**Introduction**. The English conjunctive phrase “good and evil” appears six times in the ESV Bible. The majority of the time (four times in Genesis (2:9, 17; 3:5, 22)). The first two examples in Genesis are related to the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The second two examples in Genesis are related to the change in man’s nature, that of “knowing good and evil.”

The last two verses are from 2 Sam 14:17 (David) and 1 Kings 3:9 (Solomon). The first is related to David and Solomon and how they know “good from evil.” Notice that none of the verses states that God created “evil,” but that He is “knowledgeable” of “good and evil” and that man can become knowledgeable of good and evil.

However, searching for the two Hebrew lemmas (טוֹב NEAR רַע; good NEAR evil) demonstrates that God used these two Hebrew words in 38 verses. Those extra verses discuss humanity’s situation in life related to “good or evil”; thus, no additional verses deal with God and the conjunctive phrase “good and evil.” Therefore, we should focus only on the four verses in Genesis 2:9, 17; 3:5, 22.

Starting with Genesis 2:9, we read that God placed “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”[[1]](#footnote-1) in the garden. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for knowledge has a direct article assigned to it, thus indicating that there is only **one** knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 2:17, we see the same definite article associated with the knowledge of good and evil, a knowledge that will cause death of the ones that eat the fruit.

It seems then that the “tree” can convey **the** knowledge of good and evil, not causing the one to consume the “fruit” of the tree to be either good or evil. This understanding is dynamically seen in Genesis 3:5 when the “snake” states to Adam and Eve that “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be **like God, knowing good and evil** (emphasis added) ....” The other scripture (Genesis 3:22) repeats a similar statement referring to the ability to “know” good and evil.

**Bottom line**. Unfortunately, scripture does not discuss evil’s origin but identifies many intermediate sources.[[2]](#footnote-2) These sources are the normal ones we are used to thinking about, Satan, other men, circumstances, etc. But this does not address the origin of evil. There are, however, several possible ideas associated with good and evil. For instance, in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary,* the article on the use of the “knowledge of good and evil” (seems) in the broader biblical text lends support to interpreting this knowledge as a moral discernment of good and evil ...”[[3]](#footnote-3) This is similar to the concept of “merism,” which is a figure of speech where conflicting terms, e.g., “good and bad,” combine to convey both terms and everything in between. Thus the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17) may mean the tree of knowledge of everything.[[4]](#footnote-4) If so, this would mean that Adam and Eve, intentionally or unintentionally, desired to become like God, which is evil.

Based on the above, I believe God has complete knowledge of good and evil; He is the only one with complete knowledge. This comment is based on the use of the definite article in Genesis 2:9 and 2:17. However, the above does not address the origin of evil. Here is where philosophy and theology step in and discuss some possibilities. For your reading pleasure, I have copied here an article that is very interesting concerning the origin of evil. While it addresses the “dualist’s” point of view, the arguments are still valid for any discussion concerning the origin of evil.

**Interesting article**.

“The dualist says that the theist cannot escape the following conclusion:

(1) God is the author of everything that exists.

(2) Evil is something that exists.

(3) Therefore, God is the author of evil.

Since theists affirm God’s sovereignty and creative power over all that exists, they cannot deny premise 1. Likewise, since theists do not, like pantheists, deny the reality of evil, they cannot deny premise 2. But this means theists seem stuck with an unwanted conclusion since it makes God directly responsible for creating evil.

Theists respond to both premises. First, God only authorizes some things indirectly, for example. God created freedom, but He does not perform acts of evil Himself or through man’s free choice. To state it another way, God does not create evil directly or substantially but only *incidentally.* God is directly responsible only for the *fact* of freedom, not for all the *acts* of freedom. Of course. God did create the *possibility* of evil when He made men free. But it is free creatures who bring about the *actuality* of evil. Second, God is indirectly responsible for evil in that He made evil possible. But the possibility of evil is good—it is necessary for human freedom. The power of free choice is a good power; the fact that men abuse freedom does not make freedom bad. Men abuse everything, including the water and air in their environment. But this does not mean that water and air are bad.

Many theists also object to the second premise. Evil is not a “thing” (or substance). Evil is a *privation* or absence of good. Evil exists in another entity (as rust exists in a car or rot exists in a tree) but does not exist in itself. Nothing can be totally evil (in a metaphysical sense). One cannot have a *totally* rusted car or a *totally* moth-eaten garment. For if it were utterly destroyed, then it would not exist at all. The Christian points to Scripture which says everything God made was “good” (Gen. 1:31); even today, “every creature of God is good” (I Tim. 4:11), and “nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14). To be sure, the Bible teaches that men are depraved in a moral sense, since sin has extended to the whole man, including his mind and will (Rom. 3; Eph. 2). But total depravity is to be taken in an *extensive* sense (affecting the whole man), not in an *intensive* sense (destroying the very essence of man).

When the theist says that evil is no “thing” (substance), he is not saying evil is “nothing” (that is, unreal). Evil is a *real* privation. Blindness is real—it is the real privation of sight. Likewise, it is *real* to be maimed—it is a genuine lack of limb or sense organ.

Evil is not a mere absence, however. Arms and eyes are absent in stones, but we would not say that stones are *deprived* of arms and eyes. A privation is more than an absence; it is an absence of some form or perfection that *should be there* (by its very nature).

One further point should be made about dualism. It faces the following dilemma, both alternatives of which lead to theism.

(1) Good and evil are either judged by a standard beyond themselves, or they are judged by each other.

(2) But if they are judged by a standard beyond themselves, then that is the one and only ultimate by which all are judged (which is the theistic definition of “God”).

(3) If good is judged by evil, then evil is the single ultimate by which all else is measured.

(4) If evil is judged by good, then good is the single ultimate by which all else is measured.

(5) In both cases, there is one, not two, ultimate standard (contrary to dualism).

Further, as Augustine pointed out in reply to the Manichaeans, evil is measured by good and not the reverse. For when we take all that we call *evil* away from something, then what is left is better (for example, remove all rust from a car, and one has a better car). But when we take all that is called *good* from something, then nothing is left. *Good,* therefore, is the positive and *evil* is the privation or lack of good.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**My Final Thoughts**. First, God knows good and evil. Second, since God is perfect, His knowledge of that goodness would allow Him to understand what would be the negation (evil) of His morality. Hence, He has complete knowledge of good and evil. Third, evil is not something that is created but a rebellion against God’s goodness; thus, Satan, in his rebellion, did evil in the sight of the Lord. Fourth, Adam and Eve rebelled against God when they exercised their free will and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Fifth, before this event, Adam and Eve did not know good or evil, and because they were obedient to God’s will, they would have only done that which was good.

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