

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Introduction

Evil is a problem for everyone. No matter which religion one believes or which worldview one holds, the presence of evil in the world creates a logical and existential quandary for all. For Christians, the very existence of evil can produce doubt and, in the realm of apologetics, can be something of an embarrassment. When Christians share and defend their faith, it is quite common for non-Christians to raise the so-called “problem of evil,” either as a real hindrance to belief in God, or as a smoke-screen employed to avoid a conversation concerning matters of faith. As John Feinberg has observed, “Probe an atheist or agnostic deeply enough about why they doubt God’s existence, and he or she will likely recount for you the problem of evil.”¹ Atheists often allege that the existence of evil in the world disproves the existence of God, which is why the problem of evil is sometimes known as the “rock of atheism.”²

David Hume (1711-1776) captured the problem of evil rather famously: “Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive.”³ Hume’s clear implication is an almighty and benevolent God and evil cannot coexist. There are many different versions of the problem of evil, including the logical problem of evil, the evidential problem of evil, and the existential or religious problem of evil. These versions of the problem of evil state, respectively, that the existence of any evil, the existence of a great amount of evil, or the existence of seemingly gratuitous evils are not compatible with the existence of the God of the Bible, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. The problem of evil, in all its iterations, presents a significant intellectual and existential problem to the Christian theist. But it also presents an opportunity to share one’s faith, and to show that the problem of evil, instead of defeating the Christian worldview, actually supports it.

The problem of evil is an extensive topic that cannot be examined in full in this paper, given its limited space. While others have probed, for example, J. L. Mackie’s logical problem and William Rowe’s evidential problem of evil,⁴ my goal is more modest. I intend to show

¹ John S. Feinberg, “Why I Still Believe in Christ, in Spite of Evil and Suffering,” in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 237.

² The German playwright Georg Büchner coined this phrase, according to Henri Blocher, in *Evil and the Cross*, trans. David G. Preston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 9.

³ David Hume, “Evil Makes a Strong Case against God’s Existence,” from *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religions*, Part X, in *Philosophy or Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 262.

⁴ See Ronald N. Nash’s discussion of both in *Reason and Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 177-221.

that (1) the problem of evil is a greater problem for atheists and agnostics than it is for Christians, and (2) the Christian faith, while it does not answer all of our questions regarding evil, provides the solution to the problem of evil, a reason to trust God, and a hope that makes life worth living.

A Problem for Everyone—Particularly for Atheists

As stated above, the presence of evil in the world is a problem for everyone. Death awaits us all and claims our loved ones. Some die through natural evils, such as earthquakes and floods. Others are murdered, their lives claimed by human evil. Each one of us experiences evil on some level, and this experience produces within us a sense of indignation. According to Henri Blocher, evil is “an unjustifiable reality,” a “disorder” that “oppresses and is oppressive.”⁵ Though it is difficult to define evil, we all know it when we see it. We might say that evil is a distortion of the way things ought to be.

This last statement brings us to a very significant thought, one often ignored by atheists. In order to call something evil, we must first have a sense of how things ought to be. Evil has been called a parasite on an antecedent good, much like rust on a car, rot in a tree, or a hole in a garment.⁶ To know that an earthquake is evil, or that murder is evil, would require living in a world where no earthquakes or murder exist. Yet none of us have lived in such a world. There must, then, be some other way of detecting evil. Of course, the Bible tells us that God has implanted within each of us a conscience that can detect such things (Rom. 2:15). As “the Preacher” of Ecclesiastes writes, God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccl. 3:11). Christians can state confidently that God has given everyone a sense of how things ought to be, and things such as earthquakes and murder run contrary to that sense. Furthermore, the Bible stands as a witness to the evil in the world. Protests against evil are found throughout Scripture, particularly in the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and Habakkuk.

While the Christian can easily justify his or her knowledge of evil, the atheist has a much harder time, for to detect evil, one has to have a sense of the antecedent good that evil has distorted.⁷ Those who use the problem of evil in an attempt to disprove Christianity often possess a naturalistic worldview, which denies God. Yet those who deny God have trouble establishing the basis for an objective moral standard, one which is necessary to determine what is good and what is evil. As James Sire observes, “Naturalists who deny the existence of any transcendent, personal God cannot successfully solve the problem of good. They cannot explain why there is a difference between right and wrong.”⁸

One of the key features of naturalism is evolution, which supposedly explains the development of all life forms, which have descended from a common ancestor. One of the key

⁵ Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 11.

⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 220.

⁷ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 618.

⁸ James W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 181.

things for a Christian to recognize is that the theory of evolution requires evil, specifically death and even violence. Consider the following summary of evolution:

Nature is extremely prolific. It produces many more offspring of any given species than can possibly survive. Because of a shortage of the necessities of life, there is competition. The best, the strongest, the most adaptive survive; the others do not. As a result, there is a gradual upgrading of the species. In addition, mutations occur. These are sudden variations, novel features that did not appear in the earlier generations of a species. Of the many mutations that occur, most are useless, even detrimental, but a few are truly helpful in the competitive struggle. At the end of a long process of natural selection and useful mutations humans arrived on the scene. They are organisms of great complexity and superior abilities, not because someone planned and made them that way, but because these features enabled them to survive.⁹

Notice the emphasis placed on competition. According to Charles Darwin, the evolutionary mechanism requires the reality of death, of predation. Without such things, there would be no need for adaptation and the survival of the fittest. In fact, if there were no such thing as death or violence, evolution would not have generated human beings, and we would not be here to debate the issue of evil.

Tim Keller makes a similar observation. First, he acknowledges the problem of evil. “Horrendous, inexplicable suffering, though it cannot disprove God, is nonetheless a problem for the believer in the Bible. However, it is perhaps an even greater problem for nonbelievers.”¹⁰ So evil is a problem for everyone, because all of us realize evil is not the way things should be, but this is a problem for all worldviews, particularly naturalism. Then Keller arrives at this observation: “But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection *depends* on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak—these things are all perfectly natural. On what basis, then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair, and unjust?”¹¹

The atheist may respond by saying that our survival instincts produce a negative reaction to an evil such as death. However, this response is inadequate. Natural selection would require us to view only *our* death as evil, not the deaths of others. And, as Keller suggests, the naturalist has no grounds to protest the oppression of the weak by the strong. The atheist might claim that knowledge of good and evil is simply a brute fact, but that is like saying knowledge of the length of a foot or the weight of a pound is innate. One needs a ruler or a scale, some type of standard, to measure things. So, too, the measurement of good and evil requires some type of standard.¹² C. S. Lewis, when reflecting on his previous rejection of Christianity, stated, “My

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 502. Here, Erickson is summarizing Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution as set forth in *The Origin of the Species*, 6th London ed. (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, n.d.), 473.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 25-26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² Keller states that the naturalist, when declaring the reality of evil, assumes “the reality of some extra-natural (or supernatural) standard” in order to make such a judgment, in *The Reason for God*, 26.

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?”¹³

When evil befalls a person, whether Christian or atheist, a common question emerges upon the lips or, at least, in the mind: “Why me?” If, to quote Carl Sagan, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be,”¹⁴ why ask such a question? It would make no sense to ask the impersonal universe why such evil has occurred. Such a question requires the existence of a personal Being who has the power to stop such evil and the loving character to desire to stop it. In other words, such a question demand God. As Blocher writes, “Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: ‘God is a concept by which we measure our pain,’ he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?”¹⁵

The Christian may use the atheist’s “problem of good and evil” defensively to defuse unbelievers’ attacks or positively to share his or her faith. Defensively, one might answer in this way: “When an unbeliever questions the consistency of God’s sovereignty with his goodness in the face of evil, the apologist replies that the unbeliever has no right even to raise the question, for he cannot, on his basis, even distinguish good from evil.”¹⁶ Positively, one might first show that the atheist has a greater problem regarding evil than the Christian.¹⁷ Then one could present the moral argument for the existence of God and proceed to share the Christian worldview and the gospel in their entirety.¹⁸ The problem of evil also gives the Christian an opportunity to show how other worldviews do not adequately address this issue.¹⁹

Humility

When the atheist tries to adduce evil as a proof against God, he or she is assuming that there could be no reason why an all-powerful and all-loving God would ordain or allow such evil. The atheist is therefore not realizing the limits of human knowledge. It is rather absurd that someone who has a limited lifespan, a limited capacity to learn, and a limited perspective on life could assume to know everything about evil. Stephen Evans boldly writes, “The skeptic’s challenge is really presumptuous and arrogant. It is a claim by a finite creature to know how the world should have been created. How could a skeptic know such a thing?”²⁰ Science cannot

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (1952; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 45.

¹⁴ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

¹⁵ Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 102-03. The John Lennon song he references is “God”.

¹⁶ John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 168.

¹⁷ “If the believer faces the problem of how there can be evil in a theistic world, the unbeliever faces the problem of how there can be either good or evil in a nontheistic world.” Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 169.

¹⁸ Many apologists have presented this theist proof quite well, including Douglas Groothuis in *Christian Apologetics*, 330-63. Lewis rather famously makes much of this argument in *Mere Christianity*.

¹⁹ For a brief examination of what other worldviews have to say about evil, see Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 617-625.

²⁰ C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 101.

measure evil, tell us that God does not exist, or tell us the purpose of life. Without divine revelation, we would be groping in the dark, searching for an answer to the question of evil and a solution for how to defeat it.

The Christian, however, realizes that the Bible is God's inerrant and authoritative word, one that tells us things that science, logic, and observation could never reveal. Yet the Christian must also be humble. The Bible tells us certain things about evil. For example, the Bible makes it quite clear that evil exists, that it is not merely an illusion, and that it is a problem to be overcome. However, the Bible does not tell us the exact origin of evil. Scripture tells us that God does not sin, that he is perfect, that he made human beings to be good, and that he does not tempt people to sin.²¹ We also know that the responsibility for sin falls upon the shoulders of God's creatures, whether they be fallen angels such as Satan or human beings, and not on God.²² Beyond that, the Christian should be careful not to speculate.²³

Part of what makes evil so frustrating is that it makes little sense. According to Gerald Bray, "There is something about the nature of evil that flies in the face of the facts and that refuses to yield to rational argument."²⁴ If we could understand evil, it would still be painful, but it would be something less than evil.²⁵ The mysteries of evil cannot be unlocked, no matter how much speculating and philosophizing humans do.

We would do well to remember, at this point, the book of Job. Job, a righteous man, suffered terrible loss because God allowed Satan to test him (Job 1-2). Of course, neither Job nor his friends had access to this information. (For the reader who, unlike Job, has access to that information, many unanswered questions are raised, such as why God would allow Satan to test Job, why Satan was in heaven, and why Satan exists in the first place.) Job bemoans his condition, wishing he had never been born (chapter 3). He even demands an audience with God (13:3). After over thirty chapters of speculation, God himself arrives on the scene, appearing in a whirlwind (chapter 38). Instead of answering Job's questions, God asks a series of rhetorical questions designed to put Job in his place. God asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding" (38:4). God even employs sarcasm: "You know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!" (38:21). Duly humbled, Job is silenced (40:4-5), he admits that he spoke out of ignorance (42:3) and he repents (42:6). In his suffering, Job did not need answers. God did not owe Job answers then

²¹ 1 John 1:5; Matt. 5:48; Gen. 1:31; Eccl. 7:29; James 1:13.

²² Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* 182; Gerald Bray, *God Is Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 345.

²³ I reject such speculation as the Free Will Defense because the Bible does not teach that we have libertarian free will or that this free will would be of such a great value as to make moral evil permissible. Ronald Nash says that, philosophically, one need only prove that the Free Will Defense is logically possible, not necessarily true, in order to defeat the atheist's problem of evil argument. See Nash, *Faith and Reason*, 188. The rules of philosophy might allow such a maneuver, but Christians are called to speak truth. Therefore, advancing a speculative argument that is not biblical and could very well be wrong is not in the Christian's best interests.

²⁴ Bray, *God Is Love*, 358.

²⁵ Blocher writes, "To understand evil would be to understand that evil is not ultimately evil," in *Evil and the Cross*, 103.

and he does not owe us answers today.²⁶ Instead of answers, Job needed God's presence. He needed to see God (42:5). The same is true of all people, and for those of us who believe in Jesus, we also will behold his face (1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4).

Many of us struggle with evil because we falsely assume that we are the center of the universe. We falsely assume that the purpose of life is human happiness apart from God. We falsely assume that the kindness that would prevent all suffering is superior to a tough love that would rather us suffer than remain selfish and immature. As C. S. Lewis put it, "What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are contented?' We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they said, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves,' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.'"²⁷

However, the true God, the God of the Bible, is not a "senile benevolence," nor is he one desperate to please us. He is far greater than that. He does all that he pleases and everything—including all humans—exists by him and for him.²⁸ Lewis was right to claim, "Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake."²⁹ Rather, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."³⁰

Our Problem and the Solution to Evil

If the purpose of life is to glorify God, we must all admit that we have failed. When the problem of evil is discussed, a significant omission is often made. The real problem of evil is that we are evil, and we have rejected a God that is completely good. Even those who do not believe in God must admit that human beings are the source of most of the evil in the world.³¹ But the Bible tells us that we have rejected God, who is love and the only one who is good.³² The greatest evil is to reject this God, and at the heart of sin is a desire to be God, a promise that Satan makes but cannot deliver (see Gen. 3:5).

Our sin puts us in quite a predicament. The wages of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and God would be just to condemn us all. In fact, because God is a perfect and holy judge, he must punish sin. How can God be, as Exodus 34:6-7 says, "merciful and gracious . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" while also being one who "by no means clear[s] the guilty"?

The answer, of course, is that in the fullness of time, God sent his only Son to take on flesh, becoming a perfectly obedient human being, thereby fulfilling the Law.³³ Jesus was the

²⁶ Similarly, Paul writes, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Rom. 9:20).

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 35-36.

²⁸ Ps. 115:3; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16.

²⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 43.

³⁰ This is the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. See also Rev. 4:11

³¹ "It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork." Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 79.

³² 1 John 4:8; Mark 10:18.

³³ Gal. 4:4; John 1:14; Rom. 5:18; Matt. 5:17.

only human being who did not commit evil. Paradoxically, the only righteous person who ever lived was put to death in the manner of a criminal by dying a shameful death on a Roman cross. Somehow, in ways that are hard to grasp, this was the result of Satan's actions, evil men's plotting, and God's eternal plan.³⁴ The one who did not sin bore our sins on the cross so that "we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:22-24). "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

This is the paradox of the cross, something both profoundly mysterious and also beautifully logical: crimes demand punishment and forgiveness incurs great cost. The only way for God to make us right with him, to deliver us from evil, was to become a human being, to suffer what we deserve. "Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin."³⁵ Though evil has continued after the cross, Jesus' death and resurrection announced the certain future defeat of Satan and evil. This defeat will be brought to a triumphant, cosmic conclusion when Jesus returns, as the book of Revelation proclaims.

The cross of Christ is a fitting way for God to solve the problem of evil. If Satan and sinful men are the truly evil things in the universe, then one way for God to solve the problem would be to destroy us all. However, God is loving and gracious to his creatures, so he devised a way that would destroy evil but not us. As Keller writes, "The Bible says that Jesus came on a rescue mission for creation. He had to pay for our sins so that someday he can end evil and suffering without ending us."³⁶ The Creator God also came that he might recreate us through his Spirit and make us into the kind of people who are not evil, the kind of people we were meant to be. All of this was done for our good and his glory.³⁷ Whatever suffering Christians may now face is a temporary affliction that prepares them for eternal glory (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement teach us some important things about evil. While we may not understand evil, we know that God is not indifferent to our suffering. He is not a distant, dictatorial God. Rather, he is one willing to subject himself to pain and suffering. The atonement is something completely unique among religions and worldviews; no other religion says that God became man and endured evil for us.³⁸ This news gives us a greater reason to trust the Christian God in the face of the evil that we see and experience. It gives us confidence that evil will be destroyed. The testimony of the Bible also tells us that while we do not understand the significance of every evil act, we can trust that nothing is an accident, but that all things work together for our good (Rom. 8:28).³⁹

³⁴ Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27; Matt. 26:14-16; John 11:47-53; Acts 2:23; 3:13-15.

³⁵ Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 132.

³⁶ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 30.

³⁷ Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:3-14; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 2:13-15. Notice how our redemption, God's sovereignty, Jesus' sacrifice, and God's own glory mingle in these verses.

³⁸ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 644.

³⁹ When speaking of the cross, the Christian would be wise to adduce all the historical evidence for the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. The historical evidence greatly bolsters the argument being made here, though we cannot examine it as this time.

In the end, all evil will be destroyed and all wrongs will be righted. It is nearly impossible to imagine a world that never contained any evil, for such a world is so foreign to our experience. Yet we can suppose that God could have made such a world initially. But in his infinite wisdom, he made a world into which sin mysteriously crept in, a world that needed to be saved in such a way that only God could do it. Eternity will somehow be better with the memory of God's victory over evil, with a reigning Lord who is also the Lamb slain for our sins. God's salvation of his people makes them eternally grateful for their rescue, which brings God more glory and which makes his people happier than if they had never known sin and evil. Indeed, man's chief end is to glorify God, and in the new heavens and earth, they will enjoy him forever in a world purged of all evil.

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