

Précis:
As Sparks Fly Upward (pp. 1-24)
A Study On The Problem Of Evil
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INTRODUCTION: The Weight Of Evil (p. 1)

Let me begin with a quote from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*:

“Rebellion? I am sorry you call it that,” said Ivan earnestly. “One can hardly live in rebellion, and I want to live. Tell me yourself, I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.”

“No, I wouldn't consent,” said Alyosha softly.¹

Dostoevsky's Ivan expresses the question of the problem of evil. That is the subject of my presentation today. I will be addressing the subject as a Christian theist who regards the Bible as God's word.

In my paper I give examples of horrific moral and natural evils. These evils raise a host of questions, such as whether God exists? Did God create evil? Why am I suffering? What is evil? The phrase “the problem of evil” can be used in a general sense, or specifically to refer to what is called the logical problem of evil. I will address the logical problem first. Next week I will look at other problems and questions related to evil.

EVIL: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T (p. 4)

First, let's carefully define what evil is, lest we commit Justice Potter Stewart's error by simply saying “I know it when I see it.” Such an ambiguous definition leads to much confusion.

To begin, let's consider some views that differ from the Christian view of evil.

An Atheist View Of Evil (p. 4)

The atheist view is rooted in metaphysical naturalism, in which the material universe is a closed system. Nothing exists other than the material world. In this contained system everything that happens is mechanically and physically determined.

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1952), 126, 127

Nothing non-material—neither God, nor good, nor evil—has any bearing within the system. Hence, to the metaphysical naturalist, both good and evil are relative rather than transcendent.

This view is difficult, if not impossible, to live by consistently. Most atheists adhere to some internal moral code that functions as the equivalent of a transcendent standard.

A Pantheist View Of Evil (p. 6)

Central to Pantheism's view of evil is its understanding of reality. The entire world and all our experiences are merely an illusion. Hence, evil, pain, and suffering are likewise simply an illusion. When one has achieved enlightenment, he or she is free from such illusions.

As with the atheist, the pantheist's view of evil is very hard to live by consistently. In his book *The Lotus and the Cross* Ravi Zacharias shows how difficult it is for someone suffering greatly to find any real comfort in the idea that their suffering is not actually real.²

A Religious Dualist View Of Evil (p. 6)

The dualist view of evil, in contrast to Christian monotheism, is that there are two co-equal, co-eternal gods, one good, the other evil. A modern populist version of this worldview is expressed in the Star Wars movies, in which Luke Skywalker learns to cope with the Force, using the good or light side of the force to defeat the dark side.

Dualism fails to provide a transcendent basis for determining good and evil, and this failure renders it unable to satisfactorily address the subject of evil.

It is important to point out that Satan, who plays a prominent role in Christian theology, does not fit into the dualistic view of God. Satan is a created, finite being under God's authority, as is the rest of the creation.³

A Christian View Of Evil (p. 7)

The Christian understands that evil is real, yet is not physical, material, or a being. Thus, it is not a person. Evil is not Satan. Satan possesses only evil moral qualities, but he is not the essence of evil. Evil is not a force (like the Dark Side in Star Wars). Further, evil is not an entity, a thing, or a substance.

The Christian maintains the reality of evil while denying it is material or a person by pointing out that the essence of evil is either the absence of good, or else it is the existence of good things in an improper relationship.⁴ (See paper for illustrations.)

All evil can be identified with one of these two states. As such, it is what is called a *state of affairs*⁵ in which either good is absent, or in which otherwise good things exist in an improper relationship. So, evil is not a thing or a being, but a state of affairs.

² Ravi Zacharias, *The Lotus And The Cross*, audio CD, (Hovel Audio, 2005): Originally pub; *The Lotus and the Cross; Jesus Talks with Buddha*, (Portland, OR, Multnomah Pub., 2001)

³ Job 1:6-12; Ezekiel 28:19

⁴ Norman L. Geisler, Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*, (Grand Rapids, MI., Baker Books, 1990), 61

DID GOD CREATE EVIL? (p. 9)

Philosophers do not speak of states of affairs being made or created. Rather, they speak of them being *actualized*. Creation refers to things, substances, persons, etc. But states of affairs are none of these. States of affairs are the way things are.⁶ The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga says:

...we must note that God does not, strictly speaking, *create* any possible worlds or states of affairs at all. What He creates are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. But He has not created states of affairs.⁷

God initially created all things that came into being, but it does not follow that God actualizes all states of affairs.⁸ Plantinga gives examples of states of affairs which exist which God does not actualize:

There are, for example, the state of affairs consisting of God's existence and the state of affairs consisting in His nonexistence. ...The theist believes that the first state of affairs is actual...; the atheist believes that the second state of affairs is actual... God has not created either one of them since there never was a time at which either [state of affairs] did not exist.⁹

Given man's free will, we can see that a host of states of affairs that exist or have existed have been actualized by man, not by God. That my house is setting on the plot of ground upon which it sets is a state of affairs actualized by the contractor and builders who erected it there. They are what we call the *efficient cause* of the state of affairs in which my house sets where it sets.

Since evil is not a thing, but rather a state of affairs, it was not created, but rather it was actualized. As Scripture indicates, it was not actualized by God, but was first actualized by Satan, and later also by Adam and Eve, and then by you and me.

THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL (p. 12)

The logical problem of evil is divided into two distinct problems, the first is the deductive problem, the second is the inductive problem.¹⁰ The deductive problem of evil asserts the logical *impossibility* of God. The inductive problem asserts the *improbability* of God. First, let's consider the deductive problem.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, reprint, (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1977) (Orig. pub. Harper and Row, 1974) 34. Plantinga defines a state of affairs as the way things are.

⁶ Plantinga, 34

⁷ Plantinga, 38

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Plantinga, pp. 38, 39

¹⁰ "In a good deductive argument the premises guarantee the truth of their conclusions. In a good inductive argument the premises render the conclusion more probable than its competitors." J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003), 28

The Deductive Problem (p. 12)

The eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume expressed the deductive problem this way:

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?¹¹

Christians believe that God is omnipotent, and that He is perfectly good (omnibenevolent), and that evil is real. The deductive problem of evil asserts that only two of those three beliefs can be logically true, and so it is impossible for God to exist.

Theodicy Or Defense? (p. 13)

Historically, Christians have answered with what is called a *theodicy*, a justification of God. A theodicy seeks to answer the problem of evil by showing a good and omnipotent God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil. In spite of voluminous theodicies written over centuries, many philosophers still objected that the deductive problem of evil had not been satisfactorily answered.

In *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974) the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga provided what he called the Free Will Defense as opposed to a theodicy. Instead of attempting to show what God's reasons for permitting evil were, he showed through logical reasoning merely that it was *logically possible* that God had good reasons for permitting evil.

Plantinga's efforts were eminently successful, and presently both Christian and atheist philosophers generally agree that the logical problem of evil has been permanently put to rest.¹²

The Omnipotence of God (p. 15)

Central to Plantinga's Defense is the historically orthodox position on the omnipotence of God. Christian theologians generally do not believe that omnipotence entails the ability to do the logically impossible. God cannot make a square circle, or a married bachelor. He cannot lie, or cease to exist.

Morally Good Creatures and Freedom (p. 16)

At the core of the Christian belief about creation is that God created an immeasurably and perfectly good world. This creation included creatures who were not merely good in the sense of their physical and mental attributes, but morally good as well.

However, as theologian John Feinberg points out, one cannot be a truly moral creature, one responsible for the good which he or she actualizes, without freedom.

...the theist appeals to a commonly held moral principle: No one can be held morally accountable for failing to do what they couldn't do or for

¹¹ Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, pt. X. Cited in Plantinga, p. 10

¹² Ronald H. Nash, "The Problem of Evil," in Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, eds., *To Everyone An Answer*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2004), 215

doing what they couldn't fail to do. That is, moral praise or blame can be correctly assessed only to someone who acts freely.¹³

So for morally significant creatures, we discover the absolute necessity of free will. Free will is also necessary in God's intention for humankind to enjoy a love relationship with him. Love is not possible where free choice does not exist.

The Nature of Freedom (p. 17)

What does such freedom entail? Put succinctly, such freedom according to Norman Geisler is

“the ability to be the efficient cause of one's own moral actions. Acts of which one is not the efficient cause, but rather which are forced, are not free moral acts.”¹⁴

Geisler and Ronald Brooks in *When Skeptics Ask* state:

Freedom is not in *unlimited options*, but in *unfettered choice* between whatever options there are. ...Free will means the ability to make an **unforced decision** between two or more alternatives.¹⁵ (All emphases theirs.)

In other words, for a person's action to be morally significant, it is imperative that such a person be the sufficient cause of her choice between two alternatives (A or not A). This is seen in the example of Adam. Adam had been given a real moral choice when God gave the command not to eat of the fruit of that particular tree. God's command imbued Adam's choice to eat or not to eat with moral significance. Adam made a free, unfettered moral choice to disobey God's command not to eat of the fruit.

So, the answer to the question, 'what made Adam sin?' is—Adam caused Adam to sin. Adam was the efficient cause of his own sin. Such is the nature of true moral freedom and moral accountability.

God's Choice (p. 18)

Given that God cannot do the logically impossible, at creation God had three alternatives. He could either create beings who were morally free and who could love Him, but possess the capability to do evil. Second, He could create beings who could never do evil, but were not free. Third, He could have not created man at all.

It was logically impossible to create morally free persons and make them always choose to do good. If they were to be morally free, then they must have the freedom to do evil. Some might protest that God should have opted for some other alternative than to create morally free beings who could choose to do evil, even if creating such beings is a good thing in itself. The Free Will Defense shows that God could have morally sufficient reasons to create free creatures which outweigh the potential or actual evil that resulted.

¹³ John S. Feinberg, “Why I Still Believe In Christ, In Spite of Evil and Suffering,” in Norman L. Geisler, Paul K Hoffman, *Why I A Christian*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 2001), 240

¹⁴ Norman L. Geisler, “The Origin of Sin,” vol. 3, *Systematic Theology*, (Bloomington, MN, Bethany House Pub., 2004) 86

¹⁵ Geisler, Brooks, 63

Experientially, every time a man and woman choose to have a child, they are making a similar decision to “create” a morally free creature with the potential to do evil. They do so because they believe the potential for good far outweighs the evil.

The Inductive (Probabilistic) Problem (p. 20)

The inductive problem of evil is less ambitious than the deductive. Rather than saying that it is *impossible* that God exists, it merely states that it is *improbable* that He exists.

A key argument of the inductive problem is that a good God would have created the best of all possible worlds, and this world is not that. But Plantinga’s Free Will Defense shows that there is no such thing as a best of all possible worlds:

But then it follows that for any possible world W there is a better world W’, in which case there just isn’t any such thing as the best of all possible worlds.¹⁶

Later on he concludes:

...there is no good atheological argument from evil. The existence of God is neither precluded or rendered improbable by the existence of evil.
...The Free Will Defense...shows that the existence of God is compatible, both logically and probabilistically, with the existence of evil; thus it solves the main philosophical problem of evil.¹⁷

Other Approaches To The Probabilistic Problem

—Our Limited Perspective (p. 22)

William Lane Craig offers two more answers to the inductive problem. The first is that as finite humans, we simply are not equipped with sufficient knowledge to know whether the amounts and kinds of evil in the world render a good God improbable.¹⁸

Ronald Nash puts it this way:

...what properties must a being possess in order to know that some evils really are gratuitous? It certainly appears as though one such property must be omniscience. It would seem then that the only kind of being who could know whether some gratuitous evils exist would be God. But if the only being who could know whether such evils exist is God, there surely are problems in arguing that the existence of gratuitous evils are a defeater for the existence of God.¹⁹

—Probable with respect to what? (p. 23)

Finally, when considering whether or not something is probable, one must ask “probable with respect to what?” The probability assertion implies adequate consideration of all the relevant background information. As J. P. Moreland and Craig point out:

¹⁶ Plantinga, 61

¹⁷ Plantinga, 63

¹⁸ William Lane Craig, *On Guard*, (Colo. Sprgs., CO, David C. Cook), 158

¹⁹ Nash, 220

But probabilities are relative to one's background information. Thus, with a probability argument, we have to ask: probable with respect to what?²⁰

If, in arguing against the probability of God's existence, one only considers the background information of evil, the outcome is skewed. There is much more information to factor in, including, but not limited to, the cosmological, ontological, and teleological evidences for God's existence.

We will end here for now. Next week we will go on to consider other alternative answers to the logical problem, as well as the problem of natural evil, the emotional problem of evil, and God's end game for evil.

²⁰ J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003), 542