

BETHEL SEMINARY

THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH EVIL AND ITS COMPATIBILITY WITH GOD

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Introduction

As we read the daily newspaper or tune our television to the popular news outlets, we are faced with a constant reminder of the evils that have plagued our world. In Africa, we find the skeletal frames of children rummaging through heaps of garbage to find morsels of food. In the Middle East, war-torn villages reveal newly orphaned children who are digging through rubble to see what remains of their parents. In the United States, wave after wave of destructive hurricanes leaves families watching helplessly as their homes and belongings are washed away. Like these unfortunate families, we too are forced to gaze into the hollowed eyes of evil, watching helplessly as our hearts are left in ruins.

With every evil manifestation, one thing becomes ever more apparent, that evil is a real problem. It is especially problematic for Christians for three reasons. First, many skeptics have sought the destruction of Christianity by using arguments targeting specific doctrines to bring discredit or doubt. However, skeptics have armed themselves with the problems associated with evil to strike at the heart of religion by seeking to disprove the very existence of God, killing God once and for all. Secondly, evil shows no partiality and is globally universal. Third, the problem is practical, not merely theoretical (Keefe and Tacelli 1994, 122). Something a father knows all too well as he watches his deteriorating six-year-old daughter slowly and painfully defeated by cancer, leaving him shaking his fist at God. Is it possible for the existence of evil to be compatible with an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipresent God? The thesis of this paper is not to necessarily prove God's existence or deny the existence of evil. Rather, the purpose of this argument is to establish the possibility that an all-powerful God is compatible with the reality of evil to disarm the skeptic and bring reconciliation between God and the suffering.

The Problems Associated with Evil

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

What is “The Problem of Evil”? The problem of evil is not just simply that evil exists. Rather, it is the compatibility between both God and evil that drives the conundrum. Many theologians such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and C.S. Lewis have had variations to the problem of evil. However, simply stated, "If God is able (omnipotent), He could stop evil. If God is willing (omnibenevolent), He will desire to stop evil. Furthermore, if God is omniscient, He would have been aware that evil would exist and could have prevented it. Thus, if God is both willing and able to stop and prevent evil, why does evil exist? (Keefe and Tacelli 1994, 128). Removal of one aspect seems to solve the issue. Accepting evil and denying God leaves atheism. Pantheism is the product of accepting God and denying evil. Theism, more specifically monotheism which is centered on an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God, are uniquely left struggling to reconcile the compatibility with the all-powerful and evil. The Bible does not remain silent on this issue. Examples may be found in Job, Habakkuk (Hab. 1:2-4), Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 4:1-3), and Psalms (Pss. 10; 22; 83). Many attempts to address the issue seem to require a reduction or removal of least one of God's qualities making it "perhaps the most severe of all the intellectual problems facing theism" (Erickson 1998, 386). Examples include the removal of God's omnipotence (Finitism), modification of God's omnibenevolence (determinism), or denial of evil's existence (pantheism) (Erickson 1998, 386-394). To address this issue, we must first understand what evil is and where it originates.

WHAT IS EVIL?

If God is omnibenevolent, evil cannot be within Him nor can it be emanated or created by Him. As the supremely sovereign creator, what then is "evil"? The skeptic will argue that if God is the creator of everything in existence and all things were created through Him (Gen. 1:1; John

1:3; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11) and evil is something that exists, God must have created evil too. After all, it is written, "...I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isa. 45:6-7). It seems as though that scripture confirms the skeptic's claim. Furthermore, denying either God or evil leads to dualism or pantheism.

Thomas Aquinas responds the *Summa Theologica*, on question XLVIII. Aquinas proposes that "evil" is not a substance but an absence or corruption of substance. More specifically, Aquinas states that "evil is signified as the absence of good." It is not enough to say that evil is merely an "absence." Rather, it is a privation or absence of something that should be present. This definition by no means implies that evil does not exist, or we fall into a pantheistic conclusion. Rather, as Norman Geisler explains, "Evil is a real lack, privation, or corruption of a good thing. That is, evil does not exist in itself: evil exists only in a thing or substance – and all things God made are good" (Geisler 2011, 18). Therefore, God is the creator of everything in existence. However, since evil is not a thing but a privation of good, God did not create evil. Instead, good must exist to make evil possible. Furthermore, by comparing evil to moth holes, Geisler concludes that nothing can be entirely evil. Moth holes can corrupt a sweater, but a wholly moth-eaten garment is just a hangar in the closet (Geisler 2011, 19). Satan, who by his nature, is utterly evil in a moral sense (John 8:44) is still good in a metaphysical sense because Lucifer was an angel of God. Morally, it is possible for a mere human to be utterly depraved, yet metaphysically still be good in that they are still image bearers of God.

WHERE DID EVIL COME?

The problem associated with the origin of evil stems from God's perfect nature. The skeptic would argue that if God is a perfect being, it would be impossible for Him to create anything with imperfections. Because human beings are imperfect creatures who cause evil, no

such God exists. After all, it is also written: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matt. 7:18). Citing the moral argument, I would immediately respond to the skeptic is that to admit evil's existence is to imply an objective moral law exists. If such law exists, there must be an objective moral lawgiver who is otherwise known as God (Craig 2008, 25). This argument in itself should be enough to de-fang the skeptical position. However, it fails to address the issue for the theist. Thomas Aquinas has more to say about the issue.

Again in the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas responds in question XLIX titled "The Cause of Evil" by incorporating "free will" into the equation. Referencing Matthew 7:18, Aquinas proposes that God, who is a perfect being, cannot be the direct cause of evil and can only create perfect creatures. Free will is one of the perfections that He gave to humans. Free will is a good quality in itself. However, one of the byproducts of free will is the possibility of using it for evil. As a result, God would, therefore, be the cause for making the existence of evil a possibility. This suggestion, of course, does not absolve humanity's responsibility for evil as suggested by determinism. Humans endowed with free will are responsible for the actuality of evil's existence. As a privation of good, evil is the product of using free will to choose separation from God who is the source of goodness. Thus, it is possible for God's perfect creations to create evil.

WHY DOES EVIL STILL PERSIST?

We now understand that evil is a privation of goodness and that this privation is a product of free will. We also know that God is responsible for making evil a possibility. However, as a result of their abuse of free will, humans are responsible for making the existence of evil reality. Now, we can address the issue of evil's persistence. If God is all powerful and all good, He would have both the capability and desire to stop evil. So why does evil still exist? How do we answer this question without reverting to finitism?

Many theologians seem to suggest that even an omnipotent God has limitations. "By [God's omnipotence] we mean that God is able to do all things that are proper objects of his power" (Erickson 1998, 247). There seem to be two types of limitations to God's omnipotence. First, God has natural limitations. He cannot do what is contradictory to His nature. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), sin (James 1:13), deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:11-13) or force willful obedience (Matt. 23:37). In this case, the omnipotence of God does not mean that He can do anything. God's omnipotence means that He can do anything that is possible (Geisler 2011, 37). As long as we have free will, God cannot remove evil by forcing us to choose goodness. This coercion would be a contradiction that goes against his nature. C. S. Lewis states, "I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, 'All will be saved.' But my reason retorts, 'Without their will, or with it?' If I say 'without their will' I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say 'With their will,' my reason replies, 'How if they will not give in?'" (Lewis 2001, 106-7).

Second, God can put limitations on himself by His choosing. The most notable of His self-imposed restrictions can be found in the incarnation. For it is written, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8).

In light of these limitations, we can conclude that the destruction of evil would be an action which is contradictory to free will. It is possible for God to destroy evil by destroying free will. However, this will result in a world void of any moral value. It is comparable to a wind-up doll. By pulling the string, the toy robotically says, "I love you." However, this is merely a pre-programmed response which renders any value to be insignificant. Unlike the wind-up doll,

when a spouse looks you in the eyes and says "I love you," the value lay in the fact they are willingly choosing to love. God is love, and it is God's desire that He is loved in return (1 John 4:8). However, one of the self-imposed limitations of God is that by giving humans free will, He cannot force us to return that love freely. C.S. Lewis states, "Merely to over-ride a human will...would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo" (Lewis 1976, 12). Evil cannot be destroyed without the collateral destruction of free will. However, evil will be overcome (Rom. 8:18-21; Rev. 21:1-4) by separating the good from the evil (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15) and that this separation will be based on the individual's choosing (Matt. 23:37; 2 Thess. 1:7-9).

DOES EVIL HAVE A PURPOSE?

If God is omnibenevolent, He would have a good purpose for everything (Rom. 8:28). However, as described in the introduction, what good purpose can be found when a father is watching helplessly as a terminal illness takes the life of his young child? Can we conclude that because there seems to be purposeless suffering in the world that God cannot be all good? I would first state that just because we, as limited, finite beings, cannot fathom a purpose for some evil, does not mean none exists. It does not prove God to be malevolent. Instead, it demonstrates our ignorance. Seemingly purposeless evil has been a topic that I have been working to address since early 2014 when my wife was killed as a result of an apparently purposeless evil. Since then, I have found several possibilities to reconcile this issue, and Erickson has outlined many of them. First, suffering as a direct result of divine retribution, such as that mentioned in Isa. 45:6-7, is not evil at all. Instead, it is a divine judgment that God uses to correct much like a parent disciplining a child (Heb. 12:6). Second, evil can be a byproduct of good. We see this in nature through food chains. It is good for a lion to eat a zebra for its survival. However, it is not

necessarily good from a zebra's perspective (Erickson 1998, 395). Third, God can redeem evil for good purposes. The story of Joseph is an example of such redemption (Gen 50:20).

Lastly, evil has the purpose of testing disinterested faith. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his book *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, describes disinterested faith as “[believing] in God without looking for rewards and fearing punishments” (Gutiérrez 1987, loc. 271). Job's situation was a test of disinterested faith. Gutiérrez explains, “It is impossible for the satan to deny that Job is a good and devout man. What he questions is rather the disinterestedness of Job's service of God, his lack of concern for a reward. The satan objects not to Job's works but their motivation” (Gutiérrez 1987, loc. 318).

I find this concept of disinterested faith most promising. As stated in the wind-up doll analogy, free will is a critical requirement for a meaningful relationship with God to be possible. However, taking it further, let's say we had the freedom to choose to love someone who was perfect and without flaw. With nothing preventing us from doing so, loving that person would be inevitable. Not to say that the love would have no meaning. The love shared between the triune God is without flaw, and yet it is meaningful. However, seemingly unavoidable. The same holds true for our love for God. Even with free will, if nothing exists to prevent humanity from loving God, there is no choice!

The skeptic may argue that if God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, he would have foreseen the existence of evil and would have the desire and capability of preventing it. The skeptic will conclude that because God seemingly failed to anticipate or avoid the existence of evil proves that no such God exists. My response to the argument is simple. In regards to good and evil, free will is merely the ability to make decisions. However, Evil exists to make a choice possible. Therefore, a world void of evil would be a world void of any moral choices. Thus, rendering it inferior.

Conclusion (So What?)

I first want to clarify that the intent of my paper is not to prove or disprove the existence of God. Instead, it is to provide a logical and rational response to the problems associated with evil that will disarm the skeptic and bring reconciliation between God and the suffering. In the introduction, I provided three reasons for the significance of this paper. First, all of the problems associated with evil that has been addressed in this paper have been weaponized by skeptics in a full-frontal assault on the very existence of God. Unfortunately, many skeptics in academia have succeeded in using these arguments to encourage apostasy. Second, the problems are universally felt around the globe regardless of nationality, race, gender, age, or geographical location. Third and most importantly, the problem is not merely academic, but a harsh reality that people face today. Admittedly, this is my motivation for researching this topic, having the tragic experience of losing a wife to a seemingly preventable evil. I believe that faith is essential. However, if I depended entirely on an unjustified blind faith, I would not be a Christian today. We are instructed to “take up the shield of faith” to defend ourselves against the “flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Eph. 6:16). However, it is not enough to settle for the paper shield of blind faith. I believe that those who remain entirely dependent on an unjustifiable blind faith are leaving themselves vulnerable. God does not desire blind faith (Matt. 22:37). Instead, we ought to have a reasonable and justifiable faith that is grounded in biblical truths (1 Peter 3:15). The reasons for these instructions are clear. Having faith that is reasonably justified is essential to our spiritual protection. Like a warrior forging a shield for battle, I pray that my apologetical attempt to address the problems associated with evil may assist others in forging a strong, justifiable faith, lest it withers in the heat of the day (Matt. 13:6,20-21).

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