

23T19 Response to the Problem of Evil
(Written by Dr. Kip Wehrman 08/09/2023)

Hello everyone. My name is Kip. Welcome to the PUNLA Coffee Table. Today, we are discussing an engineer's response to the Problem of Evil.

Let's pray.

Introduction

The problem of evil. This is the God denier's favorite argument. This is most often framed as an evidential argument from evil. Willam Rowe's formulation¹ is one of these. *"(1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. (3) There does not exist and omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being."* According to the evidentialist problem of evil, *"the existence of disproportionate, prima facie gratuitous evil and suffering in the world is enough evidence against the existence of the Omnipotent, Perfectly Loving, Omniscient God of Classical Theism."*²

Christian theologians and philosophers have defended against this argument for centuries, yet the argument persists. This has become a fundamental challenge which the atheist uses to say there cannot be a God.

Clarification

The first thing we must do is define what is meant by "evil." No one will argue there is no suffering in our world. Everyone has experienced and seen things they perceive as "bad" or evil. Not all bad things are evil. Bad is subjective in most cases. What is bad for me might be good for someone else. These types of events are not evil, but the product of human decisions. Good or bad becomes an issue of perspective. What about natural evil. These are things like earthquakes, typhoons, floods, lightning, extreme cold or hot, draughts etc. Of course, the aftermath of such natural disaster seems to all to be bad. There is suffering and death and devastation. The question is why do we think this is evil? If we understand, a worldwide picture based on naturalism, then why would this be bad. This is just the planet's mechanisms working according to natural laws. I find blaming "God" for this absurd. If the naturalist perceives this to be bad, then what is their basis. Using such natural disasters in an attempt to disprove God, requires the naturalist to form a basis for calling it bad. Since naturalism cannot define anything as "bad," the result is there must be a God to define these events as "bad." Natural events are just that part of nature. If I walk up to a lion and pull its tail, what do you think will happen. When it injures or kills me, it is bad for me, but the lion

¹ William Rowe, *"The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism. In The Evidential Argument from Evil,"* Edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.

² Nicola Salvatore, *"A Defence Of Skeptical Theism Manuscripto,"* – Rev. Int. Fil. Campinas, v. 44, n. 4, pp. 293-312, Oct.-Dec 2021.

is not evil. Weather and other natural events is how our world works. We don't blame the science that tries to predict the weather for the outcomes. So, no nature "evil" is not really evil at all. Bad for you if you are in its way but if you get out of the way, then maybe less bad.

So, I know the next issue the atheist brings up are the "senseless" evil acts or gratuitous evil. These are events like the holocaust or rapes and murders, and the like. Most of us would agree things like this are evil. Evil done by bad people against innocent or defenseless people. The Atheist says, "*There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.*"³

Therefore, we will limit our discussion of "evil" to the definition provided by Rowe, instances of suffering that God is capable of preventing without causing something worse.

Response

The first response is the most obvious. How could we in our finite state of existence know if God's intervention would not cause more harm than good. It is a matter of perspective, and we don't have a reasonable perspective. Stephen Wystra states the theist response, "*we should expect that we will be blind to the reasons God has for allowing our justified suffering.*"⁴

This rather cold response is not much comfort to those who have experienced this kind of suffering. How would the naturalist explain this type of suffering? The answer is they don't even try. The evil we perpetrate on each other is just a function of our natural mechanism. Richard Dawkins said in his book Good Delusion⁵, "*we are all just dancing in our DNA.*" If this is the case, then how would a naturalist or atheist recognize suffering if there is no basis for defining it.

The reality is "evil" requires an objective basis for goodness. If the atheist premise is if there was a God there would be no evil, then the reverse question is just as valid. If there is no God, then how would you know something was evil. Evil is not actually a something in itself. Evil only exists in opposition to goodness. Without God there could be no evil.

The atheist of course would go back to Rowe's argument and attack God's character. How can a "good" God allow evil? How can a theist justify the gratuitous evil done by one person to another that seems so senseless. One common argument is, "*Now although God is all powerful and supremely good, nevertheless He allows certain evils to take place in the universe, which He might prevent, lest, without them, greater goods*

³ William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," American Philosophical Quarterly 16, pp.335-341, 1979.

⁴ Stephen Wyskra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," International Journal of Philosophy of Religion 16, pp. 73-93, 1984.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London Bantam Press, 2006.

*might be forfeited, or greater evils ensue. Accordingly in human government also, those who are in authority, rightly tolerate certain evils, lest certain goods be lost, or certain greater evils be incurred.*⁶ Atheists call this a false statement, however what about torture and dismembering babies. I am sure reasonable people would agree that torturing and dismembering babies is a heinous act of gratuitous evil. Unless of course we call it abortion, which is legal in many a countries and states in the US. Okay, some will argue greater good, but this is only about perspective. Everyone would agree that torturing and dismembering babies is evil unless they can justify it through the lens of a perspective. This demonstrates how humans cannot be objective about defining evil. The only plausible source of objective goodness is God.

C.S. Lewis summed this up beautifully in his book *Mere Christianity*⁷, *“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such a violent reaction against it? Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too--for the argument depended on saying the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my fancies. Thus, in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist - in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless - I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality - namely my idea of justice - was full of sense. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never have known it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.”*

Conclusion

The problem of evil begins with who and how it is defined. However, without any doubt I believe there is evil in our world. I do not however believe the existence of evil is proof there is no God. The evidential argument from evil is perspective driven. Most things people identify as evil are truly bad things for them from their perspective. However, there are other perspectives which may not see those events as evil, they may even see them as good if they perceive a benefit to themselves. Natural evil does not rise to the level of evil by the definitions we explored. No question being in the path of a natural disaster is bad for you and it causes suffering. But suffering in itself is not evil. C.S. Lewis said in his book, *the Problem of Pain*⁸, *“God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”* If there is a God, and there is, would He not want to get our attention to correct our lives. Suffering, especially the kind that results from natural disasters, often brings people to their knees in search of God.

⁶ Nicola Salvatore, *“A Defence Of Skeptical Theism Manuscript,”* – Rev. Int. Fil. Campinas, v. 44, n. 4, pp. 293-312, Oct.-Dec 2021.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Harper : San Fransico, 2001.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, HarperOne : San Fransico, 2015.

The atheist will again assess this as if there is an “*Omnipotent, Perfectly Loving, Omniscient God*”, then why would He not eliminate all evil. The theist answer is, are you willing for God to start with you. If our definition is too broad, then all of us have done and do evil. So, if God eliminated all evil then that would include you and me.

The reason the problem of evil does not disprove God. Is without God’s standard of goodness there is no evil. The naturalist perspective provides no higher enlightenment. For if there is no God, then there is no goodness either. I heard Frank Turek quote the French Dominican monk from the 19th century Jacques-Marie-Louis Monsabre as saying, “*If God would concede me His omnipotence for 24 hours, you would see how many changes I would make in the world. But if He gave me His wisdom too, I would leave things as they are.*”

Let’s Pray.

Let me leave you with this today. If you have never read Galatians in one setting please do and see if you can see what I was reflecting on. I’m sure you will see other things as well. Reading large sections and full books of the Bible in one setting is an amazing way to immerse yourself in the story. These letters would have been read to a church. Remember to do your homework and understand the context before you begin. The extra work will be worth it.

Thank you for joining me today @ the PUNLA CoffeeTable. If you liked the message, please share a link with a friend. You can contact me at kip@punla.org if you have comments or questions. So, until next time @ the PUNLA CoffeeTable. God bless.