



Research Paper

The Dichotomy of Good and Evil: A Study of Moral Duality in the Movie *The School for Good and Evil*

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Abstract: The dichotomy between good and evil is a central concept in philosophy, ethics, and many religious traditions. It suggests that good and evil are two distinct, opposing forces that cannot co-exist. Good and evil are seen as mutually exclusive and this view calls for moral absolutism. Actions, intentions, or entities are classified as either entirely good or entirely evil. This dichotomy is often applied universally across cultures and contexts. Good and evil are seen as engaged in an eternal struggle, with good ultimately triumphing over evil. This paper examines the complex dichotomy between good and evil as portrayed in the 2022 film *The School for Good and Evil*, directed by Paul Feig and based on the novel of the same name by Soman Chainani. The film presents a dualistic world where characters are trained to stand for either virtue or vice, raising questions about the nature of morality, the rigidity of ethical binaries, and the blurring of boundaries between good and evil. By analysing the narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements, this study explores how the film challenges traditional notions of moral absolutism and offers a vision of moral complexity.

Keywords: Good and Evil, Moral Dichotomy, Ethical Binaries, Moral Philosophy, Character Development, blurring of boundaries

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The dichotomy between good and evil is an underlying concept in philosophical, moral and religious traditions. It suggests that good and evil are two distinct, opposing forces that cannot coexist. It is an age-old binary opposition. Good and evil are seen as mutually exclusive, with no middle ground or grey area. The dichotomy calls for moral absolutism. Actions, intentions, or entities are classified as either entirely good or entirely evil. This dichotomy is often applied universally, across cultures and contexts. Good and evil are seen as engaged in an eternal struggle, with good ultimately triumphing over evil.

The binary opposition good/evil is a central theme in moral philosophy, reflecting the tendency of people all over the world to classify actions, intentions, and individuals according to moral categories. This binary opposition has been explored by philosophers throughout history, offering insights into the nature of morality, the human condition, and the complexities of moral judgment. Moral Absolutism posits that certain actions are intrinsically good or evil, regardless of context or circumstances. This perspective, rooted in classical philosophy, suggests that moral truths are universal and unchanging. Immanuel Kant, for instance, argued that morality is grounded in reason and that certain actions, for instance lying, are inherently wrong, regardless of the consequences (Kant 15).

Moral Relativism, on the other hand, argues that moral judgments are dependent on cultural, social, or individual perspectives. From this point of view, what is considered good or evil may vary depending on the context. Friedrich Nietzsche, a critic of traditional moral values, suggested that good and evil are constructs shaped by social power dynamics rather than objective truths. Nietzsche's idea of the "will to power" implies that moral categories are tools used by the strong to assert dominance over others, rather than reflections of inherent moral truths (Nietzsche 124-25).

Another school of thought which focuses on the good/evil binary is Manichaeism, a religious and philosophical belief that the world is divided into two opposing forces: good, associated with light and evil, associated with darkness. In this view, good and evil are seen as equally powerful forces engaged in an eternal struggle. This dualistic perspective emphasizes the separation and opposition of good and evil, suggesting that they are distinct entities with their own intrinsic natures (Boyce 67).

The Problem of Evil, a key issue in theodicy, questions how evil can exist in a world governed by an all-powerful, all-good deity. Philosophers like St. Augustine attempted to reconcile this by proposing that evil is not an independent force but rather the absence or privation of good (*privatio boni*). In this view, evil is understood as a corruption or distortion of good, rather than a force equal to good (Augustine 87).

The English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes argued that humans are naturally selfish and driven by self-preservation, which can lead to actions perceived as evil in the pursuit of personal gain. In his work *Leviathan*, Hobbes suggests that in a state of nature, without societal constraints, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (97). From this perspective, what we consider evil is often a manifestation of human nature in its most raw and unregulated form. Jean-Jacques Rousseau countered Hobbes’ view, asserting that humans are inherently good but are corrupted by society. Rousseau believed that social institutions and inequalities foster evil by distorting natural human compassion and cooperation. This debate highlights the ambiguity in human nature and the difficulty in drawing clear distinctions between good and evil (Rousseau 45).

Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of the Holocaust, introduced the concept of the “banality of evil” in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt argued that evil could manifest not through the actions of monstrous individuals but through ordinary people who uncritically follow orders or adhere to ideology. This insight challenges the traditional dichotomy of good and evil by suggesting that evil can be a result of thoughtlessness and conformity rather than deliberate malice (26).

Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre argued that individuals are responsible for creating their own values through their choices and actions. In this view, good and evil are not pre-determined categories but are defined by the individual’s commitment to authenticity and responsibility. Sartre’s famous assertion that “existence precedes essence” implies that there is no inherent good or evil; instead, individuals must define these concepts through their lived experiences (72).

Hegelian Dialectics proposes that history and human consciousness progress through the resolution of contradictions. Good and evil, in this framework, can be seen as opposing forces that generate conflict, leading to the development of higher ethical syntheses. Hegel’s view suggests that moral progress involves the on-going reconciliation of good and evil, where each concept evolves through its interaction with the other (108).

Eastern Philosophies, such as Taoism, often present a more integrated view of good and evil, emphasizing balance and harmony rather than opposition. The concept of ‘Yin and Yang’ illustrates this, where good and evil are seen as complementary forces that exist within a larger whole. This perspective suggests that good and evil are interconnected and that one cannot exist without the other, challenging the Western tendency to view them as mutually exclusive (Laozi 32).

Carl Jung’s theory of the shadow emphasizes that evil is an integral part of the human psyche. Jung argued that individuals must confront and integrate their shadow—the repressed, darker aspects of themselves—rather than deny it. This process of integration is crucial for achieving psychological wholeness. Jung’s ideas suggest that good and evil are not external forces but internal realities that must be reconciled within each person (Jung 51).

Dualism of Plato and Zoroastrianism posits the existence of two fundamental, opposing realities or principles, while monism of Hegel and stoicism sees good and evil as aspects of a single, underlying reality or principle. Relativism, for instance Nietzsche and postmodernism challenges the idea of a universal, objective good-evil dichotomy (Boyce 45). The dichotomy of good and evil has been a longstanding theme in literature and philosophy, with roots in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. This binary opposition has been perpetuated in media, often reinforcing simpleminded notions of morality. However, recent studies have highlighted the importance of nuanced and complex portrayals of morality, encouraging critical thinking and moral ambiguity.

The dichotomy between good and evil is a deeply embedded concept in both Western and Eastern thought. Philosophical insights reveal that these concepts are often fluid, context-dependent, and intertwined with human nature and societal structures. While traditional views may posit a clear separation between good and evil, contemporary philosophy and psychology increasingly recognize the complexity and ambiguity of moral judgments, emphasizing the importance of understanding the subtleties and interdependencies of these concepts in both personal and societal contexts.

Moral dualism in literature and film has been an interesting topic for postmodern writers, scholars and critics all over the world. In the postmodern world, where everything appears to be fluid, this dichotomy seems to be deconstructed. For instance, one of the main themes in the *Harry Potter* series is that being moral is not so easy to define. J.K. Rowling creates morally ambiguous characters on both sides of the war between Harry and Voldemort. She creates a spectrum of good and evil, instead of two separate and opposing groups, and does not claim to offer any kind of permanent truth about the nature of good and evil. Voldemort in the Harry Potter series says, “There is no good and evil, there is only power and those who are weak to seek it” (Rowling 156) highlighting Nietzsche’s concept of ‘will to power’.

Critics have argued that the good-evil dichotomy fails to account for complexity, nuance, and context. The binary reflects individual or cultural perspectives, rather than objective truth. There exists a moral ambiguity. Many situations and actions cannot be neatly classified as good or evil. The good-evil dichotomy remains a powerful and influential concept, shaping ethical, moral, and philosophical debates across cultures over centuries. *The School for Good and Evil* is a film that explores the perennial theme of good versus evil, set within a fantastical world where young people are trained to become either heroes or villains. The main objective of the paper is to analyse how the film portrays the dichotomy between good and evil, and how it subverts traditional moral binaries. The study critically examines the representation of good and evil in the movie, exploring how it perpetuates and challenges traditional notions. It employs critical discourse analysis, examining the film's narrative, characters, dialogue, and visual representation. The analysis focuses on the ways in which the movie constructs and challenges the dichotomy of good and evil.

The School for Good and Evil is a fantasy adventure film that explores the complexities of morality through the lens of a magical school divided into two groups: one for training heroes, the Good and the other for training villains, the Evil. It presents a world where fairy-tale heroes and villains are trained in separate schools, reinforcing the traditional dichotomy between good and evil. This binary opposition has been a recurring theme in literature and media, influencing audience's perceptions of morality. The movie's narrative reinforces the binary opposition between good and evil, presenting two separate schools with distinct curricula and teaching methods. The School for Good trains heroes, emphasizing courage, kindness, and selflessness, while the School for Evil trains villains, focusing on manipulation, cunning, and ambition. This dichotomy is reinforced through the film's use of contrasting colours, lighting, and music.

The School for Good and Evil is founded by the twin brothers Rhian and Rafal to groom fairy tale heroes called 'Evers' and villains called 'Nevers' respectively. There is a clear-cut demarcation between the heroes and villains. Not satisfied with evil's constant compliance to good, Rafal attacks Rhian using blood magic; the brothers seem to fall off a cliff, and ostensibly Rafal dies. After many years, in the village of Gavaldon, two best friends Agatha and Sophie learn about the legendary school from the owner of the village bookstore. For the last 200 years children have been disappearing from their village; every four years two children are magically kidnapped on the 11th day of the 11th month at midnight – one seemingly good and one seemingly evil. Every four years, villagers try to stop the kidnappings and they fail miserably. While Agatha is cynical; fairy tale-obsessed Sophie fantasises of escaping the mundane life and becoming a princess. Later one night, Sophie tries to escape from Gavaldon secretly. When Agatha finds this out, she tries to stop Sophie: Sophie: "Aggie no. Please let me go!" Agatha: "No way. I'm never letting you go!" (00:16:31-00:16:35). At that moment a giant stymph snatches them both, taking them to the magical School for Good and Evil. So this time it is Sophie and Agatha who are being kidnapped. Only the kidnapped children have seen the school.

The stymph dropped Agatha at the School for Good, while Sophie is transported to the School for Evil, much to their disbelief. The twist here is that the seemingly good princess archetype Sophie with her pretty face and long blonde hair gets sent to the School for Evil while the homely, antisocial and grumpy Agatha gets sent to the School for Good. Sophie is determined to show everyone that she is Good and that she deserves to go to the School for Good and become a fairy tale princess while Agatha wants nothing to do with all these magic and school stuff and just wants to escape and go back home to Gavaldon with her best friend. So Agatha protests wishing to return to Gavaldon, while Sophie insists that she belongs to the school of Good. Hence the narrative traces the story of two best friends, Sophie and Agatha. They are unexpectedly enrolled in the school— Agatha in the School for Good and Sophie in the School for Evil—contrary to their initial expectations. This twist sets the stage for a narrative that challenges traditional notions of good and evil, questioning the rigidity of these categories and the nature of moral identity. Both girls went in search of the School Master Rhian and the magical Storian pen. He says he will only allow Sophie to change schools if she can prove herself an 'Ever' by attaining true love's kiss. She considers Prince Tedros, the son of King Arthur, as her true love and solicits Agatha's help. Agatha tells her: "... , Tedros isn't going to fall for someone just because she's hot. You need to prove to him that you're good in front of everybody, in a way no one can deny." (01:25:55).

Agatha and Sophie struggle to cope with the new circumstances and are shunned by the fellow students. Though Agatha is vocally critical of Good's superficiality, Dean of the School for Good, Clarissa Dovey argues that her sense of empathy makes her the first true princess in a long time. Meanwhile, Rafal shows up as a wasp and defends Sophie from the attack of another student. Dean of the School for Evil, Leonora Lesso interprets this as Sophie's unique potential for winning a victory for Evil, something that was thought impossible for centuries.

As Sophie attempts to grow closer to Tedros, Lady Lesso intervenes by cutting Sophie's hair, intending to crush her spirit. Under the dark influence of Rafal, Sophie undergoes a dramatic transformation, both in appearance and demeanour, quickly gaining the allegiance of the 'Nevers' and ascending to an unofficial leadership role within the Evil student body. Despite their growing distance, Agatha remains determined to help Sophie, using magic in an effort to unite her with Tedros.

The prospect of an 'Ever' and a 'Never' being together throws both schools into a chaotic situation, leading Rhian to declare a 'Trial by Tale' as the only way to resolve the problem. During the trial, Sophie fails to defend herself and Tedros effectively, leaving Agatha, who has secretly infiltrated the event, to step in and save him. This act of bravery causes Tedros to reject Sophie, perceiving her choice of self-preservation over him as a betrayal, and he begins a relationship with Agatha instead. Rafal seizes this moment of vulnerability to convince Sophie that Agatha is her true enemy. Succumbing to his manipulation, Sophie accepts his offer of blood magic, using it to incapacitate Professor Dovey, Lady Lesso, and the other faculty members. She then crashes the Evers' Ball, grotesquely transformed into a hag, marking her complete descent into darkness. She threatens Agatha and prods Tedros into attacking the School for Evil. However, by counter-attacking, the 'Evers' break the law of "Good defends, Evil attacks" (01:35:30); resulting in the 'Nevers' and 'Evers' magically switching appearances and a battle breaking out.

Sophie seeks revenge against Rhian, only to discover that he is actually Rafal, having survived the fall and murdered the real Rhian. Rafal assumed Rhian's identity, manipulating Good's stories to weaken it from within, all to favour Evil. He reveals his true intentions and proposes that he and Sophie rule together, declaring her his true love. As they kiss, the entire foundation of both schools begins to crumble, leaving Sophie horrified by the destruction.

Agatha desperately urges, "Come with me to save Sophie. That's how we'll save the school. Evers and Nevers. Please" (02:02:33). When Agatha arrives to confront Rafal, he attempts to impale her with the Storian, which he had coerced into writing his dark narrative. In a moment of selfless love for her best friend, Sophie thrusts Agatha out of the way, taking the lethal blow herself. Her sacrifice reverses Rafal's spell and nullifies the fate he had written for Agatha, saving everyone. With Sophie dying in her arms, Agatha, aided by Tedros, uses Excalibur to finally kill Rafal. Agatha then tenderly kisses the dying Sophie, and this act of true love miraculously revives her.

In the aftermath, the Evers and Nevers reconcile, and the restored faculty decide to unite the two schools into one. A portal to Gavaldon opens, and after a heartfelt kiss with Tedros, Agatha crosses over with Sophie, returning to their former lives. However, as they settle back into their old world, a new portal suddenly opens, piercing the veil between realms. An arrow shoots through, with Tedros' voice pleading for Agatha, while the Storian ominously declares, "This is only the beginning" (02:25:03).

The film is visually rich, with elaborate sets and costumes that emphasize the dichotomy between the two schools. The narrative weaves through themes of friendship, identity, and the struggle between one's true nature and societal expectations. Through its characters and plot twists, the film eventually suggests that good and evil are not as air tight compartments as they appear and that the potential for both exists within everyone.

The School for Good and Evil delves into the moral complexity of its characters and the world they inhabit, offering a critique of moral absolutism. The division of the academy into two rigid groups symbolises a simplistic understanding of morality, where individuals are categorised as entirely good or entirely evil. However, the film subverts this binary by exploring the fluidity of moral identity. One of the crucial elements of the film as in many postmodern films is the idea that appearances can be deceiving. Sophie, who wishes to become a princess and believes herself to be intrinsically good, is placed in the School for Evil. While Agatha, who is considered as an outcast and assumes herself to be befitting the School for Evil, is placed in the School for Good. This reversal challenges the characters and viewers to reconsider predetermined ideas of good and evil. The film's narrative structure further complicates the moral dichotomy by showing that the qualities associated with good and evil are not mutually exclusive. Characters from the School for Good exhibit traits typically associated with evil, such as pride and prejudice, while characters from the School for Evil display qualities like loyalty and empathy. This blurring of lines raises questions about the nature of morality and whether it is determined by inherent traits, social conditioning, or personal choices.

Sophie begins the story with a clear ambition to become a princess, associating goodness with beauty, elegance, and social status. Her placement in the School for Evil forces her to confront aspects of herself that she had repressed or denied, such as her ambition, vanity, and willingness to manipulate others to achieve her goals. As the story progresses, Sophie's character arc illustrates the dangers of conflating goodness with superficial qualities and the consequences of ignoring the darker aspects of one's personality. Her transformation into a witch, both literally and figuratively, reflects the film's message that evil is not just a trait, but a culmination of choices and actions driven by unchecked desires.

Agatha, on the other hand, is initially portrayed as awkward, cynical, and sceptical of the world's dichotomous view of morality. Prof. Anemone: "So show me your smile if you don't want to fail!" Agatha: "My ... smile?" Prof. Anemone: "Mm-hmm" (00:49:56-00:50:04). Agatha doubts whether she has been put in the right school. Her placement in the School for Good challenges her self-perception and forces her to embrace the qualities that truly define goodness: kindness, empathy, and a strong sense of justice. Unlike Sophie, Agatha's journey is about realising her inherent worth and rejecting societal norms that define beauty and

goodness in narrow terms. Her ability to empathize with others, including those in the School for Evil, exemplifies the film's argument that true goodness transcends appearances and labels.

The duality of good and evil is further embodied in the school's headmasters – The twin founders of the School, Rhian (Good) and Rafal (Evil). The discord between them functions as a symbol of the struggle between good and evil within the narrative. Rafal's attempt to blur the lines between the two sides by manipulating the students, particularly Sophie, highlights the theme of moral relativism. The headmasters' storyline emphasises that the dichotomy between good and evil is often a reflection of power struggles and manipulation, rather than inherent moral differences.

The movie's characters, however, subvert the binary opposition between good and evil. The protagonists, Sophie and Agatha, exhibit complex personalities, motivations, and moral ambiguities. Sophie, initially presented as a hero, reveals a darker side, while Agatha, initially perceived as a villain, displays kindness and empathy. This intricacy defies conventional notions of good and evil. The film's dialogue and visual representation also subvert the binary opposition. Characters' dialogue often blurs the lines between good and evil, while visual representation challenges traditional notions of heroism and villainy. The movie's use of mirrors, reflections, and shadows symbolises the complexity of morality.

Moral Duality in the film *The School for Good and Evil* offers a nuanced exploration of moral duality, challenging the notion that individuals can be strictly categorised as good or evil. The film suggests that these categories are fluid, with the potential for both existing within every person. Through its characters, narrative, and visual symbolism, the film critiques the dangers of moral absolutism and highlights the importance of understanding and integrating all aspects of one's personality. The film ultimately argues that true morality is found not in adhering to rigid labels, but in the choices one makes and the intentions behind those choices. In this way, *The School for Good and Evil* resonates with contemporary ethical debates about the nature of good and evil, offering a story that is as much about personal growth and self-acceptance as it is about the battle between light and darkness.

The findings suggest that *The School for Good and Evil* both perpetuates and challenges traditional notions of good and evil. The movie's reinforcement of the binary opposition between good and evil may contribute to a simplistic understanding of morality. However, its presentation of complex characters, nuanced dialogue, and visual representation encourages critical thinking and moral ambiguity. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on the representation of good and evil in media, highlighting the importance of nuanced and complex portrayals of morality. *The School for Good and Evil* offers a thought-provoking exploration of the dichotomy between good and evil, encouraging audiences to critically evaluate their understanding of morality. By deconstructing the binary opposition between good and evil, the movie promotes a more nuanced understanding of morality, acknowledging the complexity of human nature.

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