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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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God and Evil

How can a good God allow evil?

Rick Rood

Introduction

Many people maintain that they do not believe in God because they do not see how a loving God could possibly allow evil and suffering among his creatures. Indeed, this is probably the most frequently raised objection to belief in God. John Stott has said, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." For the believer, evil and suffering pose a severe test of faith in God.

Evidence of the fact of evil and suffering abounds in our world. Earthquakes, floods and disease result in human suffering of immense proportions. Wars and acts of human treachery also take their toll. The impact of these experiences is not limited only to those who don't love God. Christians experience evil in every respect, just as do non-believers. Why would a good and powerful God permit circumstances such as these? This is a question we must not ignore both as we seek to answer those who challenge our belief in God, and as we seek to live out our lives as sincere followers of Christ.

In this outline we will approach this issue from four perspectives. First, we will clarify the problem of evil. Second, we will look at what has become known as the "logical problem of evil." Third, we will examine what is generally referred to as the "evidential problem of evil." And finally, we will discuss the "religious or personal problem of evil."

I. The problem of evil clarified

A. *Two kinds of evil*

First, it is important to point out that there are two broad types of evil that we are discussing: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is that which

results from the actions of free creatures. Murder, theft, rape and war are examples. Natural evil is that which results from natural process such as earthquakes and floods. Of course, sometimes the two are intermingled, such as when flooding results in loss of human life due to poor planning or shoddy construction of buildings.

2. *Two aspects of the problem of evil*

Just as there are two kinds of evil, there are also two aspects to the problem of evil: the philosophical/apologetic problem, and the religious/personal problem of evil. The philosophical/apologetic problem stems from the challenges of the skeptic who questions the possibility or probability of there existing a God who would allow such suffering. In meeting these apologetic challenges we must use the tools of reason and evidence.

The religious/personal problem, on the other hand, stems from the test of faith which the believer experiences who is suffering. In meeting this challenge we must appeal to the truth revealed by God in Scripture. We will address both the philosophical and the religious problems of evil in our outline.

3. *Two aspects of the philosophical/apologetic problem of evil*

It is also important to note that there are two aspects of the philosophical/apologetic problem of evil: the logical problem and the evidential problem. We will deal first with the logical problem of evil.

2. The logical problem of evil

A. *The logical problem defined*

The logical problem of evil asserts that it is irrational and hence impossible to believe in the existence of a good and powerful God on the basis of the existence of evil in the world. It is usually posed in the form of a syllogism such as this:

*A good God would want to destroy evil.
An all-powerful God would be able to destroy evil.
However, evil is not destroyed.
Therefore, such a good and all-powerful God cannot possibly exist.*

The logical challenge contends that it is impossible to believe both in the existence of evil and of a good and powerful God. If such a God exists, evil would not exist. But if evil exists (and it does), such a God cannot possibly exist, for He would certainly destroy such evil. David Hume stated the logical problem when He inquired about God:

Is He 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? { 1 }

2. *Non-theistic responses to the logical problem*

1. **Naturalism: there is no good and powerful God**

The naturalist resolves the dilemma by negating God. But at what expense? The naturalist must be prepared to live in a world without meaning, and in which there is no hope that evil and suffering will ever be overcome.

2. **Pantheism: there is no evil**

The pantheist resolves the dilemma by negating evil. But again, at what expense? At the expense of all which our senses tell us--that evil is indeed real!

3. **Modified theism**

Some theists attempt to resolve the dilemma by modifying our conception of God. They contend that evil exists because God is incapable of overcoming it. They see God's providence in a very limited sense.

As theists, we must accept both that there is a good and powerful God, and that evil does indeed exist; but that this does not entail a logical contradiction.

3. *Key to the logical problem*

The key to the resolution of this logical problem is to recognize that when we say that God is "all-powerful" we are not saying that He can do anything whatsoever. True, Scripture does say that "with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26). But it also tells us there are some things God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). He cannot "deny Himself" or fail to keep his word (II Tim. 2:13). Neither can God even be tempted to sin, nor tempt others to sin (James 1:13). So, there are obvious exceptions to be understood when we say that God is "all-powerful" or able to do all things. He obviously cannot do anything out of character for a righteous God.

We can also say that it is impossible for God to do anything that is out of character for a rational Being, for God certainly is rational. God cannot "undo the past," or create a square circle, or make what is false true. He cannot do what is irrational or absurd. This leads us to a consideration of the free will defense.

4. *The free will defense*

It is on the basis of what we said above that we conclude that, although God certainly is capable of destroying evil, it is impossible for Him to do so without rendering it impossible for Him to accomplish purposes which

are important to Him. This is specifically true of his purpose to create beings in his own image, who possess free will. But creatures who possess freedom are free not only to love God but also to hate or ignore Him. Yet without free will we would be incapable of entering into a personal relationship with Him. Human freedom is essential to sustaining a personal relationship with God.

5. *The problem of natural evil*

It is clear that it is impossible to destroy moral evil without destroying human freedom. But what about natural evil? Here it is important to realize first that we live in a fallen world, corrupted by sin, and that we are subject to natural disasters and diseases that would not have occurred had we not rebelled against God (Rom. 8:20). Second, we must recognize that the natural order is also subject to the actions of fallen angelic beings to some degree (cf. Job 1, book of Revelation). These two facts make natural evil a product of moral evil.

But beyond this, it is difficult to imagine our existing as free beings in a world much different than our own, in which natural processes allow us to predict with some certainty the consequences of our actions. Natural processes such as gravity which sometimes harm us, generally benefit us!

6. *Objections considered*

1. Couldn't God make free creatures who always love and obey Him?

It's difficult to conceive of how God could do this, while still preserving their freedom. He could supernaturally change our desires, choices and actions. But it seems clear that beings whose desires, choices and actions were so controlled could not possibly be called "free" in any meaningful sense of the word.

2. Couldn't God miraculously intervene to prevent the evil consequences of human actions, or at least prevent evil befalling those who follow his will?

Again, God certainly could do these things, but not without virtually eliminating human freedom. First, if God only allowed evil to befall those whose deeds made them deserving of it, human freedom would be seriously compromised. People would turn to God simply to avoid suffering or to experience the benefits of his blessing. But this is not a truly free choice. Also, if God's miraculous intervention were to become such a common occurrence, it's hard to see how anyone could possibly not believe in Him. But again, such belief would not be a free expression of personal choice.

Thus, it seems clear that God could not destroy evil in these ways without also destroying human freedom or the world in which free creatures can function.

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