

Evil, Suffering & God

Objection

If God is good and powerful then why doesn't he, compelled by his goodness, put an end to suffering and evil with his power?

Forming a response

1. A note about trying to answer *why* questions like, "Why did God allow such a horrible thing to happen?" Or "Why wouldn't God put an end to such extreme suffering?" It is wise not to give concrete answers when you don't have them.
2. Pay attention to the kind of objection your friend is raising: emotional or intellectual.

Can we expect to find a satisfying answer?

Coming up with a response that will completely satisfy a non-Christian and answer all of their questions might be too ambitious a task.

A more modest target: Try to defeat the objection. Try to show that evil and suffering are not good reasons to think that God does not exist.

The dilemma: What do you mean by "evil"?

Is evil subjective or objective?

- Subjective: depends on what people think. What's evil to you might not be evil to me.
- Objective: independent of what anyone thinks about it.

Subjective evil: Is evil merely something you personally find unpleasant or distasteful?

- Why should God eliminate everything that you dislike?
- Why should God cater to your culture's sensibilities?
- If evil is subjective, then the objection vanishes, because there is nothing really wrong with evil, no matter how much I might dislike it.

Objective evil: Is evil an objective reality, that doesn't depend on what anyone thinks about it?

- Objective evil requires an objective standard of right and wrong. Not a standard that everyone agrees on (that would be subjective because it depends on what we think), but a standard that is true regardless of what we think. Where does that standard come from? And why do I have an obligation to follow it? Says who?
- Objective moral values and duties have to be grounded in something.
- Most atheists will try to ground morality in biological evolution and social conditioning. But atheists think that humans evolved from animals. We don't think of animals as moral agents (animals kill, but they don't murder). What makes humans objectively valuable in a way that animals aren't?

- There isn't a sensible way to account for the existence of an objective moral law apart from a God who makes the laws.
- If evil is objective, this is powerful evidence that God does exist. For more information, I suggest reading *On Guard* by William Lane Craig, specifically the chapter called "Can We Be Good Without God?"

This results in a dilemma for the person who thinks that evil is a reason to think God doesn't exist:

What do you mean by evil? Either...

1. Evil means your subjective dislike, and there's no reason to expect God to cater to your personal likes and dislikes; or
2. Evil means something objective, and God must exist to provide that objective standard.

No matter which option you choose, you can't argue that God doesn't exist simply because there is evil in the world.

How they might escape the dilemma

Maybe Christian beliefs aren't internally consistent: "You Christians believe in God, and you believe objective evil exists in the world. You have a contradiction in your worldview"

- Notice that the person who makes this objection hasn't revealed his own beliefs about evil. The dilemma won't apply to him in this case because we're talking about our beliefs, not his.

Maybe the objection isn't about evil, but just suffering.

- Everyone knows suffering is an objective truth about reality, so the dilemma doesn't apply here either.

Practical question: What should God do about evil?

Should God stop anything evil from happening? Should God wipe out everything evil in the world right now? Anything they say here is going to be problematic.

- If God prevents evil things from happening, then we would have no freedom. Most people will agree that the freedom to make moral choices is good. So if freedom to make moral choices is a good thing, then maybe getting rid of evil means losing a greater good!
- If God wipes out all evil permanently, then what will become of us? We are all guilty in some way. "If God wiped out all evil in the world at midnight tonight, where would you be at 12:01?" Maybe God has a better plan to deal with evil where we don't all have to get wiped out.

Tackling the objection head on

There are two versions of this objection:

- The evil in the world makes God impossible
- The evil in the world makes God unlikely

Claim: It is impossible that God and evil both exist.

In order for this statement to be true, there has to be some logical contradiction between these statements:

1. An all-loving, all-powerful God exists; and
2. Evil exists.

There is no explicit contradiction between them (they are not the opposite of each other).

Therefore, if these statements are logically incompatible, the contradiction must be implicit. There must be some other unspoken premises that, combined with statements 1 and 2, reveal the contradiction.

Try asking, “where is the contradiction?” In order for their argument to work, they will have to say something like this:

3. “An all-powerful God can create a world of free persons who never do evil.”
4. “An all-loving God prefers a world without evil.”

Because they are saying it is impossible that God and evil both exist, both of these hidden premises must be necessarily true. If it is even possible that either of these two premises is false, then their argument fails.

3. “An all-powerful God can create a world of free persons who never do evil.”
 - Is it logically possible to make somebody freely do something? If not, then maybe God can’t create such a world.
 - All we have to show is that it’s possible that God can’t create such a world. If we agree that forcing someone to freely act is impossible, then it’s clear that premise 3 could possibly be false.
4. “An all-loving God prefers a world without evil.”
 - Is it possible that for every evil that God allows, he has a morally sufficient reason for allowing that evil, even if we don’t know what that reason is? If this is possible, the objection is defeated.
 - Which of these worlds would God prefer to create?
 - A. World A includes evil and suffering, but millions of people freely choose to love God when they see how much God loved them through the cross, and they will spend all of eternity with him.
 - B. World B has no evil and suffering, but it only contains 5 people, all of whom choose to love God. Their understanding of who God is might be limited because they’ve never seen His love expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Is it possible that God prefers to create World A rather than B? If so, the objection is defeated.

Claim: It is unlikely that God exists when you consider the amount of evil in the world.

It is a more modest claim to say that God's existence is unlikely than it is to say his existence is impossible. This means the burden of proof the atheist bears is also lighter. But it still might be too much for them to bear.

The objection is based on the assumption that if we can't think of a morally sufficient reason for every evil in the world, then God probably doesn't have such reasons.

Why would you expect to know all of God's reasons for permitting evil in the world?

- It may be that God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting some evils are beyond our understanding. We are limited in knowledge and understanding. We can't even predict the weather accurately, how much more are we unable to predict what good results might follow in the future from something evil that God allows right now.
- Our ability to think is damaged by sin. Self-centredness and pride can blind us to the moral goods that result from suffering.
- It is not realistic to expect that if God does have reasons for permitting evil that we should be able to predict, understand, or analyze his reasons. We can't say with any kind of confidence that it is unlikely God could have good reasons for permitting evil.

Should we expect to see God's reasons for permitting evil right now?

- God has a long-term plan. Our troubles in this world are insignificant in comparison with eternity.
- Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."
- 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

We don't know God's reasons for permitting evil, but here are some possibilities:

- God may permit evil if it leads to a greater good
 - Suffering leads to obedience to God (Hebrews 5:8), wisdom, character.
 - We couldn't have free will if there was no possibility of evil.
 - Other examples: Courage, heroism, self-sacrifice, perseverance, loving your enemies
 - Origen: "Virtue, if unopposed, would not shine out nor become more glorious by probation. Virtue is not virtue if it be untested and unexamined." Apart from evil, "there would be no crown of victory in store for him who rightly struggled."

- Alvin Plantinga: “A good God will eliminate evil as far as he can without either losing a greater good or bringing about a greater evil.”
- God is able to bring good out of evil
 - Augustine: “For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil.”
 - Genesis 50:20 “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”
- God’s purposes may be more important than our happiness or comfort in this life.
 - William Lane Craig: “The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God. One reason that the problem of suffering seems so puzzling is that people naturally tend to assume that if God exists, then His purpose for human life is happiness in this life. God’s role is to provide a comfortable environment for His human pets. But on the Christian view, this is false. We are not God’s pets, and the goal of human life is not happiness per se, but the knowledge of God – which in the end will bring true and everlasting human fulfillment. Much of the suffering in life may be utterly pointless with respect to the goal of producing human happiness; but it may not be pointless with respect to producing a deeper knowledge of God.”
 - There are many examples in ancient history and in modern times of nations where war, natural disasters, and persecution of Christians led to significant growth in the Church. Affluent, prosperous people rarely seek to know God.
 - C.S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”
 - If knowledge of God is the most important thing in the world, then this may be enough to outweigh the cost of living in a world filled with evil.

Practical question: Where does atheism get you?

Why would eliminating God solve the problem?

- If you deny that God exists, there is no objective foundation for right and wrong, so nothing is really evil.
- The 20th century atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell said: “No one can sit at the bedside of a dying child and still believe in God.”
- The Christian philosopher William Lane Craig said in response: “What is the atheist Bertrand Russell going to say when kneeling at the bed of a dying child? ‘Too bad’? ‘Tough luck’? ‘That’s the way it goes’?” Atheists don’t have a solution to the problem of evil.
- Christians do have a response to evil: Jesus. He suffered at the hands of evil men, He identifies with us in our sufferings, and He offers hope and a future for those who are suffering in this world. God has a plan to redeem and restore this broken world.

The Emotional Problem of Evil

When it comes to the emotional problem of evil, I am convinced that the problem exists because people have a wrong view of God in their minds.

Here's how I try and help people move through the emotional problem that evil through a right understanding of God.

1. **A God who's capable of doing something about suffering, but never does is cruel.** This is something we can agree on!
2. **That's not the God we see in the Bible.** The Bible gives us the picture of a God who is working out a plan to defeat suffering once and for all.
3. **The God of the Bible feels the same thing we do about evil and suffering:** He is grieved to the heart because of it:

Genesis 6:6 – “His heart was deeply troubled,” seeing the suffering of His people when they rejected his ways. Suffering unfolds when God is rejected, and it troubles His heart.

Luke 7:13 – Jesus stumbles upon a scene of great suffering, and he is struck to the heart

4. ***The compassionate God sends his Son to suffer to put an end to suffering.*** The Christian story is one where God actually does something about suffering. He kills it. He restores his good creation by rooting out the cause of suffering—the rejection of God and his ways.
5. ***If God is dealing with suffering then why doesn't he stop it now?*** The most honest answer is “I don't know.” Personally, I cringe anytime I hear people say they know why God does something that is unclear in the Bible. The truth is we don't know why God has the timeline he does.

But this we do know:

- *God is always present with people who suffer*
- *God always has a way forward*
- *Evil & suffering do not have the final word*