

The Problem of Evil

I. Introduction

- A. Many philosophers have held that the existence of evil in the universe is the *Achilles heel* of Christianity, and that it constitutes evidence for the non-existence of the Christian God. This problem has been expressed in the following syllogism:

If God is all-good, he *would* destroy evil.
If God is all-powerful, he *could* destroy evil.
But evil is not destroyed.
Therefore, such a God (all-good and all-powerful) does not exist.

Another equally troublesome syllogism for Christians is:

God is the author of everything.
Evil is something.
Therefore, God is the author of evil.

Christians can accept the first two premises but not the third, hence the problem.

- B. This tension between the existence of evil and the Christian God has been a major subject of the Arts: Some excellent modern examples from literature are: Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, and Camus's *The Plague*,

II. The Nature of the Problem

The problem stems from a seemingly insolvable tension due to the three following beliefs of historic Christianity:

- A. God is a morally perfect being (holy). The goodness of God.
- B. God is an omnipotent being (all-powerful). The greatness of God
- C. Evil is a reality in the universe. Three types:
1. Natural evil. The natural world is in a fallen state. Malevolence is witnessed in nature (Contrary to what the nature religions believe!).

2. Moral evil. Evil that is the result of the will of moral beings.
3. Metaphysical evil (i.e., the Devil and demons).

III. Types of solutions

A. Theodicies: A theodicy is a rational attempt by theists to exonerate God as being the source of evil. Basically, these attempts try to modify one or more of the above assertions about God. There are basically two types:

1. Those that modify the nature of God. Finite-godism. two types:

- a. God is limited in power, but evil is real. This view is known as Process theology and is found in liberal protestantism and liberal Judaism. (See the popular book: *When Bad things Happen to Good People*). This view sees god as finite and in the process of struggling with evil. The triumph of good over evil depends on man's cooperation with god.

Critique: This view does not explain the origin of evil, nor is there any guarantee that good will ultimately triumph over evil. The news reports would seem to argue against this view.

- b. God is limited in his goodness. He is detached from his creation. Forms of Deism and Sadism.

Critique: If this is true (that god is finite) then the good cannot be known. To know the good necessitates an infinite, absolute standard.

2. Those that re-define the nature of evil.

- a. Evil is really good. Evil, i.e., suffering, brings about good, therefore, evil itself is good.

Critique: There is no real difference between good and evil. The Bible warns against making evil good and good, evil.

- b. Evil comes from Satan. This results in a dualism which teaches

that good and evil are equal.

Critique: (1) It limits God's power.

(2) No redemption or victory over evil is possible, only an eternal struggle.

- c. Evil must exist to appreciate the good. There is certainly some truth to this. However:

Critique: (1) This too, makes evil a good.

(2) The end justifies the means.

B. Irrational Approaches

1. Evil is an illusion. This is the teaching of Eastern philosophy and religion, and the "Made in America" cult, Christian Science.

Critique: (1) But isn't the illusion real? Where did the illusion originate? Is there a practical difference if evil is an illusion or real?

(2) No assertions can be made about good or evil.

(3) If evil is an illusion why fight it?

2. Atheist position: Evil is not a thing in itself.

Critique: We must note that the problem of evil is devastating for atheism. His problem is twice compounded. Since there is no ultimate good, any definition is arbitrary. His only logical recourse is nihilism, i.e. meaninglessness. Atheists, however, in order to live their everyday lives smuggle in values from other worldviews.

C. The Faith Approach

1. The Goodness and Greatness of God, and reality of evil, are affirmed, but the origin and purpose of evil are a mystery. Something less than a complete resolution will have to suffice for the here and now.

- a. Defense

- (1) While it may not be possible to resolve the problem, we may alleviate it somewhat, and may see the direction from which final solutions might come had we more complete knowledge and understanding.
- (2) God is omnipotent, but this does not mean God can do anything. He cannot do that which is illogical, like make a square circle. Likewise, how can he make a man with free choice and at the same time guarantee that he will always do exactly what God desires?
- (3) If God had not included evil as a part of His plan He would have to have made man other than what he is. To God it was better to make man rather than androids.
- (4) God could eradicate evil, but to do so might itself be an evil. A good person does not always eliminate all the evil he possible can. Some suffering, for example can lead to higher good.
- (5) Some of what we term good and evil may not actually be that. We are finite. What is "good"? and what is "evil"? There is also a time element. Things must be evaluated in the light of eternity.
- (6) Evil is contingent, not a thing in itself, a negation of that which is good, but real nonetheless. Blindness, for example, is real but it is a lack of something. It is quite conceivable that God included evil, the lack of good, in His plan without being evil Himself. In otherwords, some Christian philosophers say that God did not exhaust Himself when He created the universe. He could have created an infinite number of possibilities. This is not the best He could have done; it is however, perfect for what He designed it for.
- (7) The world as it now is, is not as it was when God created it. It is now in an unnatural state due to the fall of man.
- (8) Christianity's teaching on the hereafter allows for ultimate justice. Evil will be punished; good will triumph.
- (9) Christians can have reasons for believing that God has reasons for allowing evil, even if we do not always know what they are. We can trust Him because of what we know about Him from Revelation, and from our relational experience with Him.

b. Problems

- (1) How could Adam have sinned if he were created good? This is a profound mystery. Willing is related to desiring. Where did the desire to disobey come from?
- (2) Why didn't God just make the world originally like Christians believe heaven is to be? We can only speculate as to why He created at all, or why He made the world as it is. The answer may lie in the expression of His attributes. How could He express His Grace if He would have originally made earth like heaven? Or His justice? etc. There would not have been a need.

III. Conclusion: As finite beings we only see a small portion of the Divine weaving, and that the underside!

Recommended Reading:

Bridges, Jerry. *Trusting God*. We recommend this as a good foundational book because of its strong (and Biblical) emphasis on the sovereignty of God.

Geisler, Norman L. *The Roots of Evil*. A short, but good philosophical survey.

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. We also recommend *A Grief Observed*, and *The Great Divorce*, by the same author.

Murphree, Jon Tal. *A Loving God & a Suffering World*.

Peterson, Michael. *Evil and the Christian God*. Fairly high level philosophical treatment.

Silvester, Hugh. *Arguing with God*. Rich in quotations from literature. Good even for the non-christian.

See CIM Outline #7, *Why Christians Suffer* for related questions.