LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

How Could God Allow That? An Examination of the Supposed Conflicts Between An All-Loving and All-Powerful God and Evil and Suffering in the World

Submitted to Dr. Donald Clark in partial fulfillment

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SEMI500 B35

Introduction to Seminary Studies

by

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Contents

Introduction

Many unbelievers cite the fact that there is evil and suffering in the world as evidence against the existence of God. However, this thinking is actually logically inconsistent. The presence of evil and suffering actually provides evidence for the existence of God. Additionally, many Christians struggle with pain and suffering in their own lives and ask why God would allow such things to happen. The Bible is clear: the Christian should not expect to live a carefree live devoid of pain and suffering. There are multiple passages in scripture that instruct believers on the topic of pain and suffering (*cf*. Romans 5:3-5, Romans 8:18, James 1:2-4, 2 Timothy 3:12, etc.) The Lord Jesus Christ Himself tells us, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world (John 16:33)."[1]

Through an examination of the writings of C.S. Lewis, Dr. William Lane Craig, Dr. Norman L. Geisler, Josh McDowell, and other modern philosophers and theologians, this paper will show that the presence of evil and suffering in the world in fact provides evidence for the existence of God and that evil and suffering are not incompatible with an all powerful and all loving God.

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

Perspectives on Suffering and Evil

When humans face natural disasters such as floods, storms, or earthquakes; when man-made calamities strike, such as school shootings, robberies, or automobile accidents; and when diseases such as cancer, leukemia, or Alzheimer's take the lives of loved ones, some common questions are: Where is God and why did He allow this to happen? How could an all-loving yet all-powerful God allow such events to happen in the word? The problem of evil and suffering appears on the face to be a difficult problem for Christians to answer. All faith systems and worldviews must deal with the problem of evil and suffering, yet as Dr. Norman L. Geisler notes, "the problem of evil is a serious challenge to the defense of Christianity."[2] In studying the problem of evil, Seachris and Zagzebski note, "…contemporary philosophers often take it for granted that the problem of evil is worse due to the great quantity of evil in our world."[3] Unlike the eastern view, western culture has always acknowledged there is a conflict between good and evil.[4] This problem has challenges for both the Christian and the atheist. Before examining the answers that the Christian worldview offers to the problem of evil and suffering, a review of the perspectives from the atheistic worldview will help to bring into sharp contrast those of Christianity.

The Atheist Perspective

In his book, *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins quoting the Oxford Companion to Philosophy says that "the problem of evil [is] 'the most powerful objection to traditional

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2 Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 219.

3 Joshua Seachris and Linda Zagzebski, "Weighing Evils: The C. S. Lewis Approach", International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 62, no. 2 (Oct 2007): 82, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27646231.

4 Ester S. Buchholz and Joshua K. Mandel, "Reaching for Virtue, Stumbling On Sin: Concepts of Good and Evil in a Postmodern Era", Journal of Religion and Health 39, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 125, accessed January 25, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27511434.

theism'."[5] Dawkins goes on to say that this really is only an argument against the Judeo-Christian God who is good; an attribute he says is "merely a desirable add-on."[6] In a debate with Christian philosopher Dr. William Lane Craig, Dr. Edwin Curley says, "…there is also much suffering, much of it apparently undeserved; and there is sin. We call these things evil. How can they exist in a world which owes its origin to a God with the attributes Christians believe their God to possess?"[7] Curley's argument is essentially, how could an all-powerful, all-loving God allow such evil and suffering in the world? This is the essence of the classic position of the atheistic view on the problem of evil. This view can be summarized by the following logical syllogism:

1. If God were all-good, He would destroy evil.
2. If God is all-powerful, He could destroy evil.
3. But evil is not destroyed
4. Therefore, there is no such God.[8]

Ironically, the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis eloquently sums up this argument when he writes about how he felt when he was an atheist: "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."[9] In the aforementioned debate with Craig, Curley continues on the topic of evil and suffering by countering the argument that many Christians give for the presence of evil in the

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5 Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 108.

6 Ibid.

7 Edwin Curley and William Lane Crag, "Debate: The Existence of the Christian God" (lecture, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, February 5, 1998), accessed January 25, 2014,http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-existence-of-the-christian-god-the-craig-curley-debate. Paragraph 25.

8 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 221.

9 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 16.

word, namely human freedom. He opines that human freedom gives rise to horrific events, such as child abuse; yet it seems that God deems the freedom for humans to choose evil a greater good than preventing the abuse of a child.[10] Further, even if one grants that human freedom necessarily permits some evil in the world, this does little to answer the atheistic arguments about natural evil. Humans do not cause floods, tornadoes, or earthquakes. Yet God allows these events to happen, seemingly for no reason. These atheistic arguments make for a powerful case against the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible, who is supposed to be omnipotent, loving, and good.

The Christian Perspective

The Psalmist writes, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit (Psalm 147:5)." The apostle John writes, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:8)" and in the Old Testament, the Bible says, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 7:9)." The God of Christianity has many unique attributes. As the scripture passages above demonstrate, love is an important attribute of God. God is also powerful, intelligent, moral, and necessary.[11] Further, He is eternal, just, holy, and perfect (*cf*: Deuteronomy 33:37 Psalm 50:6, Leviticus 19:2, and 2 Samuel 22:31). This biblical perspective his highlighted in the book of Job, where "Job does not know why he has been afflicted with evil, but as long as he trusts in God, he believes, and must believe, that God is good."[12] For the Christian, God is infinitely wise and superior to humanity,

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10 Curley and Craig, Paragraphs 34-36.

11 Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 26-27.

12 James Kellenberger, "God's Goodness and God's Evil", Religious Studies 41, no. 1 (Mar 2005): 25, accessed January 25, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20008569.

and while we may not understand his ways or why He allows evil and suffering into the word, we trust him.[13]

So if all of the superlative attributes of God are, as Christians believe they are, what then is one to make of evil? Evil is not something that God creates, but rather evil is a lack of "goodness." It is the antithesis of God, who is the ultimate source of good. If God were not good and loving, then the problem of evil and suffering would not exists.[14] If, as the Hindu's believe, evil and suffering were merely an illusion, then there would be no conflict. But any rational person can look around and see there is, in fact, much evil and suffering in the world. So how do Christian's reconcile a loving, powerful, intelligent, moral, necessary God with the fact that suffering evil exist? Christians believe that humans are given freedom to choose to do good or evil. The Bible also teaches that natural events that cause pain and suffering are due to the effects of sin in the world that corrupted God's creation (*cf*: Genesis 3:14-19, Romans 8:22).

Is God Really Good?

When examining the issue of whether the God of Christianity is consistent with the evil, pain, suffering one sees in the world, one must look at the issue from two different perspectives. First, humans themselves cause much of the evil we see in the world through their own choices by virtue of the freedom they have. As Buchholz and Mandel write, "…current trends in [understanding both good and evil] remain that acting in a manner similar to God is good, while acting in a manner that conflicts with God and the commandments is bad."[15] One does not even have to believe in God or the Bible to recognize this fact. Even the atheist understands that certain acts are good and others are evil. Second, one must understand that some of the pain and

13 Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, Handbook of Christian Apologetics (Downers Grive: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 124.

14 Ibid., 59.

15 Buchholz and Mandel, , "Reaching for Virtue", 132.

suffering in the world is caused by natural events. These events themselves are not evil, but natural disasters certainly can bring about pain and suffering for human beings.

Human Choices and Freedom

In the introduction to his classic work, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis says that early in his life when he was an atheist and someone had asked him why he did not believe in God, he would have answered that it was because of all the evil, pain, and suffering in the world, most of which was caused by man himself.[16] In the previously discussed counter-arguments, God is portrayed as not actually being impotent because He is apparently unable to prevent evil. Yet Lewis points out that this is missing the point about God's omnipotence. Omnipotence does not mean God can do anything, it means He can do anything that is possible.[17] God cannot violate the laws of logic. He cannot, for example, make a square circle. He cannot violate His own nature. God cannot lie (Numbers 23:19). And, God cannot create creatures who are both free agents, yet are incapable of choosing to do evil. Lewis calls these "intrinsic impossibilities" because they carry the impossibility within themselves.[18] These concepts could also be called logical contradictions.

The Bible says that humans are created in the likeness and image of God (Genesis 1:26). God is a free moral agent, as are human beings. This means that humans are capable of making choices for good or evil. The atheist who says that evil perpetrated by humans as proof that there is no God is failing to see that if we did not have free will, we would be nothing more than animals operating on instinct. If God were to step in every time that a human was about to commit an act of evil, He would be forcing us to act in a certain way. This would take away our

16 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 1-2.

17 Ibid,, 16-17.

18 Ibid., 18.

very freedom to act. Acts such as kindness, charitable giving, and love would have no real meaning because they would simply be "forced" upon us by God.

Natural Events

The issue of pain, suffering, and evil caused by natural events is a bit more challenging to reconcile with the notion of the Christian God. Yet if one looks carefully at the issue, one can see there are answers. First, all natural disasters are simply a normal, natural occurrence, which have occurred to such an extreme as to cause undesirable consequences. Take for example a house fire that takes the life of the occupant. Fire itself is neither good nor evil. It is simply a chemical process that gives off heat, light, and smoke. Fire has beneficial properties. It cooks our food, warms our drink, and can be life saving in certain situations. Yet if one gets too close to fire, skin is burned painfully. Are we right to expect that God will allow the "good" properties of fire when we desire a hot cup of coffee, yet we expect He will prevent the "bad" properties of fire to affect us if we trip and fall into our campfire? Do we expect God to suspend the laws of physics when we desire, yet allow them to happen naturally when it suits our purposes?

The natural shifting of the planet's tectonic plates aids in maintaining the earth's magnetic field, without which all life on earth would die from harmful solar radiation. Yet this same shifting of the earth's crust causes earthquakes. It seems that from one perspective, plate tectonics is a good thing; yet, from another perspective it is not. Further, some have posited that the human suffering that results from an earthquake is the result of poor decisions on behalf of people to live and build in earthquake prone areas.[19] Bose writes that many of the so-called "natural disasters" that affect man are due in large part to humanity's poor choices with regards to where we build large population centers, our poor choices about road locations, and other

19 Ashish Bose, "Are Natural Disasters Manmade?", Economic and Political Weekly 35, no. 43 (Oct 21-Nov 3, 2000): 3793.

negative decisions with regards to the environment.[20] Are we to blame God for these poor decisions? Humanity should not expect God to suspend the geologic forces that govern the planet or change the weather when we do not desire to experience the negative consequences of natural forces.

The Emptiness of the Atheistic Worldview

The naturalistic worldview is the philosophical "view that nature is the 'whole show'."[21] The atheist, who positively affirms there is no God, is by definition a naturalist. Atheists believe that the physical word is all there is, and there are no non-material things and that supernatural events are impossible.[22] The view believes that natural laws and processes can account for everything that exists. Only the material world is real, and this rules out, *a priori*, any supernatural, non-material, or spiritual dimension to existence. If atheism is true, then there is no God, as God is a supernatural, non-material, timeless, spiritual being. Yet there are aspects of the atheistic worldview with regards to the issue of evil that make this worldview untenable.

What if there is No God?

If one takes atheism to it's logical conclusions, one will find some very troubling philosophical consequences. First, "the very scientific naturalist who insist on explaining *everything* in terms of physical chemical laws cannot explain their own scientific theories or laws in terms of mere physical and chemical processes" (emphasis original).[23] Atheism cannot account for non-material realities, such as the laws of logic, the laws of mathematics, moral and

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20 Ibid., 3793-3794

21 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 521.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 522.

ethical truths, and aesthetic judgments.[24] Thus if atheism were true, one could not rely on the basic laws that govern our daily lives. For example, the idea of non-material thoughts and ideas is counter to an atheistic (materialistic) worldview. On atheism, thoughts are simply chemical reactions in the brain. Turek asks, "How much does love weight? What's the chemical composition of hate? These are absurd questions because thoughts, convictions, and emotions are not completely materially based."[25] If atheism is true, then thoughts and feelings such as love, compassion, hate, and anger really are only chemical reactions in the human brain. If the thoughts in the human mind are simply chemical reactions, then they are completely subjective and cannot be a source of objective truth. In short, if there is no God and atheism is true, then there can actually be no truth at all. This, of course, is a self-defeating argument, and thus is naturally false.

The Moral Argument for God

C.S. Lewis writes in his classic work *Mere Christianity*, "[m]y argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line" (emphasis original).[26] Lewis goes on to say that his argument was that the world really was unjust, and "not simply that it did not happen to please [his] personal fancies."[27] In other words, there really is a transcendent, objective moral component to the word, and good and evil and right and wrong are not simply the personal opinions of individuals. The atheistic worldview has no external, transcendent basis on which to judge what is good or evil. For the atheist, good and evil are

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24 Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 126-127.

25 Geisler and Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*, 129.

26 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HaperCollins, 1980), 41.

27 Ibid.

simply subjective, personal preferences. Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for the existence of God is the Moral Argument. One version of this argument takes the following form:

1. Every law has a law giver.
2. There is a Moral Law.
3. Therefore, there is a Moral Law Giver.[28]

While a complete discussion of the Moral Argument is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief summary follows. The first premise of the argument is logically valid. When examining the world around us, one can conclude that a competent authority develops all laws that govern behavior. A law giver is the source for laws regarding driving habits, laws regarding taxes, and laws regarding prohibited moral acts. Transcended moral laws require a transcendent moral law giver. The second premise is also logically valid. "Everyone knows, for example, that love is superior to hate and that courage is better than cowardice."[29] No rational person can deny that acts such as murder, torture, and rape are objectively wrong. To deny the second premise is to deny that the holocaust was wrong and the Nazis simply had a different opinion about how to treat Jews.[30] Given that both the first and second premises are valid, the conclusion logically follows. The Moral Argument is one of several proofs of God's existence. To deny the conclusion, or to deny one of the premises, is to deny a properly basic belief of God's actual existence.[31]

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28 Geisler and Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*, 171.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 177.

31 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Weaton: Crosway, 2008), 40.

Conclusion

This paper has shown there are significant differences between the beliefs of Christians and atheists regarding the issue of evil, pain, and suffering in the world. Those that hold to the atheistic/naturalistic worldview believe that the presence of real evil in the world disproves the existence of God, because an all powerful, all loving God would prevent evil. The Christian position is that the presence of real evil in the world actually proves there is a God, because without an absolute standard of good and a Moral Law Giver, then humanity would have no rational way to judge that someone really was evil. Evil would simply become a subjective, personal opinion. Without an absolute standard of good and evil, there would be no objective difference between Hitler and Mother Theresa.[32] Craig, in summarizing Dostoyevsky, notes that "…if the existence of God is denied, then one is landed in complete moral relativism, so that no act, regardless how dreadful or heinous, can be condemned by the atheist."[33]

In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18)." Christians do not deny that evil and suffering are real. Nor do they deny that God is in complete control of the universe. Christians believe that God has simply not yet resolved the problem of evil. God "…wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). The Psalmist tells us that the Lord is "…a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15)." God loves everyone, and desires that all come to know him through Jesus Christ. Perhaps God is withholding is His wraith and judgment

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32 Geisler and Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*, 192.

33 Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 69.

on the world. He is holding out for that one last soul that will choose a relationship with Him through faith in His Son. Then God will once and for all deal with the evil in the world.

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RESEARCH PAPER: PART 4 GRADING RUBRIC

Element	Criteria	Excellent: Satisfies criteria w/ excellent work	Good: Satisfies criteria	Average: Satisfies most criteria	Poor: Does not satisfy criteria	Points Earned	Comments from Instructor
Introduction & Thesis Statement	• There is a clear thesis statement. The topic is identified. • The introduction provides a clear overview of the paper's contents.	18–20 pts.	17 pts.	15–16 pts.	0–14 pts.		
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