

A New Way to Think About the Question

If God, Why Evil?



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Introduction

In my fifty years of studying difficult questions, none is asked more often than “If God exists, then why is there so much evil in the world?” This is near the top of virtually all lists of the most asked questions about the Christian faith. Despite this, I know of no short, simple, readable, and comprehensive book on the topic. *If God, Why Evil?* attempts to fill this gap.

Judging by the popularity of books like *The Shack* (see appendix 3), people are hungering for a truly comforting answer when faced with suffering, tragedy, and death. I know this from personal experience. I have lost my father, my mother, my sister, and (hardest of all) my daughter. My heart goes out to anyone who has experienced any of these evils. They are real, and they really hurt.

At the same time our heart needs comfort, our head needs answers. If there is an all-good and all-powerful God, then why does He not put a stop to all of these tragedies? Better yet, if He knew the sum total of human misery that has occurred would occur, then why did He create this world to begin with?

From a purely apologetic perspective, more skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism have sprung from an inability to answer various aspects of the problem of evil than from any other single issue. What is more, when doubt begins in this area, it moves quickly to other areas. The problem of evil is a kingpin factor.

Admittedly, many books have been written on various aspects of this problem. What's different about this book? First, this work attempts to be *clear* about the various dilemmas and the proposed solutions. The problem is clearly stated first and then an answer is offered in basic terms.

Second, this book is *concise*. The problems and responses are put in succinct logical form so that one can see plainly what is being said. Elaboration is kept to a minimum so that one does not get lost in the forest for the trees.

Third, this book is *comprehensive*. Just a glance at the chapters reveals this, for the book treats evil's nature, origin, persistence, purpose, and avoidability. It discusses evil's metaphysical, moral, and physical problems. In addition, it speaks about why God does not perform more miracles to avert evil and why He, according to the Bible, allows some people to suffer forever (in hell).

Fourth, this work attempts to be *correct*. We are not engaging in mere intellectual exercises; we are searching for truth. Since we believe that God is the source of all truth and that the Bible is an authoritative revelation from Him, we seek to be biblical.

Finally, this book seeks to be *comforting*. We are not interested only in intellectual solutions but in practical ones as well. Hence real-life situations are scattered throughout the book, showing the personal value of the solutions to evil.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that you will gain as much from reading *If God, Why Evil?* as I have after a half century of pondering these matters.

Three Views on Evil

I vividly remember my first debate with an atheist, at Lake County Community College, north of Chicago. He claimed the untold evil in the world demonstrates that there cannot possibly be a God. When I asked by what moral standard he was making this judgment, he immediately realized he was on the horns of a dilemma. If he admitted there is an ultimate moral law by which he knew the world to be evil, then this would lead to an ultimate Moral Lawgiver. If he denied an objective moral law, then this would seem to wipe away any solid grounds for his complaint against God.

His answer was frank but shocking: “I don’t have any ultimate moral law by which I am making my judgment that this world is evil. My conclusion is simply based on my own benign moral feeling.” Of course, had I said my basis for believing in God was not based on any objective evidence—only my own benign moral feeling—I would have been laughed off the platform.

Everyone experiences evil. It comes in many forms: pain, suffering, disease, disaster, death. Everyone seeks an answer to the questions: Is there any purpose to pain? Why did my loved

one die? Why was our town bashed by the hurricane? Why did lightning strike our home? Why did the tornado rage through our neighborhood? Why do so many die of drought and starvation? A person would have to be totally insensitive not to wonder about the problem of evil.

Three basic answers to the overall problem have been offered.

Pantheism affirms God and denies evil.

Atheism affirms evil and denies God.

Theism affirms both God and evil.

In general, pantheists believe God exists but deny the existence of evil. They believe God is good, God is All, and hence there is no evil. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, held this view, maintaining that “evil is an error of [the] moral mind.”

Most people, however, find it difficult to accept this answer. The old limerick summarizes their conundrum well:

There was a Faith Healer of deal
Who said “Although pain isn’t real,
If I sit upon a pin,
And it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I fancy I feel!”

In short, if evil is not real, then why does it hurt so badly? If pain, suffering, and death are not real, then how do we explain where the illusion came from? And why does everyone have it? Further, why is the illusion so persistent? Why can’t we make it go away? When we wonder whether we are dreaming or awake, we can pinch ourselves. We know we have been dreaming because we wake up. But we don’t wake up from suffering,

which always surrounds us and often invades us. We can tell an illusion because there is always a backdrop of reality by which we know it is an illusion. But evil is part of the backdrop of life itself. How then can it be illusory?

The atheist's solution to evil is just the opposite. Atheists admit that evil is real, but do not believe God is. Sigmund Freud claimed that God is an illusion because belief in God is based on wish fulfillment. He said that while it would be nice if there were a God, it also would be nice if there were a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

However, we can only know something is evil (not good) if we know what is good.

We can't know something is *injust* unless we know what is just. But if there is a moral law demanding that we ought always to be just, this leads us right back to a Moral Lawgiver. C. S. Lewis said, "[When I was an atheist] 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" (*Mere Christianity*, 45).

Further, Freud confused a wish and a need. That we wish something to exist does not mean it does. But it is reasonable to believe that if we truly need something, then it does exist. Scientist and head of the human genome project, Francis Collins, puts it this way:

Why would such a universal and uniquely human hunger [for God] exist, if it were not connected to some opportunity for fulfillment? Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. (*The Language of God*, 38)

Even atheists have demonstrated a need for God. Jean-Paul Sartre said, “I needed God. . . . I reached out for religion, I longed for it, it was the remedy. Had it been denied me, I would have invented it myself” (*Words*, 102, 197). Albert Camus added, “Nothing can discourage the appetite for divinity in the heart of man” (*The Rebel*, 147). As the scientist and mathematician Blaise Pascal noted, there is a God-sized vacuum in every heart that can be filled only by the One who made it:

What else does this craving proclaim . . . but that there was once in man a true state of happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him . . . though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object, in other words by God himself. (*Pensees*, #148)

This leaves us with the remaining alternative that both God and evil are real. But this nonetheless is a real problem—at least for the Christian view of God. The God of the Bible is all-knowing, and He foresaw that evil would occur in His world. He also is all-good, and He desires to do away with evil. In addition, He is all-powerful and could accomplish this. Why then does evil exist? Are not good and evil opposites? How can the existence of evil be reconciled with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God?

Rabbi Harold Kushner offered a simple solution to this dilemma in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: God is neither all-good nor all-powerful.

If we can bring ourselves to acknowledge that there are some things God does not control, many good things become possible . . . (45). Are you capable of forgiving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect? (148)

However, there are several serious issues with this view of God. First, as C. S. Lewis observed, how can we know something is not perfect unless we know what is perfect? So if there were a *not*-perfect being that permitted or inflicted evil on this world, then such a being would not be God but a devil. The imperfect implies a perfect standard (God) by which we measure the not perfect. Kushner's imperfect god implies that there is a perfect God beyond this imperfect world.

Second, Kushner's god is not all-powerful, being finite and limited in power. However, everything that is limited is limited by something else, which eventually leads us to an Unlimited Limiter of every limited being. Thus Kushner's god is a violation of the fundamental law of causality, i.e., that every limited being has a cause.

A parable will illustrate this point. An atheist and a theist went for a walk in the woods and came upon a glass ball about eight feet in diameter. They both wondered where it came from and agreed that someone or something must have put it there. The theist then asked, "If the ball were sixteen feet in diameter, would it still need a cause?"

"Of course," replied the atheist. "If little spheres need causes, then so do larger ones."

"Ah, so," said the theist, "then what if it were eight thousand miles in diameter—would it still need a cause?"

The atheist paused and said, "Yes, if little spheres need causes and larger ones do too, then a really big one would also need a cause."

Then the theist said, "What if we make the ball as big as the whole universe: would it still need a cause?"

"Of course not," snapped the atheist. "The universe is just there!"

And there is the problem, namely, that making the ball bigger

does not eliminate the need for a cause—it demands an even greater Cause. So a finite (limited) god needs a cause. Since every *finite* being needs a cause, the Cause of all finite beings (God) does not need a cause: He is the Uncaused Cause and Unlimited Limiter of all limited things. Kushner's god does not solve the problem but calls for another, more ultimate answer.

THE PROBLEM STILL REMAINS

The Christian (theist) claims that only an infinitely good and infinitely powerful God can solve the problem of evil (see chapter 4). But how? Again, are not absolute good and evil incompatible? And could not an all-good and all-powerful God eliminate evil?

The Nature of Evil

The reality of evil has led some great minds to conclude that evil must be co-eternal with good. Augustine was one such mind. As a young man he was attracted to the Manichaean religion because it seemed to have an answer to this perplexing problem: If evil is real, and if it is opposed to good, then both good and evil must have existed forever. How he worked his way out of this thinking and ultimately became a Christian is a fascinating story, told in his *Confessions*. The result was a profound understanding of the nature of good and evil, which he shared in his anti-Manichaean writings (and of which we are the beneficiaries).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM OF THE NATURE OF EVIL

Before we can answer where evil came from, we need to ask what evil is. Very simply, the problem of the nature of evil initially can be put this way:

1. God created all things.

2. Evil is something.
3. Therefore, God created evil.

The Christian (theist) cannot deny the first premise. The Bible declares that God created all things. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1); “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3 NKJV); “By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Colossians 1:16); the saints in heaven sing to God, “You created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Revelation 4:11 ESV).

Likewise, it would appear a biblical Christian cannot deny that evil is something real. The Bible declares the reality of sin and death: “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12 NKJV); “the wages of sin is death” (6:23). To deny evil’s reality is to deny the Bible and human experience. Paul declared, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24); “I know that nothing good lives in me” (7:18).

But if God created all things (first premise), and if evil is something (second premise), then must God have created evil (third premise)? The Bible makes it clear that God created only *good* things. After almost every day of creation God said, “It is good.” Looking back on all His creation, “It was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Paul adds, “Everything God created is good” (1 Timothy 4:4); indeed, no food “is unclean in itself” (Romans 14:14). Accordingly, young Augustine and every thinking Christian since is faced with this: If everything God made was good, then how can evil be real? Or, if evil is real, then how can God not have created it?

RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF THE NATURE OF EVIL

The reply is found in what is meant by a “thing” (substance). Certainly, a Christian must admit that God did create every “thing” or substance (a thing in itself). But we need not agree that there are evil “things.” How then can evil be real but not a thing? Augustine found a satisfying, enduring answer: *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. In short, there has to be some good thing in order for evil to exist in it as a lack, corruption, or privation of it. So to restate the argument against God from the nature of evil (and to show why it does not follow):

1. God created all things.
2. Evil is not a thing.
3. Hence God did not create evil.

Some illustrations will help us understand how evil is not a thing in itself but is a lack or corruption in a good thing. Evil is real—a real lack, a real corruption. But it is not a real thing (substance).

Evil Is Like a Wound in an Arm

It is real to have a wound. But a wound is not a “thing.” Rather, wounds only exist in good things—like an arm. The wound is real—ask anyone who’s had one—but the wound does not exist in itself. It exists only in something else as a privation or corruption of it. Thus there is no such thing as a totally wounded body. A *totally* wounded body is not a body at all.

Evil Is Like Rot to a Tree

Evil is like rottenness in a tree. Here again, pure rottenness exists only in something else. A totally rotten tree is no tree at all—it's topsoil! Rot exists in the tree as a corruption of it, but it does not exist in and of itself.

Evil Is Like Rust to a Car

Rust is a corruption of a good thing (iron), but rust does not exist in and of itself. It is a privation or lack in a good thing. A totally rusted car does not exist; it's just a brown spot on the pavement. Nonetheless, rust is real—it's a real lack in a good thing, as anyone who's had a very rusty car knows.

Evil Is Like Moth Holes in Wool

Moths can corrupt a woolen sweater, but holes do not exist in themselves. They exist only in other things. Again, a totally moth-eaten garment has ceased to exist. Evil is a real corruption, but it is not a real thing (substance).

ANSWERING SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Several misunderstandings have arisen from this explanation of evil's nature. We'll discuss some of them briefly.

Evil Is Not a Mere Absence of Good

In reference to evil as a privation or lack in a good thing, some have wrongly concluded that this makes evil a mere absence of good. But that is not so. For example, the power of sight is absent in rocks and in blind persons, yet there is a big difference.

The stone by nature is not supposed to see, so there is no

privation of sight in it. On the other hand, a human by nature is supposed to see—it's part of his/her nature. In a human being, to be blind is a real privation or lack.

Viewing Evil as a Privation Does Not Imply That Evil Is Unreal

To say evil is a privation, or a lack of some good that ought to be there, does not mean evil is unreal. Privations are real. It is real to be blind. Ask any blind person. Or, try blindfolding yourself.

Likewise, to be maimed (deprived of a limb) is real. It is a real lack. Tie an arm or two behind your back and try performing your normal duties and you will quickly see how real it is to have this privation.

Hence a mere absence is not an evil, but an absence of a good that should be there is an evil. Privations are not *nothing*. They are real—real lacks or corruptions in something that should be there.

Viewing Evil as a Privation Does Not Deny Total Depravity

Biblical Christians believe that fallen human beings are “totally depraved.” But we have just seen that nothing can be totally evil. How can this be reconciled?

First of all, the Bible speaks of total depravity in a *moral* sense, not in a *metaphysical* or ontological sense. That is, there cannot be a being that is totally deprived of its being, for then it would be a nonbeing (nothing) and not a being. However, there can be (and are) human beings—all of us—whose beings are totally bent on sinning. We can be totally bent on sinning and still exist. The “total” evil is moral. It has to do with our

intending, willing, and/or doing evil things—not with our very nature as totally deprived of all *being*.

Furthermore, even total depravity in the moral sense does not mean we sin as much as we can all the time. It means we have the propensity (inclination) to sin and the necessity to die (Romans 3, 5). It means we have total inability to attain our own salvation (Ephesians 2:8–9). It does not mean we don't exist as beings in God's image—fallen as we are. The Bible speaks of fallen human beings as still being made in the image of God; this is why it's wrong to murder human beings (Genesis 9:6) or curse them (James 3:9).

What About Satan? Isn't He Totally Evil?

The Bible speaks about Satan as “the evil one” (1 John 5:19) who is a liar by his very nature (John 8:44). Surely there is no good in Satan—is he not totally evil? Yes, he is completely evil in a moral sense, but not in a metaphysical sense. Just like fallen humans still have God's image, even so Satan has the remnants of good that God gave to him as a created angel. For example, Satan has good insofar as he is a creature of God, insofar as he has intelligence, and power, and free will. Of course, he uses all these God-given good powers to do evil; he is ever, always, irretrievably bent on evil. But this is only to say he is totally depraved morally, not that he is totally deprived of all creaturely good metaphysically.

THE PROBLEM OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Even if evil is not a thing, it's still real, and it's happening. Even if God did not create evil, He does permit it to occur. Hence it may be argued:

1. God is the author (is in sovereign control) of everything that happens.
2. Evil is something that happens.
3. So God is the author of evil.

If this is correct, then even if God is not the author of any evil “thing,” would He not still be the author of evil events? In which case, God would still be the author of evil.

In response, we acknowledge that God is in sovereign control. “You can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2); “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:3); “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” (135:6); “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1). There is nothing that happens apart from God knowing, planning, and controlling it for His purposes. Even the great king Nebuchadnezzar confessed that “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men” (Daniel 4:17).

Nevertheless, note that the word *author* is being used in two different senses. Yes, God is the author of everything, including evil, in the sense that He *permits* it, but not in the sense that He *produces* it. Evil happens in His *permissive* will, but He does not promote evil in His *perfect* will. God allows evil yet does not encourage it. Just like parents give limited freedom to their children to learn from their mistakes, even so God does with His children. But in no way does God “author” evil in the sense of producing, promoting, or performing it. Indeed, God is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13 ESV); in His presence, the angels sing “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:3 KJV); “Let no one

say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13 ESV).

God's role in the world is similar to that of a book's "author." He wrote the whole story in advance (Isaiah 46:10); the story has the hero, whom He commends, and the villain, whom He condemns. Each character—whether for good or evil—acts freely, for the story is not about robots, but about humans. So while the author is the author of the villain's actions, the villain is making them freely and is responsible for them. Likewise, God is the author of all human actions, but He is not responsible for them since they are freely chosen. God does not promote or perform the evil actions of His creatures; He merely permits them within the overall story of human history, which He has authored in advance and which moves forward under His sovereign direction.

A good example is the crucifixion of Christ. The Bible says God predetermined that Jesus would be the lamb slain before the creation of the world (Revelation 13:8). Peter said, "This Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23 ESV). But even though the cross was predestined by God, nonetheless, it was freely chosen by Christ: "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17–18 ESV). In short, God is the "author" of everything that happens in the indirect and ultimate sense; He is not the immediate cause of evil actions. He neither promotes them nor produces them; He permits them and controls the course of history so that it accomplishes His ultimate purposes. Just as Joseph told his brothers who left him for dead, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20),

even so God overrules the evil intent of humans to accomplish His ultimate good.

Of course, explaining evil as a lack in a good thing does not explain where the lack comes from. All it explains is the nature of evil as a real privation in good things. Where the corruption came from is another question—one treated in the next chapter.