

Why Does God allow Suffering & Evil?

The Problem of Evil, Part 1

“If only villains got broken backs or cancers, if only cheaters and crooks got Parkinson’s disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe. But, as it is, a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumor, a happy young wife sees her husband and child killed before her eyes by a drunken driver; and . . . we soundlessly scream at the stars, ‘Why? Why?’

A mention of God—of God’s will—doesn’t help a bit. How could a good God, a loving God, do that? How could he even let it happen? And no answer comes from the indifferent stars.”

— Sheldon Vanauken¹

“This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.”

— Psalm 73:12, 13

- The Intellectual Problem of evil:

“concerns how to give a rational explanation of the coexistence of God and evil.”

- The Emotional Problem of evil:

“concerns how to comfort those who are suffering and how to dissolve the emotional dislike people have of a God who would permit such evil.”²

I. What Do We Mean By Evil?

A. Two kinds of evil in the world:

- (1) _____ evil: People’s own inhumanity to people, motivated by hate, greed, or overindulgence.
- (2) _____ evil: Disasters brought on by natural causes such as floods, earthquakes or tornadoes; different sorts of diseases such as smallpox, polio, cancer or leukemia; congenital disabilities such as muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy or encephalitis; accidents and injuries such as being burned, crushed or drowned.

B. What is evil? Different worldviews give various answers.

1. Evil is an _____. (Non-dualistic Hinduism, Christian Science, New Thought Metaphysics).
2. Evil is _____ to human existence—a brute fact. (Buddhism)
3. Evil exists because _____ is evil. (Platonic philosophy, Gnosticism)
4. Evil is the result of two equal _____. (Zoroastrianism, Taoism)
5. Evil is the result of _____—God’s will. (Islam)
6. Evil exists because God is either _____ or _____. (Hinduism, Rabbi Harold Kushner³)

ALL THESE OPTIONS ARE UNSATISFACTORY!

¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28.

² J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 536.

³ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981).
Ch. 7: “God Can’t Do Everything, But He Can Do Some Important Things.”

7. The Christian definition of evil: Evil is a _____ or _____ of the good (a privation). It is not a “thing” which can exist as an independent entity, on its own, apart from good. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) argued,

“Good can exist without [evils]. . . Evils, on the other hand, cannot exist without goods, because the natures in which evils exist are good insofar as they are natures. Moreover, evil is removed not by removing any nature or part of a nature that evil brings to a thing, but by healing and correcting what evil has damaged and deformed.” — St. Augustine of Hippo⁴

II. The Logical Objection: The Christian God and a world in which there is evil cannot coexist.

The theistic, Christian assertion:

- A. An omnipotent (all-powerful), omnibenevolent (all-good) God exists.
- B. Evil exists.

Two Forms of the Objection:

- A. If God were all-powerful, he *could* abolish evil.
- B. If God were all-good, he *would* abolish evil.
- C. Evil exists.
- D. Therefore, God is either not all-powerful or not all-good.⁵

- A. If God were good, he would *wish* to make his creatures perfectly happy.
- B. If God were all-mighty, he would be *able* to do whatever he wished.
- C. We, his creatures, are not perfectly happy.
- D. Therefore, God lacks either goodness or power or both.

In our dealing with the problem of evil, Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, distinguishes between what he calls a “defense” and a “theodicy.”

“[A Theodicy] aims to provide an account of why God actually permits the evils in the world. By contrast a defense offers no such account but seeks merely to show that atheists have failed to carry their case that evil is incompatible with God’s existence. — Alvin Plantinga⁶

III. A Problem with the Logical Objection & Evidence for God’s Existence.

- A. To say there is such a thing as evil, presupposes there is such a thing as _____.
- B. To say there is such a thing as good, presupposes there is a _____ law, on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil.
- C. To say there is such a thing as a moral law, presupposes there is a moral law _____.

⁴ Augustine, *Political Writings*, translated by Michael W. Tkacz, Douglas Kries (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 101.

⁵ W. L. Craig maintains that the law of excluded middle does not pertain here, but there is a third option, “A being is not morally culpable in allowing otherwise preventable evil to exist if that being has a morally sufficient reason for doing so. So long as it is even possible that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil it follows that God and evil are logically consistent.”

⁶ Moreland and Craig, 538.

Conclusion: The objection to God presupposes the existence of _____. The framing of the question is as much a problem for the one asking the question as it is for the one attempting to answer it.

IV. Historical Christian Explanations for the Existence of Evil

A. Evil is a necessary possibility for the existence of human _____. (free-will model)

OBJECTION: Couldn't God Have Created A Different Kind of World? (The best of all possible worlds).

1.

2.

3.

4.

Q: Wouldn't it have been better for God to act upon #1-3, rather than #4?

A: C. S. Lewis points out that the minute you use the word "better," you're invoking a _____, by which to measure what would have been morally good or superior.

B. Evil serves the purpose of turning our hearts toward God and _____ building.

OBJECTION: Is this fair? Couldn't God just make us all like Jesus?

C. The full purpose of all evils is presently a _____ that will not be made clear until eternity.

OBJECTION: This is a post-dated check, for which there is no reason to believe.

D. The problem of evil is lessened in light that _____ has suffered because of sin and still suffers with _____. We must see suffering in light of the _____.

At the cross evil is dealt with most fully. God's promise to deal with evil, separating it from good, is guaranteed at the cross—that one day He will judge everything, dispensing perfect justice.

"I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross'. 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 which symbolizes divine suffering. 'The cross of Christ . . . is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours."
— John Stott⁷

Suggested Reading:

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

_____, *The Problem of Pain*.

Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes, *When God Weeps*.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, Objection #1.

Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*.

Philip Yancy, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 335-336.