

Chapter 50

The Problem of Evil

One of the most difficult conundrums that religion has had to face over the centuries is the “problem of evil.” If God is a loving and compassionate being why does he let so many evil things happen? Why does he let children die of cancer and be killed in accidents? Take away a young father of five children by a heart attack? Kill hundreds of thousands in a tsunami? Allow horrendous wars? Allow genocide? The “problem of evil” has been characterized as the single greatest challenge to religious faith.

The Greek skeptic Epicurus of the fourth century BCE was the first known thinker to spell out the dilemma of the “problem of evil.” He wrote, “Either God wants to abolish evil and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot he is impotent. If he can but does not want to, he is wicked.” Either way, for God and those who believe in him, it is a lose-lose dilemma.

This chapter addresses the many different answers that priests, rabbis, clerics, imams, theologians and other keepers of the faith have proposed for one of the most problematic of the questions that religion has to deal with.

The Gnostics

This was such a difficult question that one early religious group, the Gnostics, (from *gnôsis*, meaning “knowledge”), answered it in a uniquely creative fashion. They were a group of quasi-Christian mystics who were popular in the first few centuries after the death of Christ. Instead of developing a massive set of circumlocutions based on a perfect, all-knowing, loving, and compassionate God, they simply suggested that God never had these qualities in the first place. They proposed that he was a seriously flawed, even demonic and malicious, being whom they called the *Demiurge*. This name was originally coined by Plato to represent the creator of the base world, as opposed to the world of the sublime. While most of the religious mystics of the world were optimists whose faith claimed that despite all the evil, the world was basically “all right,” the Gnostic mystics were supreme pessimists and felt the world was basically “all wrong.” Instead of viewing the cosmos and nature as essentially neutral, they envisioned the cosmos and nature as fundamentally hostile to human endeavor. They also believed there was a true good God called the “the True Father,” who could be held blameless for the evil of the Demiurge. Part of the appeal of the Gnostics was their claim that there was a higher, less flawed world to which the soul will return, an

“all right” heaven. This concept was adopted by many other religions.

The Deists

Another creative variation that was less extreme than Gnosticism was Deism. This religious philosophy affirms the existence of God the creator, but proposes that once he finished creating the early universe he retired or went off to create other universes. Deism allowed a peace treaty between Darwin’s theory of evolution and creationism by providing for the existence of “old earth” creationists. God created the universe but the creation of the earth and all life on earth was the result of cosmic and biological evolution. This also got God off the hook for evil in the world. Basically he could say, as humans tend to do, “It’s not my fault.” God got things started, but what happened after that was due to the forces of nature he created. The trouble with the Deism solution is that the vast majority of humans are not Deists but Theists and believe in a hard-working, personal, unretired God whom they tend to hold responsible for evil.

Theodicy

Another solution is to attempt to explain away the coexistence of evil and a personal, caring God. This is called a *theodicy*. The term is derived from the Greek *theós*, meaning God, and *dikê*, meaning justice. The following are some of the common theodicy-type solutions to the “problem of evil.”

The free-will solution. God gave man free will. This in itself suggests that God is very intelligent since it freed him from being responsible for the second-to-second action of every person on earth. Wise move, God! This also means that when man is responsible for evil, such as Hitler’s killing of the Jews, it is not God’s fault. Blame the ability of man to do what ever he wishes, to exercise his own free will. In this form evil occurs because God allowed man to have free will. The inverse form holds that God allows evil to occur so man can have free will. Both forms have the same result. This human form of evil is termed “moral evil.” Of course the free will solution does not excuse “natural evil” in the form of tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, and other acts of nature that God should be able to control.

Inanimate free will solution. One of the natural disasters that posed a great challenge to understanding the problem of evil occurred in Lisbon in 1755. Because it was All Saint’s Day, people were attending church. An earthquake caused the stone structures to collapse killing over 100,000 people. This was a particularly onerous example of God’s failure to prevent evil. To explain natural evil some have suggested the “free process solution.”¹ This is based on the assumption that if humans have free will, then all of nature in general, including tectonic plates should also have free will. Thus, earthquakes and tsunamis are not God’s fault; the disasters they produce are the fault of the free will of nature. This does not really explain why an all-powerful God could not have compromised just a little bit. For example, couldn’t he have delayed the Lisbon earthquake by one day to Monday, when all the churches were empty?

The character-building solution. A good example of this is when a couple has a

child with Down syndrome. This chromosome abnormality causes mental retardation and in previous years parents were advised to deal with this form of evil by placing the child in an institution. Over time, people stopped doing this and found that Down syndrome children are friendly, loving, and often a delight to raise, and provide true character-building for the parents. Another example is being born deaf. Some deaf people find such identity and character-building from their deafness that they refuse treatment with a cochlear implant. This solution suggests that evil helps to build man's character and to become the noble souls that God can be proud of. Of course if you are killed by the evil event, it is a bit late for character building.

The Yin and Yang solution. The Taoist religion speaks of yin and yang representing the many opposites in the universe, such as male and female and good and evil. They illustrate this concept with the following symbol of interlocking curves.

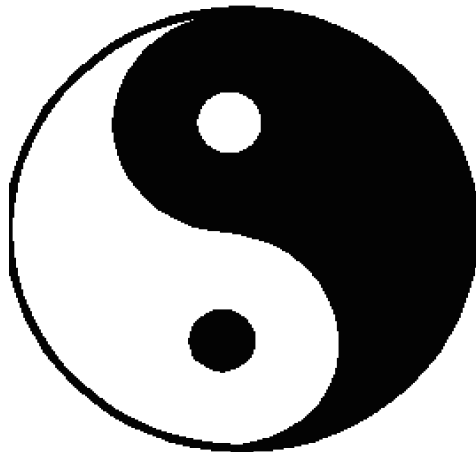


Figure 1. Yin and yang.

The yin and yang hypothesis suggests that one extreme of anything cannot exist and cannot be fully defined without the other extreme. If there was only divine perfection there would be no evil, but nothing exists in a single isolated pure state. As soon as there is some subtle variation to perfection, some dimensionality, there is automatically a window for the presence of evil. This view suggests that if there is good there

must also be evil. That is just the way things are. Accept it. Don't blame God. The fifth century theologian Augustine of Hippo mounted the same solution. He couched it in terms of *privatio boni*, or a privation of good—an evil thing can only be referred to as a negative form of a good thing. In a similar vein, to the Hindu Vedantist the question of “Why does God permit evil?” is as meaningless as “Why does God permit good?” The fire burns one man and warms another, and is neither cruel nor kind.²

A variant of this is that in order to do good deeds, one needs individuals in need of good deeds. One cannot give alms to the poor if there are no poor, or tend to the lepers if there are no lepers, or rescue the buried victims of a powerful earthquake if there are no powerful earthquakes.

The “God’s mysterious plan” solution. By far the most common explanation for God allowing evil to occur is that it was part of God’s mysterious plan. God knows exactly what he is doing and in the long run the evil that happens is all part of “God’s plan.” We mere mortals are just too stupid to understand his long-term plans. This is the common fodder of movies where a Spencer Tracy-like priest comforts a sobbing mother after her child has died with the words, “It is all part of God’s grand plan,” or its variant, “He is now in a better place.”

The “God is also suffering” solution. Christians believe that God has shared the

suffering of humans by living a truly human life in the body of Jesus Christ on earth. This gives comfort in that God is not above our misery, but along side us in the darkness. John Polkinghorne¹ gives the example of a concentration camp in World War II. A young Jewish boy was hung and was twisting and dying in a Gestapo noose. From the crowd of his fellow Jews, forced to witness the execution, came the cry “Where is God now?” One of them tells us that he reached inside himself for the answer. “He is there, hanging in the noose.” There are, of course, two ways to interpret this: either God is suffering along with us or God also just died. Polkinghorne chooses the former stating “This insight, of God as the fellow sufferer, that Christians believe was historically acted out in the cross of Jesus Christ, meets the problem of suffering at the profoundest possible level.” This explanation leaves unanswered the question of why would a rational, all-powerful God want to flagellate himself?

The “We get what we deserve” solution. After the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, many religious apologists claimed that humans were being punished for a variety of ills.³ Israel’s chief Sephardic rabbi, Shlomo Amar, suggested “This is an expression of God’s ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrong doing.” A Hindu high priest suggested the tsunami was caused by “a huge amount of pent-up manmade evil on Earth.” On MSNBC Jennifer Giroux said the tsunami was divine punishment for America’s “cloning, homosexual marriages, abortion, lack of God in the schools, and taking Jesus out of Christmas.” James Haught³ suggested this was nonsense. “Why would a loving creator drown Asians in a rage over American sins?” It is also difficult to apply this solution to a young baby just diagnosed with retinoblastoma. The “We get what we deserve” solution is basically a Rorschach test for a range of upset believers and leaves a lot to be desired.

The “Man Created God” Solution

The trouble with all of these explanations is that while they are philosophically or theologically interesting, they are not inherently very satisfying or comforting. If my child is mangled and killed in a automobile accident or if massive numbers of my ancestors are killed in pogroms or other forms of genocide, none of these excuses for God allowing these things to happen are satisfactory. The very existence of the hypothesis of an all-powerful God carries with it the implication that any form of evil could have been prevented if He had simply chosen to do so. The only truly logical and satisfying answer is to take God out of the equation entirely. If he does not exist he cannot be blamed for evil. Thus, the one solution that totally eliminates the “problem of evil” is to assume that man created God.

The “problem of evil” is one of the greatest challenges for religion to explain. While many solutions have been proposed none adequately deals with the fact that an all powerful, personal, caring God could eliminate the worst aspects of evil if he wanted to. The one solution that is the most logically satisfying to the thinking brain is to assume that Man Created God—in which case the “problem of evil” disappears.

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References

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3. Haight, J. A. Why would God drown children? *Free Inquiry*. 14-15, 2005.

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