

The Problem of Evil and Suffering in Light of a Good and Holy God¹

Introduction. The problem of evil and suffering is the number one objection to faith in God. It is probably the most powerful objection because of the emotions it invokes. For this reason it is especially damaging when left uncontested. It is in the face of this withering challenge, however, that Christianity shows itself especially tenacious under fire, and completely adequate to speak to the problems of life. Indeed, the answers of the Christian to this problem are far more compelling than the answers of any other religion. I hope you find the below notes helpful to engage others in meaningful discussions, helpful to your own heart when it struggles with suffering, and, in all things, to point to Jesus as the answer and make him ever more glorious in your eyes.^{2,3}

I. OFFENSIVE

1. Problem of Evil. This is not just a problem for Christians. It is for everyone to answer. How does your worldview account for the problem of evil?

2. Problem of Good. Atheists have to deal not only with the problem of evil, but also with the problem of good. If this world is just a cosmic accident, just atoms running into each other, then where did good come from? How do we get beauty, laughter, love, sacrifice, courage?

3. You have to assume God exists to even ask the question.

Raising the problem of evil assumes two things inconsistent with secular humanism/naturalism: (1) objective good; and (2) the intrinsic worth of human beings.

(1) Objective good. Using standards of good to judge evil--saying that this horrible suffering isn't what it ought to be--means that they have a notion of what ought to be. When you assume there is good, you assume there is such a thing as a moral law by which we can differentiate good and evil. You can't have a moral law without a moral lawgiver. God. Thus you must assume God exists to even be outraged at evil.

(2) Intrinsic worth of humans beings. To express outrage at evil and suffering, you must also assume the intrinsic worth of human beings. Under secular humanism/naturalism, we have no worth. British philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russel said it best, "...all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system..." Under this view, we are just advanced members of the animal kingdom, evolved from some prehistoric slime. How can there be any outrage if one animal kills another animal? Thus, You must assume humans have some intrinsic worth for evil and suffering to even be a problem.

¹ Lesson at Eastridge Church of Christ by Curt Covington (3/23/14)

² This is not a guide on walking with someone through personal tragedy. This is a guide to addressing intellectual and emotional objections to Christianity based on the existence of evil and suffering. In all things be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15.

³ Though I have compiled this outline as a result of my study, none of the material is my own. The most helpful resources have come from work of William Lane Craig, Ravi Zacharias, Gregory Koukl, John Piper, Jonathan Edwards, and John Stott.

These two assumptions are incompatible with atheism, secular humanism, and naturalism.

4. Problem of God. Grant that evil exists. Does the existence of evil negate all evidence that God even exists? That the universe had a beginning (and thus a beginner)? That it is finely tuned for our existence? That there exists a moral law that we did not create but are compelled to follow? (No.) Or does it make you just not like the God that exists?

5. Burden of Proof. If the atheist makes the claim that the coexistence of God and suffering is impossible, he bears the burden of proof, since he is the one making that claim. Thus, he must put forth his argument and support it, and you may play the skeptic and question whether he has carried his burden of proof.

II. DEFENSIVE- INTELLECTUAL ARGUMENTS

1. Free will--The classic defense.

(A) It's not logically possible to have free will and no possibility of moral evil. Once God chose to create human beings with free will it was up to them, rather than God, whether there was sin or not. That's what free will means. Built into the situation of God deciding to create human beings is the chance of evil, and consequently, the suffering that results.

(B) God could have created a world without suffering, but it would have also been a world without free will. Love, the highest value in the universe, requires free will for it to be true love. Real love--our love of God and of each other--must involve a choice. But with the granting of that choice comes the possibility that people would choose instead to hate.

Man is in rebellion, and many of the evils we see are caused by humans misusing their free will to harm others and cause suffering.

2. Infinite Wisdom and Human Limitations.

God could have overriding reasons for allowing the suffering in the world. We all know cases in which we permit suffering to bring about a greater good (taking a child to the dentist). We as humans are just not in a position to say that God lacks good reasons for permitting the suffering and evil that he permits. As finite persons, we are limited in space, time, intelligence, and insight. God's reasons may not be apparent until centuries later or even in another country. Thus, he can easily have morally sufficient reasons for allowing what he allows, which we simply cannot grasp.

Burden of proof. You can flip it here and make the questioner show that he must prove that God has NO reasons to allow what he allows, to show that the evil could not have ever resulted in some greater good.

Biblical examples:

Paul's unjust imprisonment gave us the prison epistles. God allowed that injustice to occur to bring about an ENORMOUS work through Paul.

Job, Esther, Jonah, Joseph--same thing.

In all things God works for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose. Rom 8:28

3. Christian Doctrines

Christianity entails certain doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and suffering. Indeed, the Bible teaches that we will experience suffering at some point.

(1) The Glory of God and our Knowledge of Him

The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God and his glory. One reason that the problem of suffering seems so puzzling is that some people tend to assume that if God exists, then his purpose is to make us all happy--God's role is to provide a comfortable environment for his human pets.

We know this to be false, and that God created the universe to magnify and display his glory so that we may exult in it. Much of suffering in life may be pointless with respect to producing happiness, but may be used to create a greater knowledge and fellowship with God for a greater number of people.

God is not glorified when people make a lot of money and then give thanks to him. He is glorified when, in the deepest pain and suffering, people point to him as their source, their strength, their all. He is sufficient.

Example: It is precisely in the countries with the most suffering that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates--China, El Salvador, Ethiopia. Compare that to Christianity's growth in the stagnant West.

Example: Look at the beautiful hymns, which have given comfort to many, but that were written by great sufferers. E.g., It is well with my soul.

Biblical example: Jesus healing the blind man, and answer to the Pharisees, in John 9:1-5. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

(2) Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God

This dovetails with the free will defense. Due to man's rebellion, the Christian is not surprised at the moral evil in the world; on the contrary, he expects it. The Bible in fact promises that we will experience pain and suffering. Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12, Romans 8:17-18.

(3) God's purpose is not restricted to this life but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life.

If this physical world is all that there truly is, and there is no afterlife, then evil really is a dire problem for which there is no justice. But this is not a problem for the Christian, because we view things in light of eternity. In light of the afterlife, in light of God's final judgment, evil is not inconsistent with our worldview. When God asks his children to bear horrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond all comprehension.

This is why Paul, who bore more suffering than any of us, can say: "So we do not lose heart. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." 2 Cor 4:16-18.

(4) The knowledge of God is an infinite good.

God is infinite goodness and love. To know him is an incomparable good, the fulfillment of human existence. The sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it.

III.

DEFENSIVE-EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS

1. The Sovereignty of God.

"But when a person settles it biblically, intellectually, and emotionally—that God has ultimate control of all things, including evil, and that this is gracious and precious beyond words—then a marvelous stability and depth come into that person's life." John Piper.

The Bible treats human life as something God has absolute rights over. He gives it and takes it according to His will. We do not own it or have any absolute rights to it. It is a trust for as long as the owner wills for us to have it. To have life is a gift and to lose it is never an injustice from God, whether He takes it at age five or at age ninety-five.

God is sovereign over moral and natural evil.

Job 1:21: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Dt. 32:39: There is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Isa. 45:7: I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these.

Eph. 1:11: God is the one "who works all things according to the counsel of his will

Prv. 16:33: The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

Moral evil: Joseph and his brothers...and many others

Thus, Charles Spurgeon says,

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes—that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnow is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence—the fall of...leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche

Romans 9, especially 9:19-24.

God's foreknowledge of sin does not make him less glorious, but more glorious. For without evil and pain and suffering, we would not know what good is and thus be able to fully taste the good he has for us. We wouldn't be able to taste his entire glory. If everything was good we wouldn't know what good is. God does not need to be rescued from his foreknowledge of sin.

To those who say, "Is not God, love?" we should say, "Is not God, God?"

2. JESUS!

First, for those who accept Christ, suffering is redeemed by eternal life with God, which is a benefit that far outweighs any sufferings and evils we experience in our earthly lives.

Second--

"Why doesn't God do something about evil?" God has done something, the most profound thing imaginable. He sent his son to die for evil men. Instead of punishing all evil, he chose instead to offer mercy.

Moreover, God himself was not immune to pain. Jesus walked through it. Suffering and pain did not spare the very Son of God.

"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 Godforsaken 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. 'The cross of Christ ... is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours... 'The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak; they rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne; But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak, And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.'" --*John Stott*

Who can identify with your struggles more? Who can say "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." ?

The only complete answer is God, in Jesus, on a cross, at Calvary.