

A Theodicy on the Problem of Evil

By

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## A THEODICY ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

One night several years ago, I heard a knock at our front door. At the time I was a pastor at a church, so hearing a knock at the door was not unusual. However, this night was very unusual. The husband and father of a family in the church, I'll call him "Bob," was at the door and was very upset. He asked that I come to his home immediately and help the family deal with a tragedy. It turned out that Bob's wife, I'll call her "Jane," had just been told over the phone that her mother and step-father were found dead at their home when Jane's sister went to check on them. The police were called because the scene was violent and had all the signs of being a murder-suicide. Naturally, Jane was very distraught. Bob and Jane had two children, and the children knew something terrible had occurred but had not been told what. I was asked to help tell them this news and help explain why something so tragic could have happened to their family.

In times like the one I just described, expounding on the intricacies of the philosophical problem of evil (PPE) is not a wise pastoral response. Even though I had studied the PPE, I knew that was not the forum for displaying my philosophical prowess. Pastoral comfort and compassion required a different response that night. Anyone who has ever had to be the comforter in a case like that knows that no amount of training or preparation can really help, which gives us peace knowing that Jesus sends the ultimate Comforter. I look back and wish I could have said things better that day, but yet I am sure that I would find myself struggling if a similar situation presented itself today.

On the other hand, I have been in circumstances where being equipped with an effective theodicy for the problem of evil has been useful. I worked with teens for several years, and at times they have insightful questions and curiosities. One is how to harmonize the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God with the existence of evil. In a discipleship situation or when engaging skeptics about spiritual matters, having a thoughtful presentation of the problem of evil is important for an effective Christian. These are the reasons why we study Christian responses to the PPE, not for the occasions like the one I described which require a pastoral response.

What exactly is the problem of evil to which I have referred? First let us acknowledge that the Christian does not believe there is a serious problem; it is the atheist who asserts that a problem exists. For centuries atheists have declared that an inconsistency exists between two propositions which theists hold as true. These propositions can be stated as:

1. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good.
2. There is evil.<sup>1</sup>

Christians have no general problem with the propositions being consistent, as both are upheld in the Bible as being true. For example, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, acknowledges very clearly proposition two, the reality of evil. In Chapter One, he famously lists a number of moral evils which lead to a person being condemned by God. Later, in Chapter Twelve, Paul exhorts Christians to “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,”<sup>2</sup> referring to both moral evils and natural evils.

Christians can also use the Bible to show the truth of proposition one regarding the nature of God. For example, Psalm 119:68 reads, “You are good, and what you do is

good.” Job 12:13 states, “To God belong wisdom and power.” Finally, Psalm 94:11 declares that the “Lord knows the thoughts of man.”

Christian theists assert the truth of both propositions and see no explicit or implicit contradictions. Even though no explicit contradiction can be shown, atheists insist on an implicit contradiction, although they struggle to make a definitive case.<sup>3</sup> Ronald Nash describes the challenges theists face from atheists when making claims about God:

- “1. If God is good and loves all human beings, it is reasonable to believe that he wants to deliver the creatures he loves from evil and suffering.
2. If God is all-knowing, it is reasonable to believe that he knows how to deliver his creatures from evil and suffering.
3. If God is all-powerful, it is reasonable to believe that he is able to deliver his creatures from evil and suffering.”<sup>4</sup>

J.L. Mackey is a philosopher and an atheist who has written extensively on the PPE. Regarding the challenges above and the supposed inconsistency between our two propositions, Mackey wrote that “good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.”<sup>5</sup> In view of the opposition from atheists such as Mackey, theists have some work to do. They must show how our two propositions are reasonably consistent.

One way to do so is to add a new premise to our set of propositions and show that the new premise is true. Nash suggests a new formulation of the argument:

1. An omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God created the world.

2. God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so.
3. Therefore, the world contains evil.<sup>6</sup>

If the first two premises are true, then the third entails and the argument is valid. The atheist is concerned mainly with premise number two above, which states that God has a good reason for creating a world which contains evil (when dealing with the PPE; of course, the atheist has other issues about premise one). Critics point to three different dimensions of the argument which they claim proves that the premise is not true. They state that the presence of moral evils, natural evils, and senseless (gratuitous) evils are proof that God did not have a good reason for creating a world containing evil. They contend that God could have created a world where people always chose to do good, or where all instances of natural evils would have been prevented by God, or, at the very least, instances of senseless evils which apparently have no good purpose would have been prevented. These are the critical attacks against theism which I will address going forward.

As Nash puts it, “most attempts to answer the problem of evil are variations of one basic theme, namely, that God permits evil either to make possible some greater good or to avoid some greater evil. God, it is claimed, always has some reason for allowing evil.”<sup>7</sup> The three primary responses, or theodicies, are known as the free will theodicy, the natural law theodicy, and the soul-making theodicy. The critic of Christianity has certain specific objections to the existence of God based on the presence of the three types of evils: moral evils, natural evils, and gratuitous evils. Therefore, Christian theists must be prepared to respond to each type of challenge.

Alvin Plantinga wrote his well-known “Free Will Defense” as a response to the problem of evil due to the existence of moral evils (he addresses natural and gratuitous evils in his essay as well). These are evils which are caused by the free choices of significantly free moral creatures. For example, it is a moral evil for a person to choose to steal, or to kill, or to bribe another person to get what they want. These moral evils corrupt not only the person involved, but all of society. Plantinga writes that the “heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil.”<sup>8</sup> Plantinga’s point is that it is logically possible that God is not able to create a universe where only moral good exists. To do so would entail creating a world in which nobody chose to do evil. Free will, however, necessitates the creature being a free moral agent, because true moral good only has merit if the creature freely chooses good over evil. If a creature is an automaton that can only choose good and never evil, how is that noteworthy?

Mackey’s response in objection to the Free Will Theodicy is the following question: “if God has made men such that they in their free choices sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?”<sup>9</sup> Mackey adds: “Clearly, his [God’s] failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.”<sup>10</sup> The problem with Mackey’s objection is that he supposes that there exists a possible world in which significantly free creatures choose the moral good all the time, and that God has the power to actualize (make real) this possible world. Plantinga’s

response is that in every possible world in which a morally free creature exists (we'll call him "Doug"), Doug chooses to do at least one wrong. Doug – and everyone else – suffers from what Plantinga calls "transworld depravity."<sup>11</sup> Transworld depravity is the condition all people suffer from whereby they will choose at least one time to do evil rather than good, and that this condition entails for each person no matter which possible world that person exists in (including, of course, the real world). He argues that since it is possible that *everybody* suffers from transworld depravity, God, even though He is omnipotent, could not have created any possible world which contains moral good but no moral evil. Therefore, "the price for creating a world in which they [significantly free creatures] produce moral good is creating one in which they also produce moral evil."<sup>12</sup> Mackey's insistence that God could have and should have brought about such a world fails; it is not logically possible. Therefore our premise which states that "God created a world which contains evil and has a good reason for doing so" stands under this scrutiny.

Some people have raised the objection of "why natural evils?" Why such things as tornados, earthquakes, or lightning strikes? These are not the result of wrong moral choices of people, some argue. Surely God could prevent these kinds of evils which harm or kill innocent people. Here is Norman Geisler's formulation of the objection:

1. Moral evil is explained by free choice.
2. But some natural evil does not result from free choice.
3. Natural evil cannot be explained by free choice of creatures.
4. Hence, God must be responsible for natural evil.
5. But natural evils cause innocent suffering and death.
6. Therefore, God is responsible for innocent suffering and death.<sup>13</sup>

There are several problems with the premises of this argument. Premise three is not Biblically true, since the free choice of Adam and Eve to sin against God brought about a state of corruption on the world which is the cause of some natural evils. Also in

premise five, people are described as innocent. Biblically speaking, and in view of the idea of transworld depravity, none could be considered innocent. Romans 3:23, which states that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” makes this point quite clearly. Other problems exist, but we’ll continue with the main point.

This argument does not directly answer the main objection that God, if he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, should and could intervene and stop all instances of natural evil before they harmed someone. In response, Nash makes a marvelous point about what critics are really asking for when they raise the objection:

Suppose God did intervene every time a natural evil was about to take place. Why shouldn’t such intervention become predictable? If God’s intervention took place before natural evil became apparent, humans might never know that they were in jeopardy; because no one would even know that a natural evil had been averted in such cases, humans would never have reason to thank God for his acts of deliverance. But if God’s intervention were to occur after the event – thus taking the form of negating any possible harm for the event – humans would soon realize that they are fortunate enough to live in a universe in which nothing (or nothing serious) can ever go wrong.<sup>14</sup>

We operate in this world according to predictable natural laws. For God to constantly alter those laws to prevent potential natural evils is to create a chaotic world which is actually less stable than the one in which certain natural evils exist. Humans rely on the consistent nature of our world and how certain causes result from certain effects. The atheist cannot demonstrate how God could create a world in which less natural evil exists and yet people are still significantly free in their moral choices *and* moral good is preserved. Therefore, the objection regarding the existence of natural evils does not hold up to scrutiny.

A variation on the theodicies regarding moral evils and natural evils is the so-called “soul-making” theodicy. Geisler makes the follow statements about the value of certain amounts of suffering or pain in the world:

“Some physical evil may be a necessary condition for attaining a greater moral good.

God uses pain to get our attention.

Many have come to God through suffering.

Some physical suffering may be a necessary condition of a greater moral good.

Just as diamonds are formed under pressure, even so is character.”<sup>15</sup>

When we read the Bible, it is clear that God intends for humans to grow in character through their life experiences and their journey with God. Paul refers to the difficulties of running a marathon in describing our spiritual journey – and yet we become wiser and closer to him through our experiences, even though a certain amount of pain and suffering is guaranteed. Nash states that “we cannot develop virtuous dispositions without living in a world in which there are real challenges and the threat of real loss.”<sup>16</sup>

The critic claims to object to the soul-making theodicy on a couple of grounds. One is that it seems like certain evils overwhelm people beyond what they can handle, therefore it is beyond the point of character development. The person making this objection also does not fully understand what he is really asking. If there is not the threat of real and tangible loss, then how is real and tangible soul-making possible? Complete victory is irrational without the possibility of complete loss. This leads to another similar objection: why does it seem like many people fail to achieve victory in the soul-making process? An all-good God would surely intervene to prevent so many from falling victim to addictions, career or financial failures, relationship failures, and the like. Surely people can develop character without large failures in the process. Nash makes the unpopular but accurate point when he states, “I suggest that human existence includes the possibility of *total* failure and *total* loss found in the biblical teaching of the

second death and ultimate, irremediable separation from God.”<sup>17</sup> The challenges we face in life must be real, not some illusion that will be unmasked at some later time when we achieve a higher level of spiritual enlightening.

The final objection to the premise that “God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so” is the objection based on the existence of gratuitous evils. These are evils which appear to have no good reason or soul-making purpose. William Rowe, another noted philosopher and atheist, wrote his formulation of the argument this way:

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 an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>18</sup>

Rowe attempts to make his case “stick” by using the famous example of a fawn in the forest:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire, a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn’s intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn’s suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse. Nor does there seem to be any equally bad or worse evil so connected to the fawn’s suffering that it would have had to occur had the fawn’s suffering been prevented. Could an omnipotent, omniscient being have prevented that fawn’s apparently pointless suffering?<sup>19</sup>

I admit that this is a powerful argument. What reasonable person, theist or not, would not be affected by this moving example of gratuitous evil? How can the theist respond?

One direct response to Rowe comes from Stephen Wykstra. Wykstra notes that Rowe moves his argument from:

We *see* no good for which God could allow the fawn's suffering.

To

There *appears* to be no good for which God allows the fawn's suffering.

To

There *is* no good for which God allows the fawn's suffering.<sup>20</sup>

The point of Wykstra's rebuttal is that Rowe has no epistemic reason for making the shift from seeing to appearance to fact. We need more information to reach Rowe's definitive conclusion than simply appearances based only on what we can see. Wykstra illustrates his position by asking us to "imagine a doctor, squinting at a used hypodermic needle and seeing no germs, inferring first the needle does not appear to have any germs on it (i.e., that it appears germless), and from this, that it does not have any germs on it (that it is germless)."<sup>21</sup>

How does this relate to God? It relates because Rowe thinks it is reasonable that one could "see" whether "God-justifying goods" could exist for the fawn's suffering (or any gratuitous evil, for that matter). But is this true? Given the limitations of human knowledge in comparison to God's knowledge, how can we make the claim that a certain evil is gratuitous in nature? One would have to have the quality of omniscience to claim that he or she *knows* that a certain evil is truly gratuitous. All we can say otherwise is that it *appears* to be so. Geisler puts it this way: "The fact that finite beings don't see the purpose for some evil does not mean there is none. This inability to see the purpose for evil does not disprove God's benevolence; it merely reveals our ignorance."<sup>22</sup> So it is a weak logical argument, while still being powerful on an emotional level.

Furthermore, Nash points out that the argument against the existence of God based on the appearance of gratuitous evils comes close to a logical fallacy. He states

that “the one sure way of showing that the world does contain gratuitous evils is to prove that God does not exist. But it would then seem to follow that one cannot appeal to gratuitous evils while arguing against the existence of God – unless, that is, one is unconcerned about begging the question.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond that, the main premise of Rowe’s argument - 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 – cannot be *proven* to be true. Rowe even admits to this in his article. The best he can do is to say that there is “rational support” for believing his premise.<sup>24</sup> This only goes to the theist’s point that human beings are too ignorant of God’s ways to begin to question him on whether certain evils are gratuitous or actually have a good purpose. Even if God told us his purpose, would we be able to comprehend it? Wykstra writes that the “disparity between God’s vision and ours, I suggest, is comparable to the gap between the vision of a parent and her one month old infant. This gives reason to think that our discerning most of God’s purposes are about as likely as the infant’s discerning most of the parent’s purposes.”<sup>25</sup>

After all of the points and counter-points, is our original premise still intact? We began with two premises which Christians believe are consistent: God exists and evil exists. Since critics do not accept this on face value, we formed a new argument which had a premise stating that “God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so.” Although atheists and Christian critics attempt to disprove this premise on the basis of the existence of moral evils (which God could have prevented by making a world in which people only chose good), natural evils (which a good God would have prevented before they harmed innocent people), and gratuitous evils (which appear to bring about

no good at all, a situation God would not allow), we have seen how their arguments are not forceful. Perhaps they carry some emotional weight and even have rational support on the surface, when scrutinized closely they do not directly rebut the truth of our premise.

If our premise that “God does have a good reason for creating a world which contains evil” is true, then we can be confident that God does exist and he is an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God. This is exactly how the Bible describes him – a God who is Greater than all possible beings. This characterization of God is fully revealed in the Bible and through the lives and careful studies of millions of Christians throughout the ages. Christians should not be ashamed to proclaim the existence of such a God, especially since we have so many sound reasons to believe in Him.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> as cited in the article "The Free Will Defense." Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998), 22.

<sup>2</sup> All Biblical references will be taken from International Bible Society, ed., *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972, 1978, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> "The Free Will Defense." Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 178.

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Mackie, "*Evil and Omnipotence*," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1990), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Nash, *Faith and Reason* , 189.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>8</sup> "The Free Will Defense." Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> J.L. Mackie, "*Evil and Omnipotence*," in *The Problem of Evil*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "The Free Will Defense." Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 41.

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<sup>13</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 222-223.

<sup>14</sup> Nash, *Faith and Reason* , 202.

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, 223.

<sup>16</sup> Nash, *Faith and Reason* , 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>18</sup> William L. Rowe, "*The Problem of Evil and Some Variations of Atheism*", from *Philosophy of Religion, Selected Readings*, ed. William L. Rowe & William J. Wainwright (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998), 243.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen John Wykstra, "*Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil*," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Geisler, 222.

<sup>23</sup> Nash, *Faith and Reason* , 212.

<sup>24</sup> Rowe, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Wykstra, 129.