



The problem of evil

The so-called problem of evil is a subject arising from the single question; "Why is there evil?" That is, natural evil as well as moral evil. With regard to our study of metaphysics, I include it here because of its relation to the philosophy of religion and its concern with natural evil.

The problem can be expressed logically. It has been called the 'inconsistent triad'. The three *supposedly* 'inconsistent' truths being:- 1) The existence of evil, 2) God's omnipotence, 3) God's omnibenevolence. I shall express the problem in a simple formal argument:

Evil exists.

If God is good

Then He ought to prevent evil.

He does not prevent evil

Therefore He is not good.

(This is a valid argument - it is not fallacious, as it denies the consequent. But is it sound?)

This can be expressed in the same way swapping out God's goodness with His omnipotence, or even His existence. This conclusion would be a problem for theists, and those holding to consistent belief in the Bible. But to hold that God is good, and permits evil, is neither irrational or inconsistent for those who carefully read the Scriptures. Someone who is *not* actively desiring to jump to a conclusion about God's goodness, power, or very existence, may just as logically say - "God is good: Evil exists: Therefore

God must have a good reason for allowing it". The fact that philosophy can't, or doesn't want to find that reason, doesn't mean that they may challenge Him on logical grounds.

The reason why the initial argument is an unsound argument is because there is a problem with the premise that "He ought to prevent evil" - this isn't true according to the Bible. In relation to God's will, reformed theology talks of the perfect will of God's decree: That is - all things that happen. Nothing escapes this, therefore the answer to why God doesn't prevent evil is simple - He doesn't want to. The less simple question is - Why? I have dealt with God's omnipotence in the section on God's attributes, so I will confine our discussion to God's goodness. Before I explain the problem with the second premise, we'll briefly consider this goodness of God, and what some see as a contradiction, or inconsistency, to that goodness, in the Scriptures.

Some see the reference to the jealousy, or anger, of God, as evidence that the Biblical God is bad. But is this correct? Even with human beings we can find it completely acceptable that a husband could exhibit jealousy if his wife is unfaithful to him. This jealousy is a righteous reaction to disloyalty. The same with anger. A man may be angry that someone has murdered his mother. That anger is a righteous response to a sinful act. It is completely acceptable that a person may demand justice and require punishment. It would *not* be right for him to take the law into his own hands, and administer his own justice in vengeance; but if the law was his, by being given by him, then it would be incumbent upon him to administer the punishment in justice. This is exactly what God does when he says "vengeance is mine". In all this, God hasn't once failed to be righteous, just, or good. Thus those who level that simplistic accusation against Him are wrong.

A theodicy is a defence of the goodness and omnipotence of God in the light of the problem of evil. The most popular theodicy is called - The Free Will Defence. It is a poor defence because, even though it seems God did give a type of free will to Angels and Adam, why should maintaining free will be more important than keeping the world free from evil? If God knew what would happen, why create the possibility? It also doesn't explain why God would allow natural evils, those aren't the result of free will. Rather it is the fall of man, and the curse, that can more adequately explain both.

The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky presents us with a fictional man - Ivan, a man who claims to believe in God. But Ivan has a serious problem with the existence of evil. Therefore he wants nothing to do with God, thinking He is not worthy of his respect or worship. This stance is a very proud one, and can be adopted by people who foolishly seek to set themselves up in the judgement of God. A cursory thought about what one is really doing by adopting this attitude, would curb the reckless hubris; but I suspect those who hold it, fail to give it even a cursory thought. Presumably they accept for arguments sake, at the very least, that the God who they are judging has been around since the beginning of time, made the most complex of all things, has knowledge and wisdom far beyond themselves, and crucially, put the concept of right and wrong within their minds - otherwise the concept would be meaningless (we shall consider this in the chapter on Ethics). Ivan is therefore inconsistent by believing in a God who gave him his sense of right and wrong, and then using this sense to judge the One who gave him his measure of discernment as to what justice is in the first place! This is a sort of vicious circle.

Another way to explain evil, is to say it is a necessary opposite to good. If one exists the other must also. This doesn't necessarily follow, as God existed in the beginning without evil. But it does suggest a truth. In Genesis there exists in the beginning a possibility of existing without God's influence - 'darkness'. Then God creates light. This illustrates the possibility of evil. By creating a being, he creates the possibility of that being going against His own character. By creating a law He creates the necessary possibility of that law being broken.

Another question arises; why does evil have to be so severe in many circumstances? People who raise this, fail to see any great goodness equal to such evils. This is to underestimate the infinite level of goodness and holiness of God, so these evils *must* be severe if they are to display the opposite of God's absolute holiness and goodness, which even extreme evil could never do. It is argued that if God were truly good, and if a negative contrast were really needed in order for us to understand the goodness of God, then why wouldn't he give us just the very minimum dosage necessary to achieve that goal? The answer is because it wouldn't achieve that goal with someone as good and holy as God! The suggestion is given that there's always a good that corresponds to, and is proportionate to, any evil. The objection being, in practice, such goodness is really hard to find. What good, for example, could possibly correspond to the horrors of a genocide? However, it is not the goodness *in the world* that offsets the evil, but the goodness of God *Himself*.

The 'offset of evil' argument isn't the whole explanation though. For that, we must, as always, consult the revealed truth in God's Word. The key passage with regard to this is Romans chapter 9, specifically verses 14-26. As I have already said, the Bible doesn't ignore these issues, but anticipates the charge. In verse 14 it states the problem:

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid."

It is clear we cannot surrender the attributes of God. The passage goes on to show His sovereignty, in the salvation of men, with regard to God's mercy upon whom He wills, and 'hardening' the rest. Here we are reminded of God moving David to number the people, in an indirect way (2 Sam 24.1). In that case Satan was the direct cause (1 Chrin 21.1). Here the direct cause is the nature of Man. In the book of Exodus it says both, that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh himself hardened his own heart. So which is it? The answer is, of course, both. God's withdrawal of His good influence results in Pharaoh hardening his own heart. God constantly restrains evil, preventing the worst of all worlds, but sometimes he loosens the restraint, as it were, for a good purpose. If a man restrains another from committing a crime, but then let's go, is he responsible for committing the crime? Those who want to accuse God of evil will say "yes", not willing to see the nuance between positive action, and passive allowance. This is shown in the Biblical example of Christ in the country of the Gadarenes - Mark.1 4.16,17. Those countrymen saw the evil event with the swine, and attributed it to Christ, even though it was the demons who were really responsible for the evil. Some will still say God is at fault, for allowing the evil. But this is to ignore the fact that it is not wrong to allow something if you have a good reason to do so. We see this in the account of Joseph's brother's selling him into slavery. When Joseph forgives them he says *"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."* Gen 50.20. This was the good reason that God allowed the evil to befall Joseph.

Even if people don't know what God's good reason is, it doesn't follow that there isn't one. Therefore if those people apportion blame out of ignorance (because they aren't in possession of all the facts) it betrays a willful bias against the accused - God.

The obvious question, following on from this, would then be;- What is that good reason, that purpose? Let's consider this from Romans 9. In v20 those who would play judge and jury, questioning God's justice and wisdom, by asking why God finds fault with men, are put in their place:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? -- Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?"

God helps us with a human analogy. We don't question the right of the potter to make what he wills. Why should we do so with the all wise Creator? We are His vessels, some made for one purpose, some made for another.

So again, what is this purpose? The crucial verses are verses 22 and 23:

"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory."

Jay.E.Adams called this the 'Grand demonstration', and indeed it is. I will give a poor analogy: What if a great artist made a masterpiece, the greatest masterpiece ever created by man. Then what if that artwork was covered up and hidden away forever. One might think that wasn't right, wasn't fitting to happen. Do we take flowers from the field and hide them in a cupboard? My point is that these things should be displayed, their 'glory' demonstrated, because they are worthy of that glory - that praise. Now, obviously, God is far more glorious than a masterpiece or some flowers. God is the ultimate Being to glorify, perfect in all His attributes - therefore the ultimate object of praise and glory. It can be understood that the creatures (including angels, and even creation itself) of such a glorious Being, should rightly glorify Him, because He is worthy of praise. It says this throughout the Bible, for example Revelation 5.12.

When a fallen human being thinks of someone glorifying themselves, they recoil, because we have never known true perfection, only human imperfections and sin. No one on earth is worthy of such a thing, so it is difficult to grasp. This doesn't stop people constantly glorifying men and women though - the applause for men and women never cease around the world. There is nothing wrong with legitimate praise, but the Bible says we aren't to *worship* people like this, not even worship of angels (Rev 19.10). But with God, this is different. He *is* worthy, it is not only fitting for His glory to be displayed, but if it isn't done, it would not be right. The attributes of God, mentioned in verses 22 and 23, are His wrath, power and mercy. Yes, even His wrath - His righteous, holy, anger in justice is to be displayed. How else could God display this without vessels fitted for destruction? There *may* have been another way, but this is the righteous way God has seen fit to use in His perfect wisdom. Remember there is nothing unfair about God judging, and punishing, in response to sinners transgressions; for all men are more guilty of sin, and a lack of righteousness, than we can imagine. There is nothing wrong with God even using natural evils to accomplish His purposes, whether it be warnings, judgements (Luke 13.1-5), or opportunities to make his people's graces shine. The objection is regularly heard "Why would a God of love send anyone to hell", but it is telling that the converse question is seldom heard - "Why would a God of Justice allow anyone into heaven?" Why do we favour only the first question, other than the fact we are more prone to try to justify ourselves, and condemn God, than the other way round!? When it comes to moral evil, God is never the cause, just as it couldn't be claimed that a specific light has caused darkness by its being dimmed. God certainly allows evil, in His permissive decree, in order to display His anger at sin, but the more glorious attributes, such as His mercy, are connected with His love and salvation. The words 'riches' and 'glory' precede, and are linked to, His mercy. The very existence of evil shows that there is something terribly wrong with creation, being a proof of the curse, and a gracious warning of impending judgement, as well as a display of wrath.

The main point is that God has sovereignly created all things for His good pleasure, according to His perfect will, for the purpose of the righteous display of all His attributes, for His glory. This is why the second premise of the initial statement, that 'If God is good He should prevent evil', was wrong. God is good, He is also Holy, Righteous, Just, Glorious etc, etc. In order to rightly demonstrate *all* this, He permits evil. This is a deeper form of 'greater good' argument that we see from verses such as Gen 50.19,20 "*Fear not...as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good*". In the book of Job we see that God even demonstrates His glory to the fallen angels by allowing evil

(*"Hast thou considered my servant Job?"*). He obviously displays it to the elect ones as well, who constantly praise Him for it - as is right and proper.

The cause of sin within Mankind is the changeability with which free will in rational creatures has been created. The Swiss theologian Johann Heinrich Heidegger puts it rather aptly considering the title of this book - "This conversion of the [human] will from a good into a bad one arose from the fact that the will, having a wider range than knowledge, fashioned happiness out of things unascertained and unknown and so having abandoned its guide with eyes and having adopted a blind one it fell within him into the pit".(p330 *Reformed dogmatics Heinrich Hepp*)

In saying all this I'm not pretending that this is a totally complete answer, merely that it is what God reveals to us. The rest we leave to Him and trust Him, knowing He does all things well in righteousness and holiness. Deut 29.29 always stands at the end of asking "Why" ad infinitum: Deut 29.29 *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."*

It will suffice to say here that the Bible says God is perfect, and His decree comes from His perfect, and righteous, will. So whilst we may puzzle over it out of ignorance, we also know this much from Scripture - God is scrupulously fair (for we are mindful to not commit the logical 'incredulity fallacy') - *"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Gen 18.25b*. The question of how one may 'know' this as true, is the subject of the next chapter.