

## **The Problem of Evil (Part 1)**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

We want to turn now to examine some of the recurring and most basic kinds of objections which are raised against the Christian faith by those who disagree with the Biblical worldview -- whether its intellectual antagonists, cultured despisers, or competing religions. Our aim will be to suggest how a presuppositional method of apologetics would answer these types of argument against Christianity (or alternatives to it) as a philosophy of life, knowledge and reality.

Perhaps the most intense, pained and persistent challenge which believers hear about the truth of the Christian message comes in the form of what is called "the problem of evil." The suffering and evil which we see all about us seems to cry out against the existence of God -- at least a God who is both benevolent and almighty. This is thought by many to be the most difficult of all the problems which apologists face, not only because of the apparent logical difficulty within the Christian outlook, but because of the personal perplexity which any sensitive human being will feel when confronted with the terrible misery and wickedness that can be found in the world. Man's inhumanity to man is notorious in every age of history and in every nation of the world. There is a long story of oppression, indignity, unkindness, torture and tyranny. We find war and murder, greed and lust, dishonesty and lies. We encounter fear and hatred, infidelity and cruelty, poverty and racial hostility. Moreover, even in the natural world we come across so much apparently needless suffering and pain -- birth defects, parasites, attacks of violent animals, radioactive mutations, debilitating diseases, deadly cancer, starvation, crippling injuries, typhoons, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

When the unbeliever looks at this unhappy "vale of tears," he or she feels there is a strong reason to doubt the goodness of God. Why should there be so much misery? Why should it be distributed in such a seemingly unjust fashion? Is this what you would permit, if you were God and could prevent it?

## Taking Evil Seriously

It is important for the Christian to recognize -- indeed, to insist upon -- the reality and serious nature of evil. The subject of evil is not simply an intellectual parlor game, a cavalier matter, a whimsical or relativistic choice of looking at things a certain way. Evil is real. Evil is ugly.

Only when we become emotionally charged and intellectually intense about the existence of evil can we appreciate the depth of the problem unbelievers have with the Christian worldview -- but, likewise, realize why the problem of evil ends up confirming the Christian outlook, rather than infirming it. When we talk about evil with unbelievers, it is crucial that both sides "play for keeps." Evil must be taken seriously "*as evil*."

A well known passage from the pen of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, readily stirs our emotions and makes us insistent about the wickedness of men, for instance men who are cruel to little children. It is found in his novel, *Brothers Karamazov*.[\[1\]](#) Ivan makes his complaint to Alyosha:

"People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel....

I've collected a great, great deal about Russian children, Alyosha. There was a little girl of five who was hated by her father and mother.... You see, I must repeat again, it is a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only.... It's just their defenselessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal that sets his vile blood on fire....

This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty -- shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night... they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her?... Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?... Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'!...

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature -- that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance -- and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth."

"No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.

Incidents and soliloquies such as this could be multiplied over and over again. They elicit moral indignation within us. They also elicit moral indignation within the unbeliever -- and that fact must not be disregarded by the apologist.

Once when I was doing a radio call-in show, a caller became very snide about my saying that we should worship and adore God. The caller wanted to know how anybody could adore a God who permitted sexual abuse and mutilation of a baby, such as the caller had witnessed in certain courtroom photographs at the trial of some horrible specimen of humanity. The description was sickening and surely evoked revulsion in everyone who heard it. I knew the caller meant to press his hostility to Christianity upon me hard, but I was actually glad that the caller was so irate. He was taking evil *seriously*. His condemnation of child abuse was not simply a matter of personal preference to him. For that reason, I realized it would not be difficult to show why the problem of evil is not really a problem for the believer -- but rather for the unbeliever. More on this later.

## Evil as a Logical Problem

The "problem" of evil has not always been properly understood by Christian apologists. They have sometimes reduced the difficulty of the unbeliever's challenge to Christianity by conceiving of the problem of evil as simply the angry presentation of evidence contrary to the alleged goodness of God. It is as though believers profess God's goodness, but then unbelievers have their counterexamples. Who makes the best case from the facts around us? The problem is presented (inaccurately) as a matter of who has weightier evidence on his side of the disagreement.

For instance, we read a popular apologist say this about the problem of evil: " But in the final analysis, the evidence for the existence of the good (God) is not vitiated by the anomaly of evil." And why not? "Evil remains a perplexing mystery, but the force of the mystery is not enough to demand that we throw out the positive evidence for God, for the reality of good.... *While we cannot explain the existence of evil, that is no reason for us to disregard the positive evidence for God.*"<sup>[2]</sup> This seriously underestimates the nature of the problem of evil. It is not simply a matter of weighing the positive evidence over against the negative evidence for goodness in God's world or in God's plan (say, for redemption, etc.). The problem of evil is a much more serious challenge to the Christian faith than that.

The problem of evil amounts to the charge that there is *logical incoherence* within the Christian outlook -- regardless of how much evil there is in the universe, compared to how much goodness can be found. If Christianity is logically incoherent, *no amount* of positive, factual evidence can save its truth. The internal inconsistency would itself render Christian faith intellectually unacceptable, *even granting* there might be a great deal of indicators or evidence in our experience for the existence of goodness or for God, otherwise considered.

The 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, expressed the problem of evil in a strong and challenging fashion: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"<sup>[3]</sup> What Hume was arguing is that the Christian cannot logically accept these three premises: God is all-powerful, God is all-good, and nevertheless evil exists in the world. If God is all-powerful, then He must be able to prevent or remove evil, if He wishes. If God is all-good, then certainly He wishes to prevent or remove evil. Yet it is undeniable that evil exists.

George Smith states the problem this way in his book, *Atheism: The Case Against God*<sup>[4]</sup>: "Briefly, the problem of evil is this: ...If God knows there is evil but cannot prevent it, he is not omnipotent. If God knows there is evil and can prevent it but desires not to, he is not omnibenevolent." Smith thinks that Christians logically cannot have it both ways: God is completely good, as well as completely powerful.

Therefore, the charge which unbelievers make is that the Christian worldview is incoherent; it adopts premises which are inconsistent with each other, given the evil in this world. The unbeliever argues that, even if he were to accept the premises of Christian theology (regardless of evidence for or against them individually), those premises do not comport with *each other*. The problem with Christianity is an internal one -- a logical defect which even the believer must acknowledge,

as long as he realistically admits the presence of evil in the world. This evil, it is thought, is incompatible with either God's goodness or God's power.

For Whom is Evil Logically a Problem?

It should be obvious upon reflection that there can be no "problem of evil" to press upon Christian believers unless one can legitimately assert the existence of evil in this world. There is not even apparently a logical problem as long as we have only these two premises to deal with:

1. GOD IS COMPLETELY GOOD.

2. GOD IS COMPLETELY POWERFUL.



These two premises do not in themselves create any contradiction. The problem arises only when we add the premise:

3. EVIL EXISTS (HAPPENS).

Accordingly, it is crucial to the unbeliever's case against Christianity to be in a position to assert that there is evil in the world -- to point to something and have the right to evaluate it as an instance of evil. If it should be the case that nothing evil exists or ever happens -- that is, what people initially believe to be evil cannot reasonably be deemed "evil" -- then there is nothing inconsistent with Christian theology which requires an answer.

What does the unbeliever mean by "good," or by what standard does the unbeliever determine what counts as "good" (so that "evil" is accordingly defined or identified)? What are the presuppositions in terms of which the unbeliever makes any moral judgments whatsoever?

Perhaps the unbeliever takes "good" to be whatever evokes public approval. However, on that basis the statement "The vast majority of the community heartily approved of and willingly joined in the evil deed" could never make sense. The fact that a large number of people of feel a certain way does not (or should not rationally) convince anybody that this feeling (about the goodness or evil of something) is correct. Ethics does not reduce to statistics, after all. Ordinarily, people think of the goodness of something as evoking their approval -- rather than their approval constituting its goodness! Even unbelievers talk and act as though there are personal traits, actions or things which possess the property of goodness (or evil) *irrespective* of the attitudes or beliefs or feelings people have about those traits, actions or things.[\[5\]](#)

There are even further problems with taking "good" to be whatever evokes the approval of the individual (rather than public at large). Not only does this too reduce to subjectivism, it absurdly implies that no two individuals can make identical ethical judgments. When Bill says "Helping orphans is good," he would not be saying the same thing as when Ted says "Helping orphans is good." Bill's utterance means "Helping orphans evokes Bill's approval," whereas Ted's would mean "Helping orphans evokes Ted's approval" -- which are altogether different matters. Not only would this view make it impossible for two people to make identical ethical judgments, it would likewise (absurdly) imply that a person's own ethical judgments could never be mistaken, unless he happened to misunderstand his own feelings![\[6\]](#)

The unbeliever might turn, then, to an instrumental or consequential understanding of what constitutes objective goodness (or evil). For instance, an action or trait is good if it tends to achieve a certain end, like the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The irrelevance of such a notion for making ethical determinations is that one would need to be able to rate and compare happiness, as well as to be able to calculate all of the consequences of any given action or trait. This is simply impossible for finite minds (even with the help of computers). But more devastating is the observation that good may be taken to be whatever promotes general happiness *only* if it is antecedently the case that generalized happiness is itself "good." Any theory of ethics which focuses on the goodness of achieving a certain end (or consequence) will make sense only if it can establish that the chosen end (or consequence) is a good one to pursue and promote. Instrumental theories of goodness eventually must address the issue of intrinsic goodness, so that they can correctly determine what their goals *ought* to be.

Philosophically speaking, the problem of evil turns out to be, therefore, a problem for the unbeliever himself. In order to use the argument from evil against the Christian worldview, he

must first be able to show that his judgments about the existence of evil are meaningful -- which is precisely what his unbelieving worldview is unable to do.



[1] trans. C. Garnett (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1950), from book V, chapter 4. The quotation here is taken from the selection found in *God and Evil: Readings on the Theological Problem of Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

[2] R. C. Sproul, *Objections Answered* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, G/L Publications, 1978), pp. 128, 129.

[3] *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Publications, 1981), p. 88.

[4] Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1979.

[5] Intuitionism would suggest that goodness is an indefinable (basic or simple) property which we do not come to know empirically or through nature, but "intuitively." What, however, is a "non-natural property" unless we are speaking of a "supernatural" property (the very thing in dispute for the unbeliever)? Further, intuitionism cannot provide a basis for *knowing* that our intuitions are correct: not only must we intuit the goodness of charity, we are also left to intuit that this intuition is true. It is a well known and embarrassing fact that not all people (or all cultures) have identical intuitions about good and evil. These conflicting intuitions cannot be rationally resolved within the unbeliever's worldview.

[6] Similar difficulties attend the notion that ethical terms do not function and are not used to describe anything at all, but simply to *give expression* to one's emotions. The related (performative) theory of ethical language known as "prescriptivism" holds that moral utterances do not function to describe things as good or evil, but simply to get one's hearer(s) to behave or feel in a certain way. On this theory, no attitude or action is good or evil in itself, and one is left without any explanation *why* people go around "directing" others with gratuitous and veiled imperatives like "Helping orphans is good."

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## **The Problem Of Evil (Part 2)**

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Does the Unbeliever Take Evil Seriously, Then?

Unbelievers complain that certain plain facts about human experience are inconsistent with the Christian's theological beliefs about the goodness and power of God. Such a complaint requires the non-Christian to assert to existence of evil in this world. What, however, has been presupposed here?

Both the believer and the unbeliever will want to insist that certain things are evil, for instance cases of child abuse (like those already mentioned). And they will talk as though they take such moral judgments seriously, not simply as expressions of personal taste, preference or subjective opinion. They will insist that such things are truly -- objectively, intrinsically -- evil. Even unbelievers can be shaken from their easy and glib espousals of relativism in the face of moral atrocities like war, rape, and torture.

But the question, logically speaking, is how the unbeliever can make sense of taking evil seriously -- not simply as something inconvenient, or unpleasant, or contrary to his or her desires. What philosophy of value or morality can the unbeliever offer which will render it meaningful to condemn some atrocity as objectively evil? The moral indignation which is expressed by unbelievers when they encounter the wicked things which transpire in this world does not comport with the theories of ethics which unbelievers espouse, theories which prove to be arbitrary or subjective or merely utilitarian or relativistic in character. On the unbeliever's worldview, there is no good reason for saying that anything is evil in nature, but only by personal choice or feeling.

That is why I am encouraged when I see unbelievers getting very indignant with some evil action as a matter of principle. Such indignation requires recourse to the absolute, unchanging, and good character of God in order to make philosophical sense. The expression of moral indignation is but personal evidence that unbelievers know this God in their heart of hearts. They refuse to let judgments about evil be reduced to subjectivism.

When the believer challenges the unbeliever on this point, the unbeliever will likely turn around and try to argue that evil is, in the final analysis, based on human reasoning or choices - thus being relative to the individual or culture. And at that point the believer must press home the *logical incoherence* within the unbeliever's set of beliefs. On the one hand, he believes and speaks as though some activity (e.g., child abuse) is wrong in itself, but on the other hand he believes and speaks as though that activity is wrong only if the individual (or culture) chooses some value which is inconsistent with it (e.g., pleasure, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, freedom). When the unbeliever professes that people determine ethical values for themselves, the unbeliever implicitly holds that those who commit evil are not really doing anything evil, given the values which they have chosen for themselves. In this way, the unbeliever who is indignant over wickedness supplies the very premises which philosophically condone and *permit* such behavior, even though at the same time the unbeliever wishes to insist that such behavior is *not* permitted -- is "evil."

What we find, then, is that the unbeliever must secretly *rely upon* the Christian worldview in order to make sense of his argument from the existence of evil which is *urged against* the Christian worldview! Antitheism presupposes theism to make its case.

The problem of evil is thus a logical problem for the unbeliever, rather than the believer. As a Christian, I can make perfectly good sense out of my moral revulsion and condemnation of child abuse. The non-Christian cannot. This does not mean that I can explain why God does whatever He does in planning misery and wickedness in this world. It simply means that moral outrage is consistent with the Christian's worldview, his basic presuppositions about reality, knowledge, and ethics. The non-Christian's worldview (of whatever variety) eventually cannot account for such moral outrage. It cannot explain the objective and unchanging nature of moral notions like good or evil. Thus the problem of evil is precisely a philosophical problem for unbelief. Unbelievers would be required to appeal to the very thing against which they argue (a divine, transcendent sense of ethics) in order for their argument to be warranted.



## Resolving the Alleged Paradox

The unbeliever might at this point protest that, even if he as a non-Christian cannot meaningfully explain or make sense of the view that evil objectively exists, nevertheless there still remains a paradox within the set of beliefs which constitute the *Christian's own* worldview. Given his basic philosophy and commitments, the Christian certainly can and does claim that evil is real, and yet the Christian also believes things about the character of God which together seem incompatible with the existence of evil. The unbeliever might argue that, regardless of the ethical inadequacy of his own worldview, the Christian is still -- on the Christian's *own* terms -- locked into a logically incoherent position by maintaining the three following propositions:

1. GOD IS ALL-GOOD.
2. GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL.
3. EVIL EXISTS.

However the critic here overlooks a perfectly reasonable way to assent to all three of these propositions.

If the Christian *presupposes* that God is perfectly and completely good -- as Scripture requires us to do -- then he is committed to evaluating everything within his experience in the light of that presupposition. Accordingly, when the Christian observes evil events or things in the world, he can and should retain consistency with his presupposition about God's goodness by now *inferring* that God has a *morally good reason* for the evil that exists. God certainly must be all-powerful in order to be God; He is not to be thought of as overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. And God is surely good, the Christian will profess -- so any evil we find must be compatible with God's goodness. This is just to say that God has planned evil events for reasons which are morally commendable and good.

To put it another way, the apparent paradox created by the above three propositions is readily resolved by adding this fourth premise to them:

4. GOD HAS A MORALLY SUFFICIENT REASON FOR THE EVIL WHICH EXISTS.

When all four of these premises are maintained, there is no logical contradiction to be found, not even an apparent one. It is precisely part of the Christian's walk of faith and growth in sanctification to draw proposition 4 as the conclusion of propositions 1-3.

Think of Abraham when God ordered him to sacrifice his only son. Think of Job when he lost everything which gave his life happiness and pleasure. In each case God had a perfectly good reason for the human misery involved. It was a mark or achievement of faith for them not to waver in their conviction of God's goodness, despite not being able to see or understand why He was doing to them what He did. Indeed, even in the case of the greatest crime in all of history -- the crucifixion of the Lord of glory -- the Christian professes that God's goodness was not inconsistent with what the hands of lawless men performed. Was the killing of Christ evil? Surely. Did God have a morally sufficient reason for it? Just as surely. With Abraham we declare, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). And this goodness of God is beyond challenge: "Let God be true, though all men are liars" (Romans 3:4).

## The Problem is Not Logical, But Psychological

It turns out that the problem of evil is not a logical difficulty after all. If God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists, as the Bible teaches, then His goodness and power are not challenged by the reality of evil events and things in human experience. The only logical problem which arises in connection with discussions of evil is the unbeliever's philosophical inability to account for the objectivity of his moral judgments.

The problem which men have with God when they come face to face with evil in the world is not a logical or philosophical one, but more a psychological one. We can find it emotionally very hard to have faith in God and trust His goodness and power *when we are not given the reason* why bad things happen to us and others. We instinctively think to ourselves, "why did such a terrible thing occur?" Unbelievers internally cry out for an answer to such a question also. But God does not always (indeed, rarely) provide an explanation to human beings for the evil which they experience or observe. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Deuteronomy 29:29). We might not be able to understand God's wise and mysterious ways, even if He told us (cf. Isaiah 55:9). Nevertheless, the fact remains that He has not told us why misery and suffering and injustice are part of His plan for history and for our individual lives.

So then, the Bible calls upon us to trust that God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which can be found in this world, but it does not tell us what that sufficient reason is. The believer often struggles with this situation, walking by faith rather than by sight. The unbeliever, however, finds the situation intolerable for his pride, feelings, or rationality. He refuses to trust God. He will not believe that God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists, unless the unbeliever is given that reason for his own examination and assessment. To put it briefly, the unbeliever will not trust God unless God subordinates Himself to the intellectual authority and moral evaluation of the unbeliever -- unless God consents to trade places with the sinner.

The problem of evil comes down to the question of whether a person should have faith in God and His word or rather place faith in his own human thinking and values. It finally becomes a question of ultimate authority within a person's life. And in that sense, the way in which unbelievers struggle with the problem of evil is but a continuing testimony to the way in which evil entered human history in the first place. The Bible indicates that sin and all of its accompanying miseries entered this world through the first transgression of Adam and Eve. And the question with which Adam and Eve were confronted way back then was precisely the question which unbelievers face today: should we have faith in God's word simply on His say-so, or should we evaluate God and His word on the basis of our own ultimate intellectual and moral authority?

God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of a certain tree, testing them to see if they would attempt to define good and evil for themselves. Satan came along and challenged the goodness and truthfulness of God, suggesting He had base motives for keeping Adam and Eve from the delight of the tree. And at that point the whole course of human history depended upon whether Adam and Eve would trust and presuppose the goodness of God. Since they did not, the human race has been visited with torments too many and too painful to inventory. When unbelievers refuse to accept the goodness of God on the basis of His own self-revelation, they simply perpetuate the

source of all of our human woes. Rather than solving the problem of evil, they are part of the problem.

Therefore, it should not be thought that "the problem of evil" is anything like an intellectual basis for a lack of faith in God. It is rather simply the personal *expression* of such a lack of faith. What we find is that unbelievers who challenge the Christian faith end up reasoning in circles. Because they lack faith in God, they begin by arguing that evil is incompatible with the goodness and power of God. When they are presented with a logically adequate and Biblically supported solution to the problem of evil (*viz.*, God has a morally sufficient but undisclosed reason for the evil that exists), they refuse to accept it, *again* because of their lack of faith in God. They would rather be left unable to give an account of *any* moral judgment whatsoever (about things being good or evil) than to submit to the ultimate and unchallengeable moral authority of God. That is too high a price to pay, both philosophically and personally.