

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Apologetics Application Paper: The Problem with the Problem of Evil

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Introduction to Apologetics

by

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Introduction

Many unbelievers cite the fact that there is evil and suffering in the world as evidence against the existence of God. The atheistic worldview believes that the physical, natural world is all there is. Atheists deny the existence of non-material things, such as God, angels, the human soul, and an eternal afterlife. The natural conclusion of atheism is that there are no objective moral laws and duties. However, this thinking is actually logically inconsistent. The presence of evil and suffering actually provides evidence for the existence of God. Further, while some honest atheist will admit their worldview denies absolute, objective moral laws, they will complain about pain, suffering, and the general “unfairness” of the universe. Essentially, they are borrowing from the Christian worldview in an effort to defeat that worldview. This paper will examine the views of prominent atheists and contrast those views with the views of C.S. Lewis, Dr. William Lane Craig, Dr. Norman L. Geisler, Josh McDowell, and other philosophers and theologians. The thesis of this paper is that presence of evil and suffering in the world is not incompatible with a belief in God, that non-material things actually do exist, that there are objective moral laws and duties, and that all of these provide strong evidence for the existence of an all powerful and all loving God.

A Summary of the Atheistic Worldview

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 world? 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.”¹ 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.”² Unlike the eastern view, western culture has always acknowledged there is a conflict between good and evil.³ What is important to note is the problem of evil and suffering has challenges for both the Christian and the atheist.

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 theism’.”⁴ Dawkins goes on to say that this really is only an argument against the Judeo-

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

2 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>.

3 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>.

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

Christian God who is good; an attribute he says is “merely a desirable add-on.”⁵ 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?”⁶ 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.⁷

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.”⁸ 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 world, 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

5 Ibid.

6 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.

7 Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 221.

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

than preventing the abuse of a child.⁹ 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 a seemingly powerful case against the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible, who is supposed to be omnipotent, loving, and good.

Atheism at its core denies the existence of God. Further, atheists believe “[there] is only a universe or cosmos and nothing more.”¹⁰ The famous astronomer Carl Sagan was known for saying, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”¹¹ The idea that only the physical world exists is also known as naturalism or materialism. The atheist believes that only the material, physical world exists and that non-physical entities, such as souls, spirits, and the like do not exist.

Evil and Suffering

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. The first perspective is that 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.”¹² 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. Even Dawkins recognizes this. He

9 Curley and Craig, Paragraphs 34-36.

10 Geisler, *Baker*, 55.

11 Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 5.

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

writes, “I receive a large number of letters from readers of my books, most of them enthusiastically friendly, some of them helpfully critical, a few nasty or even vicious. And the nastiest of all, I am sorry to report, are almost invariably motivated by religion.”¹³ Even the most ardent atheist observes that some behavior is “nasty” or “vicious.”

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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

13 Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 211.

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

15 Ibid., 16-17.

16 Ibid., 18.

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 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.

The second perspective through which one must view the issue of evil and suffering is to understand that some of the pain and 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. This perspective 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 events, 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.¹⁷ 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 negative decisions with regards to the environment.¹⁸ 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 Existence of the Non-Material

The atheistic, naturalistic worldview is the philosophical “view that nature is the ‘whole show’.”¹⁹ Atheists believe that the physical world is all there is, and there are no non-material things and that supernatural events are impossible.²⁰ 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.

If one takes atheism to its 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).²¹ Atheism cannot account for non-material realities, such as the laws of logic, the laws of mathematics, moral and

¹⁷ Ashish Bose, “Are Natural Disasters Manmade?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 43 (Oct 21-Nov 3, 2000): 3793.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3793-3794

¹⁹ Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 521.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

ethical truths, and aesthetic judgments.²² 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.”²³ 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 is patently false.

Evidence for the existence of the non-material, including the existence of the soul, can be understood by examining the process of human growth and development. When a human being is conceived, he or she goes through a range of biological changes. Humans begin life as a zygote, and then change to an embryo, a fetus, a newborn, a child, a teenager, a young adult, a mature adult, and finally an elderly adult. The person’s body is certainly not the same over time. The body that one has as a three-year-old is different than the body one has as a teenager and different still as a mature adult. Yet the person’s identity, their “self,” is the same. While our thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and other aspects of our minds change, we intuitively understand

²² Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 126-127.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

that “we do not lose our identity over time.”²⁴ A physical object is made up of its component parts. The sum of its parts is what gives it identity. Yet if a human were to lose a hand, a foot, or even an arm, or a leg, that person would not cease to be himself or herself. Clearly, there is a non-material aspect to human beings that is independent from our physical bodies. “The concepts of identity, consciousness and soul are deeply intertwined in human cognition about [ourselves and] other humans.”²⁵

Objective Morality

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 world, 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 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:

24 J. Warner Wallace, “Is There Any Evidence for the Soul?,” January 8, 2013, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.str.org/articles/is-there-any-evidence-for-the-soul>.

25 Rebekah A. Richert and Paul L. Harris, “Dualism Revisited: Body Vs. Mind Vs. Soul,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8 (2008): 99-115.

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

27 Ibid.

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 As Craig notes, “To undermine the warrant which our moral experience gives to our moral beliefs much more must be done than hold out the possibility that naturalism may be true.

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: Crossway, 2008), 40.

In the absence of some argument for naturalism, I'm entirely within my rational rights to stick with my moral sense and accept the objectivity of the moral realm."³²

Conclusions

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.³³ 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."³⁴ Despite the fact that "science is incapable of proving that souls don't exist" given the science is only capable of exploring "physical things governed by physical laws,"³⁵ there is strong logical and philosophical evidence that non-material objects do exist. This, perhaps, also shows that science is not the only source of Truth.

³² William Lane Craig, "Our Grasp of Objective Moral Values," Reasonable Faith, December 24, 2007, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/our-grasp-of-objective-moral-values>.

³³ Geisler and Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*, 192.

³⁴ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 69.

³⁵ Greg Koukl, "Weighing a Chicken with a Yardstick." Stand To Reason. April 24, 2013. Accessed June 28, 2014. <http://www.str.org/articles/weighing-a-chicken-with-a-yardstick>.

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 His wrath and judgment on the world. He is holding out for that one last, non-material 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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