

The Problem of Evil

Many people have considered the problem of evil to be the most difficult challenge to theism. Some atheists argue that it defeats all the other arguments *for* God's existence. Even for theists, particularly those in the midst of suffering, the problem of evil can raise some very difficult and perplexing questions.

The problem of evil poses an intellectual and emotional challenge, and thus it is typically addressed in two different ways. An intellectual/philosophical discussion would not likely comfort a person who is personally experiencing pain. Conversely, words of comfort would not likely satisfy a philosophical inquiry into the problem of evil.

The word "evil" includes natural evil (e.g., earthquakes, floods, animal suffering), human intentional evil (e.g., murder, rape, theft), accidents (e.g., medical, car, friendly fire), and ill health (mental, physical, episodic, fatal, chronic). These evils are often grouped more simply into *moral evils* (evils caused by intentional human choices) and *natural evils* (evils not caused by intentional human choices).

1. The intellectual/philosophical discussion

The intellectual (or philosophical) aspect of the problem of evil is presented as an argument against the existence of God. One approach taken by atheists until recently was *the logical version*. This version has largely been abandoned by those in the know as a failed argument in favor of *the probabilistic version*.

- a. The logical version. The logical (or deductive) version of the problem of evil says it is logically impossible for God and evil to coexist. To be more precise, the existence of evil disproves the existence of an *omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent* God. It is typically presented in two versions: Argument a1 and Argument a2 below.

Argument a1.

- 1) If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving, evil would not exist.
- 2) Evil exists.
- 3) Therefore, an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God does not exist.

This argument claims that an all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God is incompatible with evil. But this supposed incompatibility is certainly not explicit in the premises. Their hidden assumptions are as follows:

- 4) If God is all powerful, he can create any world.
- 5) If God is all loving, he would prefer a world without evil.

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Solutions to argument a1. Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig effectively demonstrate the failure of the logical problem of evil as follows: To deductively prove the existence of God and evil to be a logical contradiction, there can be no possibility that any of the premises are false. If there is a possibility that God and evil coexist, no matter how implausible, the logical argument fails. Regarding premise 4, God's omnipotence does not entail that he can do anything. For example, God cannot act against his own nature (e.g., he cannot lie [Titus 1:2]) or actualize a contradiction (God cannot swear by a being greater than himself [Heb 6:13], he cannot create a square circle, he cannot *make* a moral agent *freely* choose something, etc.). It is possible that God cannot feasibly create a world of free creatures in which there is no moral evil. It is also possible that God cannot feasibly create a world with less evil and more good than our actual world.

As for natural evil, it might be that these evils are caused by demons with free will, in which God cannot *make* them *freely* refrain from their evil. Whether any of these possibilities are deemed probable or in agreement with any particular revelation, if they are possible, the logical version of the problem of evil fails to meet its burden of proof.

As for premise 5, Plantinga and Craig show that as finite humans, we are in no position to know what God would prefer with any confidence. We would have to be omniscient ourselves to know the ripple effect of preventing a single evil. It is possible that to prevent certain evils, the consequence would be greater future evils. It is also possible that God uses pain and suffering to accomplish a greater good in which we are not aware, with our limited frame of knowledge. The atheist cannot prove that God doesn't have good reasons for permitting the evils in our world. Philosopher Jane Mary Trau rightly concludes that to claim that there is gratuitous (i.e., meaningless) evil is question-begging (sneaking the atheistic conclusion into the premises); thus the problem of evil cannot be used to determine the existence of God.

If any premise is not necessarily true, the logical version fails. Yet both premises 4 and 5 fail, so the argument doubly fails. If these hidden premises are replaced with premise 6 below, premises 1 and 2 are consistent.

Premise 6. God could not have created a world that has as much good as the actual world but had less evil, and God has good reasons for permitting the evils that exist.

This then leads to the conclusion: An all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God can coexist with evil.

If premise 6 is even possible, God and evil are logically compatible. The atheist has thus assumed a burden of proof that he cannot meet.

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Argument a2. The other common logical version of the problem of evil goes this way:

- 1) God created all things that exist.
- 2) Evil exists.
- 3) Therefore, God created evil.
- 4) Therefore, God is not all good.

Solutions to argument a2. First, a God who created evil would not necessarily be evil himself if he had a reason for creating evil which produced a greater good ultimately. Second, God didn't create evil, only the *possibility of evil*. Augustine argued that God did not create evil, because evil is merely a privation (i.e., a lack, or absence, or corruption) of the good which should be. Thomas Aquinas agreed and added that evil does not have positive existence since 'existence' by his definition is an act which actualizes essences, whereas evil is a lack of actualization. (Evil must be either a lack of actualizing or the actualizing of something; to be both would be a contradiction.) Evil is akin to blindness in those things which, by their natures, should see (i.e., humans and dogs are said to be blind if they cannot see, but not rocks and trees). The Christian apologists were not saying that evil is an illusion (unreal) as some eastern philosophies and some Christian cults do (e.g., Christian Science, Urantia, A Course in Miracles). Biblically, this corruption of the good is the enemy of God and his people. The Bible is the story of evil's defeat by the one true God, who is goodness. Therefore evil, being parasitic on the good, is not ultimate or primary, as it cannot exist alone. Good does not require evil, but evil does require good.

- b. The probabilistic version. This version of the problem of evil says it is *improbable* that God exists in light of all the evils in the world. Craig points out that even if this is granted, it would not outweigh all the other reasons *for* God's existence (cosmological, teleological, moral, etc.). So God's existence is not improbable relative to the full range of relevant data. Furthermore the evils in the world do not outweigh the good. If so, we would all commit suicide. Obviously most people believe there is more good than evil in the world, and thus life is worth living.

Furthermore as finite creatures, we are in no position to make these sort of probability judgments regarding the possible good reasons for God permitting evil. Only a God with foreknowledge and/or middle knowledge (knowledge of what people would choose under any circumstances) could make such an assessment of all contingencies and outcomes.

And lastly, in *Christian* theism, God's special revelation informs us where inductive reasoning from general revelation cannot. We learn from the Bible that God's greatest good is eternal blessings for those who choose to have a loving relationship with him through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, preached against sin, prayed, taught, healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, suffered and died for the sins of the world, and rose from the dead in a glorified immortal body. Jesus didn't deny the

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reality of evil or soft-pedal the seriousness of it; he faced evil head-on and conquered it. Jesus himself endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Heb 12:2). So it is not surprising that God would use pain and suffering in our lives to accomplish a greater good—that we would have our own crosses to bear. Our eternal salvation and conformance in character to Jesus Christ is more important to God than our short-term comforts. In Christianity, suffering can be used by God for punishment and chastening and/or to develop a greater dependency on him. God sometimes uses the vilest evils to bring about his greatest blessings (e.g., Gen 50:20; Acts 2:23). Without pain and suffering, virtues such as courage and sacrifice would not exist. Without obstacles and enemies, we would never experience victory. The Christian is called to care for those who are suffering, to be Christ's body to a hurting world; but the Christian does so, not in despair, but with the firm hope that the sufferings of this world are light and momentary relative to eternity (2Cor 4:16-18; Rom 8:18, 28). The Christian can endure suffering and minister to others with the understanding that the knowledge of God is an incomparable good, and that Jesus makes suffering more bearable. And finally, God is a just and equitable judge, who promises to call all people to judgment, where he will reward good and punish evil (Jn 5:29; Rom 2:5-8; 1Cor 3:8-15; 2Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13). In the end, good and evil are both recompensed, which is good (2Thes 1:6; Heb 10:30).

So Christian theism can offer a good defense to the problem of evil, as well as a theodicy (explanation of evil), such that the coexistence of God and evil is not improbable. On the other hand, atheistic arguments not only fail to disprove God, atheists are left with no ultimate grounding for the categories of objective good and evil, just nature doing what nature does. Without a transcendent moral law-Giver, morality is no more than subjective preferences. Various forms of pantheism cop out by denying the reality of good and evil. And religious dualism unwittingly demands a transcendent standard to judge which is the eternal *good* god versus the eternal *evil* god. This transcendent standard is therefore ultimate. This ultimate is therefore God and so religious dualism is self-refuting. While humans are in no position to understand God's reasons for the various individual miseries that afflict us, Christian theism provides a consistent, coherent, and comprehensive worldview that enables us to acknowledge evil in the providential plan of God, to individually overcome evil with good as Jesus did (1Pet 2:23; Rom 12:21), and look forward to a day when God will destroy evil. At the end of the day, Christianity is the only solution to the problem evil.

2. The emotional discussion

It is one thing to think about the problem of evil from a distance, but altogether another to personally be in the throes of it. William Shakespeare wrote, "For there was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently." The philosopher tries to think clearly about evil, but a friend or counselor or pastor is needed when a person is suffering. A good friend (while also needing to think clearly about evil) knows how to listen, care for, counsel, pray for, and weep with a friend who is in pain. More importantly God himself cares about our

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suffering. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came to earth and suffered the pain of rejection, humiliation, scourging and a cruel death—all for us. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. The English evangelical John Stott reflected,

In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering.

God uses adversity to test us--to try our faith. Job did not curse God during his afflictions, but learned to trust all the more in God, proclaiming, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." (Job 13:15). And God showed himself faithful to Job.

God uses hardships to spiritually purify and empower his people. The apostle Paul suffered labors, stripes above measure, in prisons, beaten with rods, three times suffered shipwreck, in perils in the sea, of robbers, his own countrymen, by heathen, in the city, in the wilderness, among false brethren, in weariness and painfulness, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness, and beside those things from without, the daily care of all the churches. Through it all, the great apostle said he gloried in his infirmities that the power of Christ may rest on him... "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (2Cor 11-12)

Tom Schmidt illustrates how Jesus is sufficient in our suffering. He tells a story of a remarkable woman he knew named Mabel:

The state-run convalescent hospital is not a pleasant place. It is large, understaffed, and overfilled with senile and helpless and lonely people who are waiting to die. On the brightest of days it seems dark inside, and it smells of sickness and stale urine. I went there once or twice a week for four years, but I never wanted to go, and I always left with a sense of relief. It is not the kind of place one gets used to. On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before, looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases, strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

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As I neared the end of this hallway, I saw an old woman strapped in a wheelchair. Her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to the side, dropped one eye and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly. I also learned later that this woman was 89 years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone for 25 years. This was Mabel.

I don't know why I spoke to her. She looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a flower in her hand and said, "Here is a flower for you, Happy Mother's Day!" She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke, and much to my surprise her words, though somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, "Thank you, it's lovely, but can I give it to someone else? I can't see it you know, I'm blind."

I said, "Of course," and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one and stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, "Here, this is from Jesus."

It was then that it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. . . . Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks, and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. . . . It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder. And I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say. . . .

During one hectic week of final exams, I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all of the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, *what does Mabel have to think about?* Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it is day or night. So I went to her and asked, "Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?" And she said, "I think about my Jesus."

I sat there and thought for a moment about the difficulty for me of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes. And I asked, "*What* do you think about Jesus?" She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote, and this is what she said,

I think how good he has been to me. He has been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied. . . . Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus, he is all the world to me.

And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

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Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all.
He is my strength from day to day,
Without him, I would fall.
When I am sad, to him I go.
No other one can cheer me so.
When I am sad, he makes me glad.
He's my friend.

This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know, I knew her. *How could she do it?* Seconds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company and without an explanation of why it was all happening – and she laid there and sang hymns. *How could she do it?*

The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something that you and I don't have much of. She had power. Lying there, in that bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to hear, unable to talk..., she had incredible power.

3. Conclusion

The theist, without having to know why God allows evil, using logic only, can give a solid defense of God and evil's compatibility. The atheist fails to meet the burden of proof that God and evil cannot coexist.

Atheism, pantheism, and religious dualism fail to give a credible explanation for the existence of evil, and offer no hope in overcoming it. However, the *Christian* has the resources to give a general theodicy all the while rightly acknowledging the limited knowledge of humans and the inscrutable ways of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God. Only the Christian understands that God became a man and suffered for us, and that he is touched with the feelings of our infirmities. Only the Christian understands that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in believers, and that all things work together for good *to them who love God*. Only the Christian understands that Jesus will return to destroy evil, and for his children, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away." (Rev 21:4)

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Sources:

1. Richard G. Howe, presentation, personal conversation, and email
2. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, book, [*I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*](#), Appendix 1
3. Phil Fernandes, paper, [*The Problem of Evil*](#)
4. Matthew Coombe, paper, [*A Theodicy \(answering some questions about God and evil\)*](#)
5. William Lane Craig, Aalborg University lecture YouTube video, [*The Problem of Evil*](#)
6. Alvin Plantinga, book, [*God, Freedom, and Evil*](#)