurd. Why? One of the most obvious reasons you might give for rejecting the Evil God hypothesis is that the universe contains far too much good for it to be the creation of such a malevolent deity. Why, for example, would an evil God create love, laughter, ice cream, and rainbows? These things, surely, constitute excellent evidence that there’s no Evil God. There’s not just good, but at least some gratuitous good, in the universe. ([Law 2019](#), p. 7)

In the debates regarding EG, almost everyone considers EGH to be absurd. The disagreement lies in whether one can argue from the symmetry between EGH and GGH to establish the absurdity of GGH. A proponent of the MH can adopt two broad strategies. First, they can argue that GGH is not absurd, and given the epistemic symmetries between EGH and GGH, EGH is not absurd either. If it can be shown that neither EGH nor GGH is absurd, another step needs to be taken: to demonstrate that the coexistence of EG and GG is possible and not absurd. In contemporary debates on EGC, no one has been willing to argue for the non-absurdity of EG when posed as the single cause of the universe. As Lancaster-Thomas puts it, there are two ways to formulate EGC:

What I call the weak Evil-god challenge claims that belief in the EGH and belief in the GGH are both similarly likely or reasonable positions to hold, so there seems to be no motivating reason to choose one over the other. On the other hand, what I call the strong Evil-god challenge maintains that the GGH should be rejected because it is absurd or incoherent (the strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence), or because if the EGH is true then so is the GGH, which is

a contradictory state of affairs, so both must be rejected (the strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency). (Lancaster-Thomas 2020, p. 452)

Lancaster-Thomas argues that no one in contemporary debates on EGC has defended the weak challenge. However, MH can be viable even if EGH and GGH are absurd, both individually and separately. Recall that the absurdity of EGH stems from the problem of good, and the proponent of EGH parodied this to illustrate that GGH is absurd due to the problem of evil. If proponents of MH do not face issues of good or evil, then MH is not absurd, even if EGH and GGH are absurd on their own.

In probabilistic terms, $\Pr(H|E)$ is the probability of a hypothesis given all the evidence E. Page and Baker-Hytch (2020) formulate the EGC as follows:

- (1) GG is approximately epistemically symmetrical to EG. [premise]
- (2) If a hypothesis H_1 is approximately epistemically symmetrical to another hypothesis H_2 , then $\Pr(H_1|E) \approx \Pr(H_2|E)$. [premise]
- (3) Therefore, $\Pr(GG|E) \approx \Pr(EG|E)$. [from (1) and (2)]
- (4) $\Pr(EG|E)$ is very low. [premise]
- (5) Therefore, $\Pr(GG|E)$ is very low. [from (3) and (4)] (Page and Baker-Hytch 2020, pp. 489–90)

Following Page and Baker-Hytch, I consider the total evidence to include all relevant factors, encompassing both supporting evidence and counterevidence for each of GG and EG, along with background information and considerations of theoretical virtue. Page and Baker-Hytch present the Evil-God Challenge by arguing that, based on the evidence, the good-God hypothesis and the evil-God hypothesis are roughly equally probable. Additionally, when two hypotheses have similar evidence, our total evidence should lead us to regard them as equally probable. From these points, it follows that, given our evidence, the probability of a good God is approximately the same as that of an evil God. However, almost everyone considers the evil-God hypothesis to be very improbable in light of the world's goods. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, the good-God hypothesis should also be regarded as very improbable in light of the world's evils.

Now, let us consider MH, the view that both GG and EG coexist. While $\Pr(GG|E)$ and $\Pr(EG|E)$ may each be low individually, their joint probability $\Pr(GG \wedge EG|E)$ need not be as low as one would get by assuming independence, if the existence of one deity makes the other more likely, for example, in cases where good and evil are positively interdependent. By the multiplication rule of conditional probabilities,

$$\Pr(GG \wedge EG|E) = \Pr(GG|EG \wedge E) \times \Pr(EG|E)$$

If $\Pr(GG|EG \wedge E) \approx 1$ while $\Pr(EG|E)$ is low

Then

$$\Pr(GG \wedge EG|E) \approx \Pr(EG|E)$$

While each hypothesis is unlikely in isolation, the probability of the joint hypothesis under MH can still be appreciably higher than the product $\Pr(GG|E) \times \Pr(EG|E)$ that one would obtain under an independence assumption, provided that $\Pr(GG|EG \wedge E)$ is substantially greater than $\Pr(GG|E)$.

As mentioned earlier, Augustine relied on privation theories of evil to counter MH. More recently, the same argument has been used to counter EGH. Whether the privation theory of evil is dead is open to debate (see Calder 2007; Marks 2025). Nevertheless, even theists who do not consider it dead recognize the challenges it faces. Marks (2025) contends that the privation theory of evil is a hard pill to swallow. He asserts that this theory is challenged when we try to explain natural evils such as disease and predation. Although there are well-known theistic strategies for explaining natural evil, such as Hick's claim that a law-like environment is needed for our moral formation (Hick 1978, p. 305) and Augustinian theodicies that assign natural evils to fallen angels (Plantinga 1974, pp. 191–92)

Marks argues that if natural evils are genuine, it implies that God creates them. However, if we regard them as illusory or justify them by appealing to a greater cosmic harmony, it contradicts our moral intuitions surrounding pain and suffering. This is indeed a hard pill to swallow: the theist must either accept that God is the author of natural evil or reject our moral intuitions about pain and suffering (Marks 2025, pp. 22–26). Additionally, the proponent of EGH can parody the privation theory of evil and propose a privation theory of good (see Collins 2024). Given the challenges EGH and GGH face with their respective privation theories, it seems more reasonable to assume that some goods and evils cannot be accounted for by privation theories. As a result, MH appears to provide a more reasonable account of good and evil than GGH and EGH.

3. Manichaeism and *A Priori* Plausibility

Michael Hickson states that Bayle thought Christian theism has no reasonable response to the problem of evil, whereas Manichaeism does, and so the Christian has to accept his religion based on faith. For Bayle, Manichaeism had a *posteriori* superiority, whereas theism enjoyed an *a priori* advantage over Manichaeism (Hickson 2013, p. 54). According to Bayle, Manichaeism has the feature of a good system because of its empirical strength:

However, assuming the Manicheans do win the *a posteriori* debate, the overall result is not necessarily a stalemate, for Bayle has his Manichean claim that “the main feature of a good system is that it accounts for what experience teaches us.” Thus, the problem of evil for Bayle is that the Manicheans can win what is arguably the more important of two kinds of debate over the origin of evil, and so, from the point of view of reason, the dualist hypothesis is at least as appealing as the monotheistic, and is perhaps more appealing. (Hickson 2013, p. 55)

If we accept that GGH possesses *a priori* plausibility, while struggling to account for our experiences, and conversely, that MH can explain our experiences but lacks *a priori* plausibility, it is reasonable to question our *a priori* reasoning in this context and identify our faults within it. MH, a hypothesis with high *a posteriori* plausibility that conflicts with our *a priori* reasoning, provides substantial reason to revise our *a priori* judgments. If we cling to our *a priori* reasoning and dismiss hypotheses that demonstrate high empirical plausibility, we risk stagnation in scientific progress. In this sense, *a priori* reasoning, particularly in the realm of science, is best understood as relative rather than absolute (see Friedman 2009). I adhere to Bayle’s point methodologically, namely that empirical fit marks a hypothesis as a live rival; however, this does not by itself establish the truth of a hypothesis. Likewise, relying on Friedman’s relativized *a priori* does not vindicate the soundness of MH. That said, some recent arguments claim that the *a priori* reasoning employed by supporters of GGH can also be parodied and used by proponents of EGH. Consequently, we observe ontological and cosmological arguments being parodied and utilized to support EGH. MH, however, struggles to parody these arguments since, within this framework, there are two sources (one for good and one for evil), and proposing a single source for the universe in this model may lead to the conclusion that neither the GG nor EG represents a deity with creative powers. Nonetheless, there are plausible scenarios in which we can envision a world coming into existence despite MH. First, let us clarify what we mean by EG and how this might lend *a priori* plausibility to MH.

4. EG and Order

Forrest distinguishes between two different conceptions of EG (which he refers to as anti-God), which is useful for our discussion. First, an EG who “creates so that creatures will suffer, because of the joy this suffering gives It. This may be contrasted with a different idea of anti-God, that of an evil being that seeks to destroy things of value out of hatred

or envy. An omnipotent, omniscient being would not be envious. Moreover, destructive hatred cannot motivate creation.” (Forrest 2012, p. 37). For these two reasons, Forrest argues that the second conception of EG is not tenable.

Additionally, following Morriston, we can agree that even if only one deceiving God exists, there is no reason to believe that he should systematically deceive us. As Morriston argues, EG does not imply that we should be systematically deceived. He may enjoy the errors and deceptions, such as those concerning the existence of a loving God who created the world. After all, if you are not deceived about your child’s existence when she suffers or dies, you too will suffer greatly. Morriston concludes that for this reason, we shouldn’t assume that EGH increases the likelihood of systematic deception (Morriston 2004, pp. 97–98). Still, none of these licenses the stronger claim that, if both EG and GG exist, neither would try to influence us. The point is that in a two-deity setting, we have no good reason to expect a stable, publicly detectable net pattern of influence traceable to either side. Even if GG has reason to involve himself in human affairs, such involvement need not be overt or continuous (Swinburne 2003, p. 50), and under rivalry any regular policy by one will be met by countermoves from the other. So rather than saying that EG is systematically harming us while GG is systematically rescuing us, it is better to say that whatever influence there will be, it is intermittent, domain-specific, and apt to cancel out overall.

In the case of Manichaeism, however, it might be different because GG and EG are competing, after all, and are at war. Then, it may be argued that although they may each sometimes act, since both have roughly equal power, neither succeeds in systematically influencing us. The proponent of MH has other options as well. He can either interpret the war between good and evil as a metaphor or some theological doctrine that needs interpretation. Nevertheless, even if taken literally, we can say that for an activity to count as battle or war, there needs to be some rules governing that activity so that we can distinguish it from other phenomena, such as pure chaos. It may be the case that human involvement in this cosmic battle is not significant, although it does influence us humans and involves us in it. Alternatively, we can find inspiration from ‘deal-making theodicy’ that argues that God has entered into an agreement with Satan so that Satan would be the king of this world and hence the evils in this world (see Lembke 2025). Likewise, the Manichean can argue that since neither of these Gods can finish the other one off, they may agree to create a world in which they can cooperate to create humans and bet on how humans will act and whether humans will ultimately choose good or bad. Another possibility inspired by Forrest’s ‘Rebel Angel Theodicy’ can be developed. We can argue that EG and GG were responsible for different natural laws, and, for example, while one was responsible for evolution (natural selection), the other was responsible for other laws (Forrest 2024, p. 2). The proponent of GGH may retort that, despite our efforts to show the superiority of MH to GGH based on its explanatory powers of our experiences, we have neglected the order we perceive in the universe. Order is not merely a matter of *a priori* plausibility; rather, our experiences also indicate that there is order in the universe. Just as GGH needs to deal with the problem of evil and EGH needs to deal with the problem of good, MH needs to deal with the problem of order. In other words, how can one believe in two battling Gods, one evil and one good, if there is an apparent order in the universe? Here, we can offer a response inspired by the Satan hypothesis (SH). The SH suggests that God has given Satan and fallen angels free will, and the natural evils we see in this world are the result of their activities. An objection against the SH is that if SH is true, why isn’t the world that bad? In response to this objection, Dunnington responds

Or, the proponent of SH might point out that Satan himself could have good reasons for reigning in the extent of his destruction. After all, Satan’s aim is to

thwart God's purposes for the redemption of human persons, and making his malevolent intent utterly transparent would only serve to better attune human persons to the cosmic war Satan and his cohorts are waging against God. Satan wants people to hate God, but pulling out all the stops in his campaign of destruction would only serve to turn human persons against Satan and *toward* God. (Dunnington 2018, p. 268)

The Manichean can argue that EG has valid reasons to refrain from total destruction. First, if there is to be a battle or war, there must be sufficient order and regulation in the world for such an activity to be recognized as a battle. Every battle requires a battlefield, which necessitates some level of order. Secondly, total destruction would render human life nearly impossible. EG must engage in destruction only to the extent that allows human life to be viable while also giving humans the impression that the world is genuinely orderly. If the world seems orderly, the likelihood of humans believing in the existence of a good God increases. Thus, when confronted with the evils produced by the evil God, humans might begin to doubt GG's existence due to the presence of evil, even in an otherwise orderly context. Therefore, EG has compelling reasons not to disrupt the order in the universe and may even collaborate with GG to foster an orderly universe¹.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we began by outlining the distinctive dualistic framework of Manichaeism. Turning to the EGC, we illustrated how advocates of MH can undermine GGH by parodying the evidential problem of evil through a parallel "problem of good." By employing probabilistic reasoning, supporters of MH can argue that, although the probabilities of $\Pr(GG | E)$ and $\Pr(EG | E)$ seem low in isolation, their joint probability under MH may be significantly higher if the existence of one deity increases the likelihood of the other. This suggests that MH not only circumvents the absurdities attributed to either GGH or EGH but also potentially achieves greater *a posteriori* plausibility by accounting for the mixed moral phenomena we observe.

We then explored *a priori* considerations, engaging with Bayle's distinction between intuitive appeal and empirical strength. While Christian theism possesses strong *a priori* plausibility, its empirical account of evil encounters difficulties. In contrast, Manichaeism excels empirically but conflicts with entrenched *a priori* beliefs. Building on Friedman's concept of the relativized *a priori*, this paper argued that hypotheses demonstrating high *a posteriori* plausibility, such as Manichaeism, should prompt a revision of our *a priori* commitments instead of outright dismissal. In this context, consistent empirical success can serve as evidence to reexamine what we deem "intuitively" reasonable.

A longstanding objection is that a universe ruled by two warring deities would lack the coherent order we observe. To address this, we examined recent theodicies, such as rebel-angel and "deal-making", which show that an evil deity might restrain its destructive impulses for strategic purposes (e.g., to maintain a recognizable "battlefield") and that both deities could implicitly cooperate to preserve natural regularities. These adaptations illustrate that Manichaeism can accommodate both a distinct source for the existence of evil and the maintenance of cosmic order without introducing logical contradictions. Ultimately, by integrating the *a posteriori* advantages provided by the EGC with renewed *a priori* plausibility, and by resolving the order objection through contemporary theodicies, MH can plausibly emerge as a serious alternative to monotheistic theism. However, this should be considered as a first step in reintroducing MH to the philosophy of religion, and as such, it only serves as a conditional validity claim (under the stated assumptions discussed) and not a soundness claim.

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Note

- ¹ By introducing SH in this section, it might be thought that SH might be better off than MH. Although a thorough comparison would require a paper-length engagement, a few reasons for finding MH preferable to SH will be offered. SH posits a GG plus a created malign agent, namely Satan, whose harmful activity GG permits for reasons like soul-making. MH instead posits two ultimate, opposed principles, GG and EG. Under SH, good comes straight from God, but evil needs an extra explanation; under MH, good and evil come straight from relevant sources. SH suggests the world's order should mostly reduce suffering except where Satan interferes, yet much pain comes from the same steady laws that enable flourishing (e.g., evolutionary predation and pandemics). MH predicts a stable mixture where both principles are in play and neither is decisively dominant, fitting the observed regularity of order in the world.

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