

THE MORAL LAW ARGUMENT & THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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I. Introduction:

- A. **Consider**...If there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God, how can it be that the world is full of evil? Or, why, does an all-loving and omnipotent God allow, moral evil, sin in our world?
- B. As I interact and engage with the young and old on college campuses or field questions in various venues the most often asked question and perhaps the most difficult obstacle to belief in the God of the Bible this is that question. This enigma is powerfully portrayed in our literature, movies, and even in certain art depictions. Consider Victor Hugo's powerful depiction of human suffering from a passage in his famous work, *Les Miserables*:¹

Man overboard! Who cares? The ship sails on. The wind is up, the dark ship must keep to its destined course. It passes on.... He hollers, stretches out his hands. They do not hear him.... What a specter is that disappearing sail! He watches it, follows it frantically. It moves away, grows dim, diminishes. He was just there, one of the crew.... No, what has become of him? He slipped. He fell. It's all over. He is in the monstrous deep.... The voracious ocean is eager to devour him. The monster plays with his agony. It is all liquid hatred to him. He tries to defend, to sustain himself; he struggles; he swims....There are birds in the clouds, even as there are angels above human distresses, but what can they do for him? They sing, fly, and soar, while he gasps... Men are gone. Where is God? He screams, 'Help! Someone! Help!' He screams over and over. Nothing on the horizon. Nothing in the sky. He implores the lofty sky, the endless waves, the reefs; all are deaf. He begs the storms; but impassive, they obey only the infinite....What can he do? He yields to despair. Worn out, he seeks death, no longer resists, gives up, lets go, tumbles into the mournful depths of the abyss forever.... The soul drifting in the sea may become a corpse. Who shall restore it to life?

- C. In this passage what do we have? We have loss, disappointment, disillusionment, frustration, silence, and alienation from God.
- D. Christian philosopher Douglas Geivett comments:

He initially cries out, hoping against hope for assistance. He first calls out to his shipmates. But they do not hear him. He then casts about for some other source of salvation. The birds fly overboard, yet they are powerless and oblivious. Their carefree spirit is an insult to his deplorable condition. What about the elements themselves that engulf him? Is salvation to be had there? No, they are

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: Signet/Penguin Books, 1987), 94-5 cf. "Can a Good God allow Evil and Suffering" by R. Douglas Geivett in *Philosophy: Christian Perspectives for the New Millennium*, edited by Paul Copan, Scott B. Luley, and Stan W. Wallace (Addison, Tx.: CLM & RZIM Publishers: 2003), 123-48.

his immediate problem. And God—where is God? Might He yet deliver? Time goes by. The man swims and treads water, conserving his strength as much as possible, and God does nothing to intervene. And so the man’s thoughts turn from the hopeless prospect of survival to the possibility that, when he dies, all will not be lost. He may yet be raised.²

E. We also see evil and suffering depicted in the Bible. Perhaps the most famous in the O.T. is the biblical narrative of Job. In Job we see trials are given, via divine permission, into the life of a righteous man. God instructed Satan: “Everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger” (Job 1:12). Thus, Satan did everything to introduce despair and faithlessness. In one single day all his sons and daughters had died in a natural disaster. In the words of the Puritan writer Thomas Watson, Job was a “spectacle of misery.” How did his wife respond? She too, a victim of these events as well counseled her husband with these striking words: “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9).³

F. We also see and hear about terrible suffering in our everyday experience. In fact, in just in one newspaper you have the following stories: rape, genocide, assault, murder, war, greed, and exploitation. Consider these examples from just one newspaper a while back:⁴

Somalis are stealing food from starving neighbors...people are dying by the thousands;

Muslim women and girls are being raped by Serb soldiers,

In India, Hindus went on a rampage that razed a mosque and killed over 1,000 people.

In Afghanistan gunmen fired into a crowded bazaar and shot ten people including 2 children.

Cigarette company is having to defend itself against charges that it is engaged in a campaign to entice adolescents to smoke.

High school principle is indicted on charges of molesting elementary and middle school boys over a period of 20 years:

A man is being tried for murder in the death of a 9 year old boy; he grabbed the boy to use as a shield in a gunfight:

G. And just this weekend we have Iran bristling at Israel and the Western world; forest fires in California; grandmother dies shielding boy from Tornado; a missing girl; 4 drowned and 3 are missing in New York waters; 30 detained in connection with deadly India blasts/ and dozens of militants die in Afghan fight.

² Geivett, “Can a Good God allow Evil and Suffering,” 126.

³ Geivett, “Can a Good God allow Evil and Suffering,” 127.

⁴ Eleanor Stump, “The Mirror of Evil” in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 235-247.

II. General Responses to the Evil and Suffering We See Around Us:

A. What are our responses as Christians who believe that God is good all the time and yet live in a world filled with such evil and suffering? How can we answer the non-believer who can't seem to reconcile such problems they hear or see everyday? There are typically six responses to such things I've observed by both believers and non-believers alike.

1. **Look away approach:** We may take note, shake our heads sadly, and go about our business. We work, going about our business, worrying about our children, helping our friends and neighbors, and look forward to social gatherings.
2. **Can't ignore approach:** We sit in our cool homes with dinner on our table and our children around us, and we know that not far from us the homeless huddle, children go hungry...and you ask yourself: Is it human, is it even decent for us to enjoy our own good fortune and forget the misery that is near us? But we may even say it is morbid to keep thinking about the evils; it is depressive; it is not healthy. Nevertheless, how can we close our minds to what is going on around us?!?! Thus, we do little or nothing as we live with the angst after being told, "Just get use to it, that's the way life is."

142 "The Way I See it" quote on Starbucks cup:

"With childhood comes a brief grace period of ignorant bliss-when you're not aware of the pain around you. That is the most special, truly unique time. It is the core of adult lament." ~ Barry Privett, Lead singer of Carbon Leaf.

3. **Labor at Obliviousness approach:** We drown our minds in our work or in pleasure or in both.
4. **Good Samaritan approach:** Evil can be eliminated...Eden on earth is possible. Whatever it is in human behavior or human society that is responsible for misery around us *can* be swept away. Reform our world! Remove the human defects that produced the evil in the first place (e.g., apply utopian communism).
5. **Explain evil away:** In the Way I see it # 250... a statement on your neighborhood Starbucks cup, Bishop Carlton Pearson, who is an author, speaker, spiritual leader, and recording artist, wrote:

"In reality, hell is not such an intention of God as it is an invention of man. God is love and people are precious. Authentic truth is not so much taught or learned as it is remembered. Somewhere in your preincarnate consciousness you were loved absolutely because you were. Loved absolutely, and in reality, you still are! Remember who you are!"

Just like “hell” people will attempt to explain “evil” away, often in non-sensible propaganda-marketing type terms, often playing on our sentimentalities, but their statements lack cogency, common-sense, and substance. Haiku, anyone!

6. **It has led has led others to a disbelief in, resentment of the God of the Bible, or a path of absolute despair.** Some view that God is cruel, denial of His very existence, nihilism (there is no truth), agnosticism, other world religions, “*New age*” beliefs, or secular, humanistic philosophy. And still there are others who are deeply troubled. They want to believe in God’s existence as the Bible proclaims Him to be but because of present evil and suffering, are deeply troubled with the tension they experience, both intellectually and emotionally. Consider the following testimony by Philip Hallie.

Philip Hallie who studied cruelty for years, made an interesting statement in his study of Nazi medical experiments on Jewish children in the death camps. He states that Nazi doctors broke and re-broke “the bones of six-or seven-or eight year old Jewish children in order, the Nazis said, to study the processes of natural healing in young bodies.” Across all his studies on cruelty Hallie writes:

“...the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution...My study of evil incarnate had become a prison whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my horrified indifference to slow murder. Between the bars and walls I evolved like a madman...over the years I had dug myself into Hell...”⁵

7. **And still there are others who don’t want to believe in God’s existence and so they attempt to rationalize against God’s existence (or indict Him as being responsible) with arguments.**

III. Typical Arguments Used to Question God’s existence and goodness.

How would you respond to the following four arguments:⁶

A. Consider this argument against God’s existence:

1. **An all-good God would destroy evil.**
2. **An all-powerful God could destroy evil.**
3. **But evil is not destroyed.**
4. **Therefore, as such God does not exist.**

B. Consider the following argument against God being all-perfect:

⁵ Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1979), 2.

⁶ Material adapted from *Baker’s Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 219-24.

“No one has demonstrated that any alternative world is morally better than the one we have. Hence, no antitheist can show that God did not create the best world, even given the privation of God. This, of course, does not mean that the theist is committed to the belief that this present world is the best world that can be achieved. God is not finished yet, and Scripture promises that something better will be achieved. The theist’s assumption is that this world is the best way to the best world achievable.”
~ Norman Geisler,

Baker’s Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics, 224.

If God knew evil would occur, why did He create it? God was free to create or not to create. Why did he choose to create a world he knew was fall into depravity, suffering, pain, and death? Christians believe that God is both all-knowing, all-good, and free. As an all-knowing God, He foresaw evil. As free, he could have avoided creating the world. But this conflicts with God as all-good, for such a God must have had a good purpose for creating a world he knew would decay, be depraved, and be deadly. Why then did he create it?

There were other better alternatives open to God. He could have chosen not to create it all. He could have created a world in such a way that there would be no sin. He could have created a free world where no one would have chosen to sin. He could have created a world where sin occurred but where everyone was ultimately saved. Any one of these worlds would have been better than the world conceived by the orthodox Christian believer, where evil occurs and where not everyone will be saved from damnation:

1. God could have chosen a better alternative by:

- a. not creating at all;
- b. not creating a free world;
- c. creating a free world that would not sin
- d. creating a world that sinned but would all be saved.

2. But God did not choose one of these better alternatives.

3. Therefore God did not do his best.

4. But to do so less than his best is an evil for God.

5. Therefore, no all-perfect God exists.

C. Consider God as the Author of evil:

1. God is the Author of everything.

2. Evil is something.

3. Therefore, God is the Author of evil.

- D. Consider God being responsible for physical evil.** Why do we have tornadoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, earthquakes, violent sand storms, droughts, and volcanic eruptions?⁷
1. Natural evil cannot be explained by free choice of creatures.
 2. Hence, God must be responsible for natural evil.
 3. But natural evils cause innocent suffering and death.
 4. Therefore, God is responsible for innocent suffering and death.

DID YOU KNOW?

Physical suffering can often be explained in reference to human free choice:

- (1) Some suffering is brought on directly by our free choice. The choice to abuse my body can result in sickness.
- (2) Some suffering is brought on indirectly by free choice. The choice to be lazy can result in poverty.
- (3) Some physical evil to others can result from our free choice, as in the case of spouse or child abuse.
- (4) Others suffer indirectly because of our free choice. Alcoholism can lead to poverty of one's children.
- (5) Some physical evil may be a necessary byproduct of a good process. Rain, hot air, and cool air are all necessary for food and life, but a byproduct of these forces is a tornado.
- (6) Some physical evil may be a necessary condition for attaining a greater moral good. God uses pain to get our attention.

IV. How do we define evil?

A. In order to answer these arguments, we must first ask ourselves what evil is & how it is perceived:

- 1. Biblical usage of evil:**
- 2. Religious views of evil:**
 1. Atheism affirms evil but denies the reality of God;
 2. Finite godism can claim that God desires to destroy evil but is unable to because he is limited in power;

⁷ The best work I know that responds to the issues regarding God and natural disasters is by Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer. It is titled, *Where was God? Answers to Tough Questions about God and Natural Disasters*. Pastor of Moody Memorial Church, Pastor Lutzer gave a presentation on this topic a few years ago at a Southern Evangelical Seminary (www.ses.edu) national apologetic conference. It is worth purchasing from the seminary bookstore.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sin is a transgression of the law of God: The Greek word *parabasis* means “*overstepping, transgression.*” God gave the Mosaic law to heighten man’s understanding of His standard and the seriousness of transgressing that standard (Rom. 4:15). Thereafter, when God said, “*You shall not bear false witness,*” a lie was seen to be what it is: an overstepping or transgression of the law of God (Rom. 2:23; 5:14; Gal. 3:19).

Sin is a failure to conform to the standard of God. The Greek word *hamartia* means “*miss the mark;*” “*every departure from the way of righteousness.*” Thus, it means that all people have missed the mark of God’s standard and continue to fall short of that standard (Rom. 3:23). This involves both sins of commission as well as omission. Failure to do what is right is also sin (Rom. 14:23).

Sin is a principle within man. Sin is not only an act but also a principle that dwells in man. Paul refers to the struggle with the sin principle within (Rom. 7:14, 17–25); all people have this sin nature (Gal. 3:22). Hebrews 3:13 refers to it “*as the power that deceives men and leads them to destruction.*” Jesus also refers to sin as a “*condition or characteristic quality*” (John 9:41; 15:24; 19:11).

Sin is rebellion against God. Another Greek word for sin is *anomia*, which means “*lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4) and can be described as a “*frame of mind.*” It denotes lawless deeds (Titus 2:14) and is a sign of the last days, meaning “*without law or restraint*” (Matt. 24:12).

Sin is wrongful acts toward God and man. Romans 1:18 refers to “*ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*” Ungodliness refers to man’s failure to obey God and keep the commandments related to Him (Exod. 20:1–11); unrighteousness is seen in man’s failure to live righteously toward his fellow man (Exod. 20:12–17).

3. Deism can distance God from evil by stressing that God is not in the world, but beyond it.
4. Panentheism insists that evil is a necessary part of the ongoing progress of the interaction of God and the world.
5. Pantheism affirms the reality of God but denies the reality of evil.
6. Theism affirms both the reality of both God and evil.

B. The problem of evil may be viewed in simple form as a conflict involving three concepts:

1. God’s power,
2. God’s goodness, and
3. The presence of evil in the world.

Common sense tells us that all three cannot be true at the same time.

C. Solutions to the problem of evil typically involve modifying one or more of these three concepts:

1. Limit God’s goodness,
2. Limit God’s power, or
3. Limit the reality of evil (e.g., illusion)

D. Consider...

1. If God made no claims to being good, then the existence of evil would be easier to explain; but God does claim to be good;
2. If God were limited in power so that he was not strong enough to withstand evil, the existence of evil would be easier to explain; but God does claim to be all-powerful;
3. If evil were just an illusion that had no reality, the problem wouldn’t really exist in the first place; but evil is not an illusion. Evil is real.

E. How may we define evil?

1. Evil is the corruption or privation of something good:
 - Rot in a tree (rot can exist as only as the tree exists).
 - Decay in a tooth (decay can only exist as the tooth exist).

- Decay of a carcass (decay can only exist as flesh exists).

- Rust on a car (rust can only exist as metal exists).

2. Evil exists only in another, but not in itself:

- Evil may not be an actual substance, but it involves an actual privation in good substances. It is not an actual entity but a real corruption in an actual entity, e.g., rotting trees, rusting cars, tooth decay, brain cancer, etc.- all these are examples of how evil is a corruption of something good.

V. Reconciling Evil with the existence of God: How?

A. The problem of evil can be summarized:

1. God is absolutely perfect.
2. God cannot create anything imperfect.
3. But perfect creatures cannot do evil.
4. Therefore, neither God nor his perfect creatures can produce evil.

B. Christian response...

1. God created every substance.
2. Evil is not a substance (but the corruption in a substance).
3. Therefore, God did not create evil (for evil exists only in another but not itself).
4. God is absolutely perfect.
5. God created only perfect creatures.
6. One of the perfections God gave some of his creatures [angels, Lucifer, Adam, & Eve] was the power [gift] of free choice.
7. Some of these creatures freely chose to do evil.
8. Therefore, a perfect creature caused evil.

C. Evil arose in the abuse of a good power called freedom:

1. Freedom in itself is not evil. It is good to be free. But with freedom comes the possibility of evil.
2. God is responsible for making evil possible, but free creatures are responsible for making it actual.

D. Persistence of Evil. Having considered this, then how do we deal with the persistence of evil. Why does God allow it? Even if He did not produce evil, he does permit it? Yet, he is all-powerful and could destroy it. So, why doesn't he do so? The classical way to state the problem of the persistence of evil is this:

1. If God is all good, he would destroy evil.
2. If God is all powerful, he could destroy evil.

3. But evil is not destroyed.
4. Therefore, there is no such God.

Response:

1. God can and will overcome all evil:
2. God is all all-good and desires to defeat evil.
3. God is all powerful and is able to defeat evil.
4. Evil is not yet defeated.
5. Therefore, it will one day be defeated.

E. How to use it with a non-believer in association with the Moral Law argument:

- 1. Moral Law implies a Moral Law Giver.**
- 2. There is an objective moral law.**
- 3. Therefore, there is a Moral Law Giver.**

“Moral laws don’t describe what is, they prescribe what ought to be. Moral laws can’t be known by observing what people do. They are what all persons should do, whether or not they actually do.”

- a. Upon what basis do unsaved people know that the torture of Jewish children by Nazi doctors is evil?

- 1. By reason?** While it is true that moral principles and ethical theories do rely on reason (otherwise there is no coherence, logic, or intelligibility), we build those principles and theories, at least in part, by beginning with **strong intuitions** about individual cases that exemplify wrongdoings, and we construct our ethical theories around those intuitions. Typically ethicists look for what the individual cases have in common, then they try to codify their common characteristics into principles. Once the principles have been organized into a theory, they may revise their original intuitions until their intuitions and theories are in harmony. Nonetheless, original intuitions retain an essential primacy. If we found that our ethical theory affirmed those Nazi experiments, we would throw away the theory as something evil itself. But what exactly are these original intuitions? What cognitive faculty produces them? Not reason, apparently, since reason takes them as given and reflects on them.
- 2. How about memory?** No because we aren’t remembering that it is evil to torture children.
- 3. How about sense perception?** No because when we say that we just see the wrongness of certain actions, we certainly don’t mean that it’s visible.
- 4. Can we even identify the cognitive faculty that recognizes evil intuitively?** It would be a mistake to infer that there is no such faculty.

5. It's clear that we have many other cognitive faculties that similarly can't be accounted for by the triad of reason, memory, and perception. For example: We have the abilities to tell mood from facial expression, to discern affect from melody of speech.
6. While we don't understand much about the faculty that produces moral intuitions in us, we all regularly rely on it anyway...we have some cognitive faculty for discerning evil in things, and that people in general treat it as they treat their other cognitive faculties: as basically reliable, even if fallible, and subject to revision.
7. It is also clear that this cognitive faculty can discern differences in kind and degree of evil.

For example:

A young Muslim mother in Bosnia was repeatedly raped in front of her husband & father, with her baby screaming on the floor beside her. When her tormenters seemed finally tired of her, she begged permission to nurse the child. In response, one of the rapists swiftly decapitated the baby and threw the baby in the mother's lap.

- a. Is this evil different? Did you feel it immediately? Did you have to reason or contemplate it before you came to the decision it is evil? Are we not filled with grief and distress, shaken with revulsion and incomprehension? See, the taste of real wickedness is sharply different from the taste of garden-variety moral evil, such as stealing a package of gum, and we can discern it directly, with pain.
8. This moral faculty also discerns goodness. We recognize acts of generosity, compassion, and kindness. Have you ever wept when we you were surprised by true goodness?

F. How to use the moral law argument? Consider the following argument from Ravi Zacharias:

“One of the strongest arguments against the existence of God is the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Can you not see what is brought in through the back door in that question? Because if there's evil, there's good. If there's good there has to be a moral law. If there's a moral law there has to be a transcendent moral lawgiver. But that's what the skeptic is trying to disprove and not prove. Because if there is no moral law giver, there's no moral law. If there's no moral law there's no good. If there's no good there's no evil. So what's the question, really? The strongest argument against the existence of God actually assumes God in the objection.”

G. There are those who attempt to separate Good from Goodness by saying something that if God is good, then what makes Him good? Listen to the words of J. Budziszewski:

“God and Good aren't two things; they are one. He simply is the Good, and good things short of Him are good because He made them. It's His goodness that these thousand goods reflect, as white light refracted through a prism gleams in a thousand brilliant colors-love, joy, wisdom, beauty, strength, and the rest. Now think hard: God cannot be at odds with Himself. It is because He is the Good, and with infinite wisdom knows Himself, that He knows what Good is. So to think that you, or I, or your cat might know Good better than Good knows Himself is pretty silly.”

Prof. Budziszewski continues:

Another way to answer was suggested by C. S. Lewis. God is the source of our ability to know about Good. In that sense His standard is our standard. He gave us our minds and our conscience. He was the one who made us able to see that evil and good are different, who polarized our souls to fear the one and long for the other. The very power to ask the questions and form judgments about the matter comes from Him and depends on Him. So to set this power against Him is like sawing off the branch that we are sitting on.⁸

VI. Conclusion:

- A. How can we answer the question, “But if God is good and all-powerful, then why is there suffering?”

Consider again the words of Budziszewski: “I’ll admit to you that I don’t know the whole answer as to why God permits suffering. I do know how God views our suffering, though, because He took the worst of it upon Himself for us. That’s what the Cross is all about. With that kind of God, I can wait for the rest of the answer.”

- B. On the Cross of Calvary we have a unique convergence of themes: Injustice, evil, love, hope, and meaning.

1. Injustice because the Jews and Romans crucified an innocent man.
2. Evil because He took upon all our sins.
3. Love because He died on our behalf.
4. Hope because eternal life is made possible.
5. Meaning because we are recipients of God’s grace.

- C. When discussing the moral law argument and the problem of evil consider the following elements that need to be incorporated in your discussion:

1. Answer their question with a question. Find out what the other party means by “evil”, “goodness,” and “God”? Make sure they really know what they are talking about. Do not assume anything; no detail is trivial.
 - a. By helping the other party better formulate the question you demonstrate credibility, care, and interest. In this case, you are listening to him or her!
2. Show that all three propositions: (1) God is powerful, (2) God is morally perfect, and (3) evil exists are all independently plausible for good reasons and that there are good reasons to believe that that there is no contradiction when combined with a conjunction.

⁸ J. Budziszewski, *Ask Me Anything 2: More Provocative Answers for College Students* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 133-34.

3. Remember that evil itself is an argument for God's existence; it assumes God's existence in the objection.
4. While you appreciate the fact that they are sensitive to the evil that surrounds them, be sure to ask them what they have done about the evil within themselves.