

The Problem of Evil

By John Feakes, JF-M-525

“Perhaps the most important and most enduring challenge to Christian belief is the problem of evil.” So writes Michael Peterson in his insightful treatise.¹ John Stott concurs, explaining that, “[Evil] undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can be possibly reconciled with God’s justice and love.”² Evil in this sense encompasses an enormous range of phenomena, which is normally divided into two categories. “There is moral evil,” notes John Loftus, “suffering as the result of the choices of moral agents.”³ Loftus points to the Holocaust, terrorist bombings, rape, molestation, slavery, and torture as examples of moral evil.⁴ There is also a nonmoral category of evil. Examples of nonmoral evils include the suffering and loss inflicted by hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and floods. To this may be added instances of birth defects and disease. “When you consider the extent and depth of suffering in the world,” writes William Lane Craig, “whether due to natural disasters or to man’s own inhumanity to man, then you have to admit that it’s hard to believe in God. The horrible suffering in the world certainly seems to be evidence of God’s absence.”⁵

¹Michael Peterson, *Evil and the Christian God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 7.

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John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 311.

³John Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), p. 228.

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Ibid.

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Philosopher Patrick Grimm insists that evil in the world is not merely superficially inconsistent with Christian theism, but constitutes an *argument* against it.⁶ As insistent as Grimm is, he, like many others, fails to articulate exactly what the argument is. For an argument to have any real persuasive power its structure must be valid and its premises must at least be more probably true than their negation. Evil is not a problem for Christian theism unless a rational *argument* can show an incompatibility between the two either necessarily or probably. Timothy O' Connor reminds his readers that if it is claimed that A leads to contentious claim B, one is obligated to clarify exactly *how* A leads to B. If one claims that the existence of evil in the world leads to the conclusion of atheism, the proposed link ought to be subjected to careful scrutiny. It would be extremely rash to base one's answer to the question of God's existence on an argument that has never been fully spelled out, much less subject to critical scrutiny.⁷

William Lane Craig explains that there are two versions of the intellectual problem of evil: the logical and the evidential.⁸ The logical version seeks to show that it is logically impossible for both God and evil to exist. Like the immovable object and the irresistible force, God and evil are said to be mutually exclusive. Since evil obviously exists, it follows that God does not exist. Though it is common to refer to the logical

William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith With Reason and Precision* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), p.151.

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Patrick Grimm, *Questions of Value* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 1990), Lecture 6, "Thoughts on Religion and Values."

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Timothy O' Connor, "The Problem of Evil: Introduction," *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 304.

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Craig, *On Guard*, p. 152.

version of the problem of evil, it would be more accurate to refer to a family of logical arguments. The first of these may be called the metaphysical argument from evil. This argument seeks to show an inconsistency between the doctrine of creation by an all-good God, and the existence of evil. Specifically, if God created everything, and evil is something, then God is the creator of evil.⁹ Geisler and Corduan note that this argument commits the fallacy of equivocation. Specifically, the term *something* is being misapplied to evil. Though evil undeniably exists, it is not a *thing*. Evil is not a substance. Rather, evil is a corruption or a privation of a good that should be there.¹⁰ God is indeed the creator of all things, but since evil is not a *thing* God is not necessarily the author of evil. The metaphysical argument from evil thus fails to prove that God does not exist.

Other versions of the logical problem of evil focus either on the mere existence of evil (whatever its source may be), the nature and extent of specific evils, or the existence of apparently gratuitous evil. In every case, the unstated and underlying assumption is that God has no morally sufficient reason for allowing evil to exist. This crucial assumption is first of all arbitrary, and claims that rest upon arbitrary premises carry no argumentative force. Secondly, classic Christian theism denies the premise outright anyway. Christians have always affirmed that God has morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil to exist. As a worldview Christianity is at least logically consistent in this affirmation concerning God and evil.

Often the critic will demand to know specifically what God's reasons are for allowing evil to exist. The Christian can at best offer possible suggestions that are

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Norman Geisler and Winfried Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion, Second Edition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), p. 314.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

consistent with the teachings of Scripture. Ultimately, however, the Christian must confess that he does not (and probably cannot) know with certainty exactly why God has allowed *any specific instance of evil*. The critic may be personally dissatisfied with such a response, but this dissatisfaction marks a departure from internally critiquing the Christian worldview. That is, in voicing his dissatisfaction with the Christian's answer, the critic is merely offering some autobiographical information regarding his own personal likes and dislikes. He is not showing that the Christian's response is logically inconsistent. Most philosophers today recognize that the logical version of the argument from evil is unsound. William Lane Craig concludes his analysis of the logical argument from evil by declaring:

After centuries of discussion, the books on the logical version of the problem of suffering have been closed. It's widely admitted by both atheist and Christian philosophers alike that the logical version of the problem of suffering has failed. The burden of proof it lays on the atheist's shoulders, namely, trying to show that the coexistence of God and suffering is impossible, is just too heavy to bear.¹¹

Atheist philosophers, however, still see the existence of evil as extremely problematic, if not downright devastating, to Christian theism. Instead of arguing that the existence of evil negates Christian theism with logical necessity, they argue that evil shows Christianity false with a high degree of probability. This is called the evidential version of the argument from evil. According to Michael Peterson, evil in this sense "constitutes the most impressive piece of negative evidence which can be used to argue that theism is improbable or implausible."¹² As in the logical version, the evidential version focuses either on the mere existence of evil, the nature and extent of specific evils, or the

¹¹Craig, *On Guard*, p. 157

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Peterson, p. 66

existence of apparently gratuitous evil. The evidential argument is calculated to show that Christian theism, while not necessarily false, is highly unlikely, or very probably untrue.

Christians and atheists alike largely agree that if God exists, then no genuinely gratuitous evil exists. Most Christians admit that much of the evil in world certainly *appears* gratuitous. Nevertheless, despite appearances they believe that these evils are not *actually* gratuitous; God is using them to bring about greater goods. As noted earlier, this type of faith commitment is often utterly unacceptable to the unbelieving mind. One effective way of undercutting this version of the evidential argument is to deny its central premise, namely, that if God exists there would be no gratuitous evil. This approach effectively neutralizes this particular version of the argument from evil, but it comes at a very high price. It ends up causing people to seriously ask whether the God they are left with is the God of Christian theism. On the Christian worldview, God is described as the greatest conceivable being (Hebrews 6:13). He is both omnipotent and morally perfect. It seems obvious that a being that is able to bring greater good from evil permitted is greater than a being who must allow gratuitous evil. A being that either cannot or will not use evil to achieve greater goods cannot be considered maximally great.

In attempting to defend Christian theism, Michael Peterson argues that some evils *are* truly gratuitous, that is to say, they are pointless and meaningless.¹³ His reason for saying so rests upon his commitment to the general reliability of man's rational and cognitive faculties. This commitment, he reminds his readers, is part of the Christian worldview. He then argues that "it may be unwittingly inconsistent for the theist to claim that human experience of gratuitous evil is regularly and systematically mistaken."¹⁴ It

¹³Peterson, pp. 91-92, 123.

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Ibid., p. 92.

seems far more inconsistent, however, to affirm belief in the Christian God while also holding to the belief in genuinely gratuitous evil. First, if such a God exists, all facts are interpreted by him and are given meaning as they relate to his plan. Belief in the existence of God therefore entails rejecting the notion of “meaningless” or “pointless” brute facts. Secondly, such a view contains the unbearable tension between trusting God with all of one’s heart (Proverbs 3:5) and trusting one’s own opinion. In assuming Christian theism, one assumes the only conceivable justification for trusting the general reliability of sense data and the intelligibility of human experience. When one interprets facts as brute or meaningless, one is denying the very God that makes meaningful interpretation of experience possible in the first place. The Scriptures are replete with warnings about trusting in the opinions of man, which are at once vain (Psalm 94:11) and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:20). “It is better to trust in the LORD,” wrote the Psalmist, “than to put confidence in man” (Psalm 118:8).¹⁵ The prophet Jeremiah warned, “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD.” Third, because Peterson’s view makes God’s perspective and interpretation of things less than ultimate, one may pursue certain ends quite apart from God. He states, “The quest for and achievement of value within this perishing, temporal life are worthwhile for their own sake.”¹⁶ From a truly biblical perspective, absolutely nothing is to be pursued purely for its own sake. The apostle Paul commanded Christians in every generation to do all things to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Nothing is untouched by God’s presence and influence. “For of him, and through him, and to him,

¹⁵All Scripture is from the *King James Version*.

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Peterson, p. 145.

are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:36). Though Peterson’s acceptance of gratuitous evil may temporarily undermine the evidential argument, for the reasons outlined above, the consistent Christian must reject it. In the end, Peterson’s theodicy undermines the very faith he seeks to defend.

In responding to the evidential argument from evil as an argument for atheism, the Christian might first respond that evil, if it is to be legitimately recognized as such, requires that some objective standard of goodness exist. On an atheist worldview, however, there is no way to account for the existence of such a standard. Atheist Richard Dawkins admits that on atheism, the universe has “at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pointless indifference.”¹⁷ If the universe were what the atheist claims it is, there could be no argument from evil because evil would not and could not exist. Thus atheism’s chief argument against Christian theism falls flat. Phil Fernandes concludes that, “The presence of evil may be problematic for all other worldviews (including Christian theism), but it is totally devastating to atheism.”¹⁸

The Christian’s response to the evidential argument from evil can (and should) go still deeper in demonstrating Christianity’s rational necessity. By extension it must also show conceptual schemes built upon an atheist metaphysic to be epistemologically bankrupt. It must be pointed out to the atheist that to make any argument, evidential or otherwise, certain metaphysical requirements must be met. For instance, to reason in a valid manner, there must be some objective standard of reason according to which the

¹⁷Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1996), p. 133.

¹⁸Phil Fernandes, *The God Who Sits Enthroned* (Bremerton, WA: IBD Press, 2002), p. 126.

human mind conforms. A universe comprised of innumerable, particular, material things in motion can hardly be the source of a standard, which at once must be immaterial, universal and invariant. Furthermore, in order to assess probability, one must assume that natural processes have unfolded, and will continue to unfold, in a generally uniform way. An atheist universe is a universe in which contingency is ultimate. It is a world without a purpose, plan, or the superintendence of a divine, personal agent. Given these assumptions, there simply is no reason to assume that observed cases are reliable guides to future or unobserved cases. The inductive principle ends up without any rational foundation, and the entire edifice of science, which has been built upon it, collapses as a result. In short, Christianity is undeniable just because to deny it, one ends up denying the very conceptual scheme necessary to rationally deny anything. Even if these transcendental arguments are set aside and one were to argue purely from the widely accepted canons of logic and common human experience, one could still show the evidential argument from evil far less than convincing. William Alston uses the analogy of a master chess player to highlight the deference in knowledge and wisdom that must surely exist between God and man. He asks his readers to imagine a chess master competing against a novice. An inexperienced observer may suppose the master has made a terrible move that will likely cost him the game, only to find out later that he was setting a trap for his opponent 15 moves ahead.¹⁹ All must admit that God, if he exists, certainly knows infinitely more than finite, fallen, and fallible human beings. That this being would allow certain evils for purposes we cannot now understand ought to come as no surprise.

¹⁹William P. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments From Evil," *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 353

Alston uses a second analogy to demonstrate the rashness of anti-Christian conclusions to the evidential argument from evil. He suggests that man's search for God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing apparently gratuitous evil is much the same as the search for some small physical object located somewhere in an enormous search area. A person who concluded that the object is not in the target area is surely being rash (if not foolish) if they have only searched a small fraction of that area.²⁰ It likewise seems hasty in the extreme for a person to conclude that God "likely" has no morally sufficient reason for allowing evil. Alston explains that, "We lack the resources to determine the extent to which the possibilities we can envisage and understand exhaust the field, and to determine the extent, variety, and detailed constitution of the terra incognita."²¹ God's own situation and relationship to the universe must of necessity relate to his reason(s) for allowing evil to exist. A finite human being could never share such a perspective. Man's ability to grasp the greater good God has in mind, as well as the conditions for achieving that good, is limited enough to question the conclusion that some evils are "probably" gratuitous. William Lane Craig points to the causal interconnectedness of particulars in the universe as part of the answer to the question of gratuitous evil. Craig suggests that permitted evils cause "ripple effects" that extend outward through time and space, and that these interactions achieve, in the end, greater goods.²² On the Christian view, God does not suffer from limitations in wisdom, insight, knowledge, and location and can for that reason foresee the greater goods that any specific instance of evil will eventually

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Alston, p. 354

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Ibid., p. 355

²²Craig, *On Guard*, p. 160.

serve to bring about. A finite person's own limitations in these areas make it impossible to judge whether Craig's suggestion is even probably true or false. Thus, the evidential problem of evil fails to show that any instance of evil is probably gratuitous.

Any acceptable theodicy must be consistent with the Scriptures. It is an unfortunate fact that many of today's most educated and articulate apologists create theodicies based upon a flawed and compromised understanding of the Bible. Dinesh D'Souza, for instance, accepts much of popular scientific opinion regarding evolution and the age of the earth. This necessarily entails rejecting the literal interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Taking Genesis as anything other than literal historical narrative is not only contrary to the New Testament inspired commentary on the matter (Matthew 19:4-6; 24:37-39, Mark 10:6-8, Romans 5:12, 1 Timothy 2:13-14, 2 Peter 2:4-5; 3:5-6) but it is the cause of much doctrinal confusion as well.²³ This compromise has led to D'Souza's flawed theodicy. According to him, a world in which the survival and evolution of life is possible must also of necessity be a world in which natural disasters occur. D'Souza points to plate tectonics as an example. On his view, in order for the earth to support life, it must be so structured that tectonic plates exist and operate as they do.²⁴ According to popular opinion, it is the movement of tectonic plates that causes earthquakes and Tsunamis. Thus on D'Souza's view, God was incapable of making a

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Mark Van Bebber and Paul S. Taylor, *Creation and Time: A Report on the Progressive Creationist Book by Hugh Ross* (Marysville, WA: 1996).

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Debate between Dinesh D'Souza and Bart Ehrman: *Theodicy, God & Suffering* held at Gordon College, 11 November 2010, available at <http://www.apologetics315.com/2011/06/dinesh-dsouza-vs-bart-ehrman-theodicy.html>; accessed 12 July 2014.

world in which embodied, intelligent, interactive creatures could exist peacefully without contending with the destructive results of tectonic activity. This view must surely be rejected. In the first place, it depicts God as being to a large extent limited by natural law, which would make him far less than maximally great. In the second place, such a view places the opinion of fallen man above the declarations of Scripture, which affirm that the original creation was in fact “very good” (Genesis 1:31). In the third place, the theory of plate tectonics itself is highly questionable on scientific grounds.²⁵ Even if one accepts plate tectonics as a process in operation today, one need not be committed to understanding the process to have been in operation over millions of years of so-called geological deep time.²⁶ To do so is to reject the clear teachings of the Bible, which is tantamount to destroying the very thing to be defended. Peter Van Inwagen, like D’Sousa, rejects the literal interpretation of the Genesis record.²⁷ Consequently, he too sees natural disasters as part of the original creation. On his view, the fall did not affect the created order of the cosmos. Rather, it affected man’s rational and cognitive faculties so that he became largely inept at navigating around natural disasters. In contradiction to this view, Paul states that the fall *did* affect the created order. He writes:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of

²⁵*Plate Tectonics: A Different View* (St. Joseph, MO: Creation Research Society, 2000).

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John D. Morris, *The Young Earth: The Real History of Earth – Past, Present, and Future* (Green Forrest, AK: Master Books, 2007), pp. 83-84

²⁷Peter Van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy,” *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, p. 391

the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. (Romans 8:19-22)

Here Paul, as elsewhere (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:13-14), understands the Genesis record literally. According to it, God created a very good world that became subjected to corruption because of man's sin. What was once a lush garden in which Adam could work with delight later became, because of sin, thorn and weed infested (Genesis 3:17-19).²⁸ Because of man's sin, joyful work became drudgery. The Bible teaches that God created the world very good (Genesis 1:29-31) with man as the apex of his creative work (Genesis 1:26-27). The purpose for man, who was granted dominion over a paradise earth (Genesis 1:28), was loving relationship with one another and with God. The Scriptures declare that God is love (1 John 4:8), and that God's chief commandment is to love him with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neighbour as himself (Mark 12:29-31). Paul writes that, "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10). It seems self-evidently true that genuine love requires the freedom to *choose* to love. God created man capable of engaging in legitimate love relationship, which entailed that man also had the potential to choose not to love. The Lord Jesus explained that true love for God must be exemplified through obedience (John 14:21). Original man was given a simple command, namely, to refrain from eating from a particular tree in the midst of a garden filled with trees (Genesis 2:16-17). Man disobeyed and his sin brought death and sorrow into the world (Genesis 3:6, Romans 5:12; 8:20-22). God showed himself lovely by coming into the world to die for the sins of fallen man (Romans 5:8). Today all may accept Christ as their own personal Lord and Saviour, and so receive forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with God

²⁸Thorns are recognized by the patriarch Job as the punishment for sin (Job 31:38-40).

(Romans 5:1). By trusting in Christ alone for salvation, one is spiritually born again (John 3:5, Titus 3:5), and receives everlasting citizenship in the kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20).

The Bible promises that one day Christ will return and put an end to evil. He will restore the planet to its original, Eden-like conditions (Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 19:28, Acts 3:21), and bring sorrow, sickness, and death to an end (1 Corinthians 15:26, Revelation 21:4). According to the apostle Paul, the magnificent future promised those who have put their trust in Christ utterly eclipses whatever evil may exist in the world. “For I reckon,” says Paul, “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). Today a person is free to accept whatever truths God has revealed to him about himself and his own sinful condition. With this freedom comes the freedom to deny and suppress these truths, and to instead live a life in pursuit of selfish intellectual and moral autonomy. Such decisions certainly cause much evil in the world. The exact reason for God allowing any *specific* instance of evil is impossible to state with certainty. Nevertheless, there are many biblically sound suggestions that may collectively account for many (if not all) types of evil, though each is insufficient to accomplish this by themselves.²⁹For instance, some evil is permitted to develop virtues such as mercy and courage (soul-making). In addition, natural evils such as disasters (and even lesser physical struggles) certainly serve to mitigate sinful man’s ability to actualize many of the intentions in his heart. In having to contend with such things, sinful man, in no doubt many cases, is prevented from bringing about even greater evils. It must be remembered, however, that God is able to make good come from evil acts (Genesis 50:20, Acts 2:22-24, Romans 8:28). The role of evil in

²⁹Geisler and Corduan, pp. 366-370.

turning men to God is another obvious instance of God using evil to bring about a greater good. Craig notes that, “It is in precisely those countries that have endured severe hardship that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates, while growth curves in the indulgent West are nearly flat.”³⁰ As Christians participate with God in his great work of defeating evil on the earth, they can encourage those that are suffering to trust in the Lord who causes all things to work together for good to those that love him (Romans 8:28). They can declare with certainty that God has not forgotten them, and they can point to a promised future whose glory and duration will cause all their afflictions to one day become obscure in the extreme, if they are remembered at all (Isaiah 65:17).

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Craig, *On Guard*, p. 164.

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