

Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? (Part I)

CHAPTER 7

“How can an all-powerful, all-loving God allow so much suffering and evil in the world?”



Three hundred years before Jesus was born, the Greek philosopher, Epicurus (342-270BC) gave this problem its classical form. He said...

If God wants to prevent evil, but can't -- God is not all-powerful.
If God is powerful enough to prevent evil, but won't -- God is not all-loving.
If God neither can nor desires to prevent evil -- He is not divinity.
If God can and desires to prevent evil -- Why then is there evil in this world?

Even the prophets in the Bible raise the question in various forms:

Habakkuk asked God, “*Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?*” (Habakkuk 1:3)

David cried out, “*How long will the enemy mock you, O God?*” (Psalm 74:10)

Jonah wondered why God would put up with the evil Ninevites and wanted God to wipe them out.

Jeremiah challenged God by saying, “*I would speak with you about your justice: why does the way of the wicked prosper?*” (Jeremiah 12:1)

The book of Job is consumed with the question: “*Why was Job suffering?*”

TWO IMPORTANT POINTS TO BEGIN WITH:

- 1) Every world religion and every world view - not just Christianity - must give an explanation for an answer for evil and suffering. This is not just a Christian question!
- 2) An answer to the question of suffering and evil must meet both the intellectual and the emotional demands of the question. In other words, if someone puts forth an explanation for the problem of suffering and evil this explanation must make sense logically, intellectually, philosophically and emotionally.ⁱ

One way that people choose to resolve this problem is to say that evil and suffering really do not exist. Many Eastern religions go this route.

For example, pantheistic religions teach, *"If God is all, and God is good, then evil can not exist."*

Hinduism, Taoism, some forms of Buddhism, the Christian Science Church, Unitarians, and others believe that the way to resolve the problem of evil is to realize that it really does not exist at all. It is an illusion. Thus, in order to overcome pain, suffering and evil, (they say) we must learn to believe that everything in the physical world is non-real or illusion -- then the illusion will have no grip on us.

This explanation does not make sense emotionally. I can't imagine having to tell a rape victim, "the evil you've encountered is just an illusion."

Also, the pantheistic explanation of evil and suffering does not make sense intellectually.

*"There is a humorous story told of India's leading philosopher, Shankara. He had just finished lecturing the king on the deception of the mind and its delusion of material reality. The next day, the king let loose an elephant that went on a rampage, and Shankara ran up a tree to find safety. When the king asked him why he ran if the elephant was non-real, Shankara, not to be outdone, said, 'What the king actually saw was a non-real me climbing up a non-real tree!' ONE MIGHT ADD, 'THIS IS A NON-REAL ANSWER.'"ⁱⁱⁱ (Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, 118)*

"If it is true that 'all is one' and 'all is God,' as the New Age worldview holds, the distinction between good and evil ultimately disappears. When a New Ager tells me there are no absolutes, I always ask him if he is *absolutely* sure about that."ⁱⁱⁱ

Another example of an explanation that does not make sense logically and emotionally is atheism. Many atheists and skeptics begin their challenge to God's existence by saying *"God can't exist because evil exists."*

But there are logical problems with this statement.

Questioning the question: Consider the following dialogue by Dr. Ravi Zacharias and a university student from a question and answer session (adapted from Ravi Zacharias' book "*Can Man Live Without God?*").^{iv}

Student: There is too much evil in this world; therefore, there cannot be a God!

Speaker: Would you mind if I asked you something? You said, "God cannot exist because there is too much evil." If there is such a thing as evil, aren't you assuming that there is such a thing as good?

Student: I guess so.

Speaker: If there is such a thing as good, you must affirm a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil.

Speaker: In a debate between the philosopher Frederick Copleston and the atheist Bertrand Russell, Copleston said, "Mr. Russell, you do believe in good and bad, don't you?" Russell answered, "Yes, I do." "How do you differentiate between good and bad?" challenged Copleston. Russell shrugged his shoulders and said, "On the basis of feeling – what else?" I must confess, Mr. Copleston was a kindlier gentleman than many others. The appropriate "logical kill" for the moment would have been, "Mr. Russell, in some cultures they love their neighbors; in other cultures they eat them, both on the basis of feeling. Do you have any preference?"

Speaker: When you say there is evil, aren't you admitting there is good? When you accept the existence of goodness, you must affirm a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil. But when you admit to a moral law, you must posit a moral lawgiver. That, however, is who you are trying to disprove and not prove. For if there is no moral lawgiver, there is no moral law. If there is no moral law, there is no good. If there is no good, there is no evil. What, then, is your question?

Student: What, then, am I asking you?

This student just realized that the question of evil and suffering is only valid if God, in fact, exists. As soon as you take God out of the picture, terms like "Good" and "Evil" can only be defined by conflicting human opinions and personal feelings. If morality is defined by human opinion we are reduced to asking ourselves, "*which human's opinion do we choose to follow?*"

"Seen in this light, the reality of evil actually requires the existence of God rather than disproves it."^v

So atheism's explanation for the problem of evil and suffering does not make sense logically. Also, it does not make sense emotionally.

Listen to what Richard Dawkins, an atheistic professor at Oxford University, says about “why people suffer:”

"In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."^{vi}

Would Dawkins honestly tell a rape victim that the rapist was merely dancing to his DNA?^{vii}

“Why did God create a world where evil and suffering exists?”



There are two types of suffering:

- 1) Suffering caused by moral evil or sin.
- 2) Suffering caused by natural causes (such as natural death, drought, famine, tornadoes, cancer, etc.)

In this chapter, we will examine both types of suffering.

Think about four possible worlds God could have created:

1. God could have created no world at all.
2. God could have created a world where only goodness could be chosen.

In this type of world suffering caused by moral evil or sin would not exist, but along with that, there would be no free choice!

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the freedom to choose. If God did not create us with the freedom to choose we would be like robots. God could have created humans that had no choice to love him or not. But, this would have made real love impossible.

For example...

Imagine a man who programmed his computer to say "*I love you!*" every few minutes.



Would this be real love?

God does not force us to love him. He gives us a choice. Free choice, however, leaves the possibility of a wrong choice.^{viii}

If we choose to love God, we will obey him.

If everyone obeyed God, evil would not result.

If people choose not to obey God, evil will result.

This is where suffering caused by evil comes from.

It comes from disobedient people, not God.

C. S. Lewis writes, “*God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata - of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating.*”^{ix}

3. God could have created a world where there was no such thing as suffering due to natural causes.

According to the Bible, the original creation was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). This implies that there was no suffering due to natural causes in the beginning. Genesis 3 describes how Adam and Eve used their free will to disobey God and introduced sin in the world. Now we live in a fallen world where, because of sin, even the ground is cursed (Genesis 3:17-19). Because of sin, we are subject to suffering due to natural causes that would not have occurred had humans not rebelled against God.

The Bible says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (Romans 8:18-22)

Why doesn't God intervene every time there is possible suffering due to natural causes?

Would this be a desirable environment to live in? Probably not. This would be Road Runner/Wylie Coyote Land. This type of world would only confuse us and frustrate us. Rationality and intelligence involve a high degree of dependability between observable causes and their effects. Consistent scientific laws enable us to understand, manage and use our environment constructively. God has created our world with consistent natural laws (such as the law of gravity). These natural laws help us to survive. In a world where there were no consistent laws of nature, we would never grow in our understanding of it. We would never be able to use these laws for our good or pleasure. However, sometimes these natural laws can bring about suffering and pain.

4. **The world as we know it - where good and evil exist along with the possibility of choosing either.**

If God's intention was to produce an environment where humans could exercise their love for God and love for each other...This world is equipped for that.

If God's intention was to produce an environment where humans could develop character and exercise their rational, ethical, intellectual, spiritual and moral sensibilities...this world suits that purpose. In the final analysis, of the four worlds described -- **ours is the only one where love is possible.**

*"This world is the **best way** to the **best world**. If God is to both preserve freedom and defeat evil, then this world is the best way to do it. Freedom is preserved in that each person makes his or her own free choice to determine their destiny. Evil is overcome in that once those who reject God are separated from the others, the decisions of all are honored and made permanent."* ^x

NOTES

ⁱ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 108-139.

ⁱⁱ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2003), 42.

^{iv} Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 182.

^v Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2003), 35.

^{vi} Richard Dawkins, *Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 133.

^{vii} Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 114.

^{viii} Ravi Zacharias and Norman Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2003), 37.

^{ix} C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, HarperCollins Edition 2001), 47-48.

^x Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990), 73.