

Talking About the Problem of Evil

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T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.

What is Evil?

The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don't know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.



Atheist philosopher David Hume said, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Let's address this. I'll give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we need to address how one can even object to evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I'll close with God's solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

Evil is not a “thing” that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or a phenomenon that exists by itself. It’s like darkness, which is not a created thing; it’s the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God’s omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, “The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most perfect.”

The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate *this* one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of "pre-established harmony."

Leibniz describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best."

Human Free Will

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz, this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its

simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: “The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.” God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God’s instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, “God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so.” John Stackhouse Jr. says, “God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings.”

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga’s argument like this:

“God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of ‘compulsion,’ is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God’s love and to love God in return, but to go one’s own way in defiance of both God and one’s own

best interest.”

God created us with free will because our decision to say “yes” to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say “no” to Him.

The Greater Good

To review, so far, we’ve addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We’ve talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We’ve talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I’ve given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say “delicate” because this defense may not help a questioner much if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid’s viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can’t see it and we can’t understand the larger picture of what He’s doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: “Whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.

The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous “King of the Jews”; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. *He* understands what it is to suffer. *He* has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced, and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God’s wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ

returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil. He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible's definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I've just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.