

If There is a God, Why is There Evil?

The existence of evil is one of the greatest obstacles to belief in God. The Bible tells us that God is gracious, merciful and loving, and that he is all-powerful. If this is true, then how can he stand by and allow his creation to be marred by so much violence, cruelty and distress? The philosopher Bertrand Russell issues a sobering challenge:

I would invite any Christian to accompany me to the children's ward of a hospital, to watch the suffering that is there being endured, and then to persist in the assertion that those children are so morally abandoned as to deserve what they are suffering – Bertrand Russell.

The philosopher David Hume states the argument clearly:

Is he (God) willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? – David Hume.

The reality of evil confronts every philosophy of life, and the burden of explaining its origin and existence lies equally upon all. It is not a problem unique to the Christian faith. Atheists try to use evil as an argument against the existence of God, but offer no explanation for the existence of either good or evil without God. Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, try to deny the reality of evil by passing it off as an illusion. By contrast, the Christian faith confronts evil head on, and deals with it.

Previous papers in this series demonstrate that God really does exist, and that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.¹ This paper presents the philosophical arguments to show that the existence of evil is not incompatible with the existence of a loving and all-powerful God. It also shows that the Christian faith provides the most rational and realistic understanding of evil, and offers the only true remedy to the problem of evil.

The Atheistic View

Atheists argue that the presence of evil in the world is incompatible with the nature of God described in the Bible. However, this view is illogical for two reasons. Firstly, the existence of evil is not a reasonable basis for concluding that God does not exist. Good and evil can co-exist, and the evidence for God's existence is very strong. The assertion that God and evil are incompatible is an unproven assumption, and is contrary to the evidence of life. Secondly, it is possible that God in his wisdom has allowed evil to exist for a time and for some purpose unknown to us.

It is a Christian conviction that evil can be used in a higher purpose, that suffering produces saintliness. If this is true, then it is possible that God's unwillingness to create a world in which evil is impossible reflects neither on his goodness nor on his power, but flows from his eternal and unchanging purposes – William Dyrness.

To prove the assumption that evil is incompatible with God would require the atheists to have all knowledge on the matter, which is something that only God has. The atheists would, in fact, need to be God in order to prove that God does not exist! This is clearly illogical.

Many people who do not believe in God seem to bear a great resentment against Christians and against God for a problem which on their own assumptions does not exist at all – William Dyrness.

Rather than being incompatible with the existence of God, it can be argued that evil actually *proves* the existence of God. Evil is commonly understood as resulting from the lack of

¹ See the articles *Does God Exist?* and *Is the Bible the Word of God?* in this series.

something good. Thus, sickness is the absence of health, death the absence of life, and hate the absence of love. But we can only know the lack of something if we know what it is to have what we desire. Good and evil are not mutually exclusive; they are thesis and antithesis. For example, death could not exist without there first being life, nor sickness without there first being health. Evil, therefore, helps to prove the existence of God by proving that good must exist before evil can result from the absence of good.

Goodness is, so to speak, itself; badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled – C. S. Lewis.

Atheists often ask, “Why doesn’t God stop evil?” to which one could reply, “How much evil should he stop?” If he were to stop all evil, none of us would survive one day! The degree to which God interferes in people’s lives, to that degree he is denying their freedom to choose their own destiny. Nevertheless, the Bible shows that God does hear the cries of his children and is able to save us from our troubles (e.g., Psalm 145:18-19; Isaiah 59:1).

The atheistic view stumbles on another critical point. In order to judge one thing as good and another as evil requires an innate sense of morality which itself must come from God. If our morality is the product of natural processes, then no one person’s morality can be judged as better than another’s, and good and evil have no meaning. The fact of human moral experience points to the reality of God – not to its negation.

Why is it any easier to account for goodness without God than it is to account for evil with him? That the problem of evil generates more fury than the problem of goodness may be more a matter of psychology than philosophy – Ed. L. Miller.

Finally, atheism does not provide a practical solution to the problem of evil. Instead, it intensifies the evil by removing the advantages of having God on our side to help us through. Atheism does not explain or remove evil – it only removes hope.

Suffering would be altogether intolerable if there were no God ... Atheism answers that the fact of suffering proves that there is no God. But this does not reduce the world’s suffering by one hair-breadth, it only takes away hope – F. J. Sheed.

The Pantheistic View

Eastern religions respond to the problem of evil by denying its actual existence. The central premise of the eastern religions is that of monism. This philosophy holds that all diversity is mere illusion, and that ultimate reality is a single entity which is neither good nor bad. The eastern religions dismiss evil as a state of mind which can be cleared away by clearing our minds of all our troubles. This response is unrealistic and impractical. Evil *is* real, and it cannot be run away from. It must be confronted and dealt with positively.

Denying the existence of evil is illogical. If evil, which is so obvious and evident to our minds, is an illusion, then how do we know that the theory itself is not an illusion? What about the illusion of evil, is that not an evil in itself? The pantheistic view is therefore self-refuting and irrational.

It would be nice if it were true that no evil existed, but the very fact that men wish it to be so makes this belief highly suspect – Sigmund Freud.

The view of evil as an illusion is also impractical. It provides no explanation for the obvious reality of evil, and its denial does not remove the presence of evil in the world. To accept this theory is to reject the fact of experience.

Accepting the illusionist’s position demands that one admit that all of life as he experiences it is deceiving him – Norman L. Geisler.

It is one thing to believe that evil is an illusion, but quite a different matter to live consistently on this premise.

Those who believe that evil and the world are illusions do not actually function as if this were so. They may maintain that all is an illusion, but if one were to push them in front of an oncoming bus, they would quickly “warm up” to the reality idea! – Norman L. Geisler.

The belief that evil is only an illusion, is itself an evil. It can, and does, lead to a fatalistic view of life. If evil is an illusion, it would be pointless trying to improve the conditions of life. Hence, the destitute would be left to starve and the sick left to die, and there would be no need to have hospitals, schools and universities. This defeatist view of evil is inhuman, impossible and irrational.

The Christian View

The Christian view is that God did not create evil, but he did create the possibility for evil. The Bible tells us that man was made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). This means that man had to be given a free will and the opportunity to choose between right and wrong. The Bible also shows that the angels had this same freedom of choice. By contrast, animals do not have a choice because they do not have a moral awareness. Their actions are governed by natural instincts, a kind of programmed response. The problem with having a free will is that people can choose to do what is wrong (i.e., to sin) in preference to what is right.

The Bible also tells us that sin is the result of rebellion against God. Since God cannot rebel against himself, he cannot be the author of sin. But the archangel Lucifer, the angels who followed him, and Adam and Eve all chose to rebel against God, thereby introducing evil into the creation. We are all born with the rebellious nature of Adam and Eve, and we are all to some extent subject to the temptations placed before us by Satan (the fallen Lucifer). The result is that we are easily led astray towards sin and evil (Romans 3:10-18). Thus, evil resides in the things outside of God and is the product of rebellion against God. In essence, sin is the abuse of free will, and evil is the result of sin.

While we do not believe that personal freedom is the ultimate explanation of the origin of evil, we do believe that freedom was the means by which sin did come into the world – John Gerstner.

Christians also believe that God can use evil to achieve good purposes. For one thing, it can force people to examine their lives beyond the superficial and self-seeking pleasures of this world. By having to consider evil, some people may develop an appreciation and desire for good. This, in turn, may lead them to God.

Sometimes God will use evil to rebuke his children in order to save them from a worse evil by allowing them to continue in sin (e.g., Job 5:17-18; Hebrews 12:5-11). At other times he may allow his people to experience various kinds of trials to help purify them and to build up their spiritual character (e.g., James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7).

God also has the right to punish evil people, as well as to reward those who are righteous (Matthew 25:31-46). His right to judge sin and evil stems from his having absolute authority over his own creation, and from the fact that he is himself perfect (Matthew 5:48).

The Christian response to evil is one of endurance because of the hope that they have in Christ, trust in God because of his faithfulness to us in the past, and overcoming through his strength within us. Christians persevere in times of hardship, confronting evil and overcoming it in the manner of their Lord and Saviour on the cross (e.g., Romans 8:35-39; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 12:8-10; Hebrews 10:32-39; 1 Peter 5:8-10).

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

When it comes to dealing with troubles and hardships, Christians have many significant advantages over non-Christians. The Bible teaches that:

- God will provide strength in times of trouble, comfort to those who mourn, and encouragement to those who struggle (Isaiah 61:1-4; John 14:16-17; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).
- He will not allow any hardship which is too much for us to bear, but will always provide a way out (Isaiah 43:1-5; 1 Corinthians 10:13).
- He will always bring a far greater good out of every bad situation than the harm done by the evil (Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18).
- He uses evil to develop godly character in his children which is rewarded in heaven (Romans 8:15-17; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 1 Peter 1:3-7).

Unlike any other religion, the Christian faith offers a solution to the problem of evil – the cross of Christ. It is here that God, in the form of a man, took upon himself the full force of sin and evil, and overcame it. Through the cross, God has demonstrated both his hatred of sin and his love for us.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death, he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace, and thought it well worth while – Dorothy L. Sayers.

The cross of Christ is God's final answer to the problem of evil because the problem of evil is in the cross itself – E. J. Carnell.

At the heart of the story stands the cross of Christ, where evil did its worst and met its match – John W. Wenham.

Conclusions

Of all the philosophies on evil, the Christian view is the most rational, realistic and practical. Christians accept the reality of evil and understand how it operates in the world. They are affected by it just like everyone else, but they regard evil as having been already defeated by Christ on the cross.

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Only in Christ has God provided a solution to the problem of evil. The cross is a measure of God's hatred of sin and evil, and of his love for mankind. On the cross Christ met evil head-on, and triumphed over it. His victory over sin and evil is also our victory (Colossians 2:9-15). Thus, we have the hope of our own resurrection to a new life with God free from all evil.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

If you would like to be among those who are being saved, this is what you should do:

- ❖ **Pray to Jesus Christ.** “The Lord is near to all who call on him ... he hears their cry and saves them” (Psalm 145:18-19).
- ❖ **Read the Bible.** You should start by reading the whole of the New Testament, asking Jesus to help you to understand what you are reading.
- ❖ **Join a church.** It is vital that you find a church which holds the Bible to be the final authority in all matters of faith and practice for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

List of Papers in This Series

Does God Exist?

Was Jesus Christ God?

Did Jesus Christ Rise from the Dead?

Is the Bible the Word of God?

If There is a God, Why is There Evil?

Do All Religions Lead to God?

Is Atheism Rational?

Acknowledgments

The following sources were used in the preparation of this paper:

Christianity for Skeptics by Steve Kumar and John Heinger, World Wide Press., 1994.

Christianity for Skeptics by Steve Kumar, Hendrickson Pub., 2001.

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984.