

Précis:
As Sparks Fly Upward (pp. 25-56)
A Study On The Problem Of Evil
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(Page numbers reflect the page on which the discussion of that subject commences.)

INTRODUCTION (week 2)

Last week we discussed approximately the first half of my paper on the problem of evil, We looked at the approaches of various worldviews to the subject, the Christian understanding of the nature of evil, whether God created evil, and different aspects of the logical problem of evil. In considering the logical problem we examined the Free Will Defense, the deductive problem, and the inductive problem.

This week I want to pick up with a couple of other approaches to the logical problem, and then consider what are the purposes God might have for evil. Next I want to examine the issue of natural evil and the unique issues it raises. Then I will leave the logical problem and move on to the emotional problem of evil and the special challenges it offers. Finally, I will talk about God's end game for evil. As we have time and need, we can also discuss the subjects raised in the excursions, the freedom of God and the topic of hell.

Alternative Christian Answers (p. 26)

Up to this point, I have been tackling the logical problem of evil from the approach of Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense (FWD). However, as I cited on page 14 of my paper, the theologian John Feinberg points out that the FWD does not fit well with Calvinism due to its reliance on libertarian free will, although some Calvinists do employ it.¹

Let's consider briefly a couple of Calvinist responses to the logical problem. I will look at two solutions provided from different ends of the Calvinist theological spectrum. (Hard Calvinism holding to a very strong view of divine determinism, and soft Calvinism placing somewhat more emphasis on compatibilistic free will.²)

A Calvinist Theodicy (p. 26)

Rather than employing a defense (to use Plantinga's term) to the logical problem, hard Calvinists rely on a more traditional theodicy. A hard Calvinist does not hold that

¹ 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), 242

² Ronnie W. Rogers, *Reflections of a Disenchanted Calvinist*, (Bloomington, IN, Crossbooks, A Division of LifeWay, 2012) 96.

men have moral free will, so the argument from freedom provides such a Calvinist with no help. Instead, he seeks to offer some morally sufficient purposes that God has for willing or permitting evil in His creation. Typically, these reasons or purposes have to do with the demonstration of God's "perfections." A good example is provided by John Piper in a video entitled "Why There Is Evil In The World."

The terrorized, troubled world exists to make a place for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to suffer and die for our sins. The reason there is terror in the world is so that Christ could be terrorized. The reason there is trouble in the world is so that Christ could be troubled. The reason there is pain in the universe is so that Christ could feel pain. This is the world that God prepared for the suffering and death of His Son. This is the world where the best display of divine love could happen. ... This world of suffering and death exists so that God could love like He only could love in this world. And you can back up and say, "I wouldn't have done it that way." Well, you're not God, and I am thankful. I think it's really arrogant to say that you, before the creation of the universe, would have greater wisdom than the Almighty, to design a universe in which the fullness of the panorama of His perfections would shine more brightly than in this one.³

Piper's argument is that it was necessary for God to determine that evil exist in His world in order to display the "panorama of His perfections." While this theodicy may prove satisfactory to the Calvinist, it does little to address the logical problem of evil. It does not demonstrate a logical error in the problem, but rather asserts that a good and righteous God has justifiable reasons to will, to desire, or to cause evil to exist, and that in doing so He is not morally culpable. His freedom from moral culpability is not explained logically, only asserted.⁴

So while the hard Calvinist may be satisfied that there is no contradiction between a wholly good God and the existence of evil, he accepts this by faith and provides no real logical refutation of apparent contradiction.

The Humans Defense (p. 27)

Feinberg, who describes himself as a "moderate Calvinist,"⁵ seeks to offer another approach more along the lines of the FWD. He serves as an example of what I have termed a "soft Calvinist," one who views compatibilistic free will in human actions. As such, Feinberg provides what he calls the Humans Defense (HD). Central to the HD is the essential nature of the human creature God intended to make when He created him. The HD, according to Feinberg, asserts that such a creature is good and is part of God's perfectly good creation.⁶ The HD's argument is that God can not prevent the evil of the world without altering the essential aspects of what it means to be human which God intended. On this basis Feinberg offers a substantial list of reasons why it was logically necessary for God to permit evil to exist. He goes on to argue that moral evil was not

³ John Piper, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGhCWh4Gbs0> (Last accessed on 9/17/12).

⁴ Rogers, 17

⁵ Feinberg, 240

⁶ Feinberg, 244

created by God and that God did not intend evil.⁷ He concludes by stating that he has solved the logical problem of evil for the Calvinist.⁸

Feinberg's HD provides some substantial arguments for why God must permit evil to exist, and as such offers a worthy theodicy. However, his claim that it is a defense that answers the logical problem seems overstated. As a compatibilist who views free will as a matter of desire rather than of choice, he appears to have failed to account for the *origin* of Adam's desire in a way that fully exonerates God.⁹ While both the Calvinist theodicy and the Humans defense have useful aspects, it appears that only the FWD fully answers the logical problem of evil.

A Purpose For Evil? (p. 30)

I have argued so far that it is possible that God has sufficient reasons for permitting evil, though such reasons may be beyond our knowledge. Nevertheless, we do have good cause to believe that God does, in fact, have such sufficient reasons. What could possibly be the reasons a good and loving God would allow his creatures to experience evil, pain, and suffering?

In my paper I discuss such reasons at length. Here I will simply list some of them. First, much evil we encounter is the result of our own sinful and foolish choices. Such actions of necessity have negative consequences, and though at times God graciously prevents such consequences, He is under no moral obligation to do so, and often does not.

Many times some evil we encounter, such as the example of the five missionaries killed in Ecuador, results in some unanticipated great advance of God's saving purposes. In addition, some goods, such as courage, grace, and mercy only exist in the face of great evil, and without which would not be possible. Evil is also one of the chief mechanisms for developing in us a knowledge of and intimacy with God. Evil also develops character in us when we respond to it properly (Romans 5:3-5).

So, while we may not know why God is permitting a specific evil at any particular time, we do know that God has many morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil.

THE PROBLEM WITH NATURAL EVIL (p. 35)

In addition to moral evils, we must also confront the questions raised by the impact of natural evils, such as disease, earthquakes, tornados, famines, etc. How did such evils arise?

Historically the church has held that all natural evil was the consequence of the Fall. However, the development of a scientific orthodoxy that posits an age of the earth at billions of years raises questions for the historic position of the church.

Some Christians now hold to the old earth view, while some others remain committed to a young earth view. Those who hold to the old earth are typically theistic evolutionists and old earth creationists. Young earthers are typically creationists.

The problem of an old earth view is that it holds that natural evils existed in the world for eons prior to the Fall of man. Christian philosopher William Dembski discusses these issues at length in *The End of Christianity*. Dembski, himself an old earth

⁷ Feinberg, 245

⁸ Feinberg, 249

⁹ Rogers, 17

creationist, dismisses the views of some old earth Christians who believe that God uses waste, randomness, and inefficiencies to “create” the world into which He placed Adam and Eve, or those who believe that God created a world of suffering and evil to accomplish His master plan. Dembski rejects both approaches as having abandoned Christian orthodoxy.

Instead, Dembski proposes what he calls “retroactive evil.” In his view all natural evil is the consequence of the sin of Adam. However, he holds that God, operating in his *intentional-semantic logic* rather than a human *causal-temporal logic*, acted in such a way that evil existed in the earth as a consequence of the Fall, but prior to the act—in Dembski’s word, retroactively.

As I see it, Dembski’s proposal has three problems. 1) Its argument is so complex as to appear to run counter to the perspicuity of Scripture. 2) There is no apparent reason, other than the arguments from modern scientists, to interpret the first three chapters of Genesis from an intentional-semantic logic as opposed to the normative causal-temporal logic. 3) There is no answer as to how Adam and Eve could have made any sense out of all the evil they observed around them prior to their sin.

Blame the Angels? (p. 37)

Some notable Christians such as Alvin Plantinga and C. S. Lewis have argued that natural evils not directly attributable to man are caused by Satan and demonic activity. This proposal causes some difficulty for those committed to an old earth view, as Dembski points out.¹⁰ While it provides less difficulty to the young earth creationist, this account remains outside the traditionally orthodox view of the church.

Man’s Sin and Natural Evil (p. 38)

According to Dembski, the claim that human sin has cosmic and transhistorical consequences has been a central theme of Christian orthodoxy.¹¹ A variety of Scriptures testify that natural evils are the direct result of the sin of mankind, both initially at the Fall, and subsequently as God’s creatures ruined the earth as a consequence of their rebellion against God. (See Genesis 3:17-20; Romans 8:20-23; Isaiah 24:4-6)

Scripture is clear that the earth was despoiled by man’s sin, and like man himself, stands in need of Christ’s redemptive work. Any view of natural evil which negates this reality runs counter both to God’s Word and the testimony of the church for two millennia.

THE EMOTIONAL PROBLEM OF EVIL (p. 41)

The emotional problem of evil confronts us with difficulties far different from the logical problem of evil. Someone may know all the correct intellectual answers to the problem of evil, but when confronted with some great suffering in their own experience, may find their heart still asking if God is there, or if He is good and truly loves them, or if He perhaps bears some grudge against them. This is what we call the emotional problem

¹⁰ William A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity, Finding A Good God In An Evil World*, (Nashville, TN, B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 37, 38

¹¹ Dembski, 36

of evil or suffering. Many a person, when confronted with the debilitating emotional impact of evil in their life, has jettisoned his or her belief in God altogether.

Which Apologetic?

The intellectual problem of evil lies primarily in the will and in the mind. The emotional problem of evil lies primarily in the heart and in the experience. How is the Christian to answer the emotional problem of evil? While the primary apologetic for the intellectual problem of evil is vigorous logical and rational reasoning, I would suggest that the primary apologetic for the emotional problem of evil lies elsewhere.

In my paper I draw lessons chiefly from the example of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11), with some additional insights from Job's friends. What is striking is that prior to His raising Lazarus from the dead, it was the presence of Jesus, and the tears of Jesus that touched the hearts of the women and the other mourners. As Christ's representative on earth, it is our privilege to stand in His place in ministering to those suffering the devastating impact of the emotional problem of evil. Simply by being with someone suffering, listening to them, weeping with them, we may do more to show to them the reality of God and the love of God than any words we might speak.

A Time For Words (p. 42)

But I would be remiss to suggest there is never a time or place for words when someone is suffering the emotional problem of evil. So, what kind of answers can we give to someone in such pain?

First, recall the lesson of Job's friends, who presumed to know why Job was suffering and what he should do about it. They not only caused Job more grief, but they sinned against God. We must be very careful before we venture to suggest to someone why they are suffering.

There are, however, many things we can share, at the right time and in the right way, with those who are suffering. We can assure them that God has entered into their suffering, that He is "very present" to help. (Psalm 46:1) We can comfort them that though they, or we, may not know the reasons God is permitting their suffering, He surely has very good reasons, and that whatever His purposes, they are immeasurably good. We can remind them that though God permits suffering in our lives, he does so only because He loves us, and not because He gets some pleasure from seeing our pain.

A FINAL WORD: THE WEIGHT OF GLORY (p. 46)

In the concluding chapter of my paper I look at the lessons we learn about the end of suffering from Joseph, Paul, and Jesus. What we see demonstrated in the case of each of these is the principle that for his children God always redeems out of great evil an incomparably greater "weight of glory."

Though Joseph suffered greatly for thirteen years, as a direct result of his suffering he had many, many more years of great good in his life, and even far greater good in the lives of many thousands of others.

Paul, too, details a stunning record of sufferings over many years, yet he says that the very evils he endured were producing an incomparable weight of glory for him. Again, as with Joseph, it is the evil itself that becomes the vehicle of the great glory he anticipated.

The greatest example of this principle at work is, of course, the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus knew that it was through this, the greatest of all evils, that the greatest of all goods would come. It is for this reason that he “set his face to Jerusalem,” and that He “endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before Him.” (Luke 9:51 KJV; Hebrews 12:2)

And so, for the child of God, the “problem of evil” actually leads to our greatest joys, for it is in the vast evil of this world that we discern the even greater glory and greatness of our God. For it is in His redemption of His marvelous purposes, not merely in spite of evil, but through evil, that the power, and goodness, and love of our great God will be seen.

In the end, our awesome God will triumph over evil, not by a nail biting score of 3 to 2, but by a score so infinitely great that all the evil of all time will seem to us a mere “momentary light affliction.”

Two incidental questions arise from subjects I address in my paper that I discuss in two separate excursions appended to the end of the paper. These are:

EXCURSUS A: On The Freedom Of God (p. 52)

In this excursus I explain how it is that moral freedom for man necessitated the ability to chose both good and evil, but that it was not necessary or possible for God’s moral freedom to entail the ability to do evil. This truth is rooted in the nature of God, the nature of freedom, the nature of evil, and the nature of love.

EXCURSUS B: The Problem Of Hell (p. 55)

The promise of God redeeming an eternal weight of glory out of evil for His children says nothing of those who have rejected God and thereby chosen evil. Once a person dies, his or her decision to reject God, and hence to reject all good, is forever confirmed, and that person spends all eternity away from the presence of God and thus away from all good. But God has provided a way of forgiveness and reconciliation so that no person need face such a terrible future. That way is in the atoning death of His Son for their sins. Those who believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life in the presence of God.