

Chapter 17: God, & the Problem of Evil

SYDNEY, 26 Dec. 2001

Homes burned to the ground and hundreds of people were evacuated as firefighters spent Christmas Day battling 70 fires blazing across NSW and the ACT.

Fanned by winds of up to 90km/h, fires spread across the state from Ballina in the north, to the lower Blue Mountains, Glenmore Park in Sydney's west, Helensburgh in the south and Huskisson on the south coast.

The Daily Telegraph 26 Dec. 2001

INDIA , Nov. 10, 1999

India cyclone death toll estimated at 10,000; epidemic feared

Francis said more than 10 million were estimated to have lost their homes, livestock or livelihood. Many people were dying of starvation apart from gastroenteritis, he said. CNN 10 Nov '99

ISTANBUL, Turkey, Aug. 20, 1999

"Two devastating earthquakes hit Turkey within the space of less than three months during 1999. The first – with its epicentre at Izmit in Turkey's heavily populated northwest – struck at 0302 hours local time on 17 August. It left some 17,000 people dead and thousands more homeless. The second struck just 100km away on 12 November, killing hundreds more.

Voices of Trapped People Still Heard; Death Toll Tops 10,000;

Police Detain Three Contractors

Workers load the bodies of earthquake victims on a container truck after pulling them from beneath the rubble in Sakarya , Turkey . With so many corpses not yet buried, officials fear an epidemic of disease

may follow Tuesday's earthquake. U.N. officials were quoted as saying as many as 35,000 were still buried beneath rubble, but Turkish officials refused to confirm that figure. There were, no doubt, thousands still buried.”

ABCNEWS

Every now and then we come across striking news as above. The initial reaction of many of us is that we immediately sit up on our comfortable lounges in front of the TV ask: How could this happen? What kind of world is this? And finally: How could a Benevolent and Almighty God possibly allow such evil to occur?

You may be in a position to counsel people through their pain and grief, but you don't really confront the question until you are caught in tragic circumstances. It is then and only then that many questions will challenge your mind and test your faith. This chapter aims at helping you finding the roots of the problem and how to stand up to it creatively.

From the time that mankind began their life on earth; they have been the victims of many natural disasters, such as fatal bacteria and viruses, earthquake, flood, tornado, lightning, fire, draught. This bitter experience, for many, has made a considerable sense of the topsy-turvy nature of the world with a conclusion that our world does not seem to present a single, uniform goodness, under the guidance of a good God, but rather a distressing mixture of good and evil with no one apparently in final control.

Historical Background

The problem of evil and insufficiencies in the world is one of the most ancient philosophical problems that man has faced.

In Greek mythology, Mount Olympus believed by ancient Greeks to be the dwelling place of mischievous bunch of gods. They are forever plotting against each other and each other's devotees.

Historically, man has been offering animals or even human sacrifices to please gods of storm, flood, etc. Each god would have also his or her preferences in sacrifice.

For example, Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning, has a taste for cock, sheep, crab, and turtle sacrifices. Some natural disasters still carry their mythical names. The name hurricane comes from the mighty storm god Hurikan. Volcano also has its name from Vulcan, the god of fire in Roman mythology.

In Christian theology evil act began right from the creation of Adam and Eve when Adam disobeyed God and the original sin was committed.

God and the problem of evil

Atheist philosophers are usually agnostic in that they claim there is no ample proof for the existence of God without any claim of proof for the non-existence of God.

In a debate between Bertrand Russell and father F. Copleston which was broadcast in 1948 on BBC, Copleston asked Russell: “*Would you say that the non-existence of God can be proven?*” Russell answers: “*No, I should not say that. My position is agnostic.*” 156

As a challenge to theism, however, the problem of evil has been posed in the form of one of the following dilemmas:

1) Proving the non-existence of God: The topsy-turvy nature of the world as we experience it, is inconsistent with the existence of God. In order for God to exist, there must be a perfectly good world and if there is an evil in the world, which obviously is, it proves that there is no deity and final control over the world.

2) Proving the duality of deity: another dilemma that the problem of evil poses is a dualist approach to the universe. Dualism suggests that there are two major forces in the world. One is the creator of all that is good and the other is the creator of evil.

In the history of development of religion there has been some religions classified as forms of religious dualism. Manichæism for instance is a religion founded by the Persian Mani in the latter half of the third century and Zoroastrianism are regarded classic examples of dualism.

3) Limiting Divine Attributes: A very famous challenge to theism is that the existence of evil limits at least one of the three divine attributes of God. God is Omnipotent, Omniscient and Most Merciful and Benevolent. The argument as propounded by the Scottish philosopher; David Hume (1711–1776) is:

“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 there is evil?”²

In other words, 1) either God is able to abolish all evil and He wills to do so, 2) or He wills but is unable to do so, 3) or He is able but doesn't want to, 4) or He doesn't want and is unable to abolish the evil. The first hypothesis is against our findings and the rest result in limiting God's attributes.

This challenge suggests that unless one of the divine attributes is limited the problem of evil cannot be solved³. Theists however disagree on limiting God's attributes, and hence they need to find a solution for Hume's argument.

4) Insufficiency of Wisdom: Finally that last but not the least challenge for theism posed by the problem of evil is that existence of evil proves that there is

no sufficient wisdom governing the world. They argue as why the wise God has not created the world in a way that no evil exist or is empowered? Why one has to be born blind, another deaf and the third disabled? Insufficiency is not consistent with wisdom.

Definition

In order for us to look for a solution for the problem of evil, we ought to firstly find out what the evil is all about. We usually label something evil when we assume its the cause of a harm any harm to us. Thus, *Evil* is that which is morally bad or wrong, or that which causes harm, pain, or misery. An earthquake is regarded an evil due to its devastating harms and pain to humankind, so is a bloody war and a fatal bacteria.

Initial Evil & Real Evil

Many things may also initially appear evil and bad to us but a closer and more precise look suggests that they are very useful and good. Similarly, we may consider certain things good for us in the beginning, but after a professional consultation we conclude that it is evil and hence must be avoided.

Imagine a very tempting food when you are ill in comparison to a bitter medication with a disgusting taste. Initially, your temptation desirous towards the food, and refrains from taking the medicine, in spite of the fact that the first is really harmful and hence evil for your body and the latter is good.

Therefore, we need to be very careful of which basis are we attributing an action or an event to be good or evil. Is it solely due to it's seemingly harm or benefit to me? Is it because it appears to be good or evil to me? Is it only harmful to me or to every body? Have I thoroughly examined all different impacts of it and then concluded that it's evil?

Therefore, in the realm of humankind, the real good is what eventually beneficial for mankind, and bad is what eventually harmful. Thus, if there be a volcano or earthquake or lightning with absolutely no harms to humans, is not regarded as evil.

Similarly, if there were no difference physically or mentally between a disabled child and an able one, and they were both regarded normal, there would be no pain and hence no evil would be concluded.

Types of Evil

Another key point to arrive at the best answer for the problem of evil is to identify and distinguish between different types of evil.

Leibniz (1646–1716) the German philosopher and mathematician in his famous book ‘*Essays in Theodicy 4 on the Goodness of God*’ has divided the examples of evil into three categories:

1. *Metaphysical evil*: This is an evil, which has prevailed the present world. This is due to the limitation possessed by the world, which makes it by nature unable to be possibly any better.
2. *Physical evil* , which includes all physical phenomena that causes harm to man, from bacteria, viruses to natural disasters like earthquake, volcano, and hurricane.
3. *Moral evil*: all pain and suffering caused by man's misuse of the gift of free will, such as all criminal acts.

Out of all the three different types of evil, what has been really the major concern of the theologians, are the last two. Also, as the third type of evil is more of a moral discussion, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Thus, I shall be dealing mainly with what is called natural evil that is by and large has no human cause behind it.

Suggested Answers

As old as the problem of evil is, there has been, and is a considerable diversity of opinions suggested about it. The following the major ones.

Christian Responses

According to John hick; the contemporary theologian, there are three main Christian responses to the problem of evil: “The Augustinian response, hinging upon the concept of the fall of man from an original state of righteousness; the Irenaean response hinging upon the idea of the gradual creation of a perfect humanity through life in a highly imperfect world; and the response of modern process theology, hinging upon the idea of a God who is not all-powerful and not in fact able to prevent the evils arising either in human beings or in the processes of nature.” 5

The main traditional Christian response to the problem of evil was first formulated by St. Augustine (354–430) and has constituted the majority report of the Christian mind through the centuries, although it has been much criticized in recent times.

According to Augustine, evil always consists of the malfunctioning of something that is in itself good. He gives the example of blindness that is the lack of the proper functioning of the eye.

As for moral sins, he argues that the fall of angelic and human beings were the origin or moral evil and sin. And natural evils are the punishment of human sins. Thus, according to Augustine, “*All evil is either sin or the punishment for sin.*”

As for physical evils, we know now that they existed long before human beings came upon the scene.

Today signs of arthritis have been found in the bones of some prehistoric animals; that is hundred of millions of years before Homo sapiens emerged.

In short, Augustinian response, represent the Christian and Hebrew traditional philosophy according to which man has himself brought about the evil from which he suffers by transgressing the law of God, on obedience to which his happiness depended.

The second Christian response is that of Saint Irenaeus.

The third response is a modern development in which a number of Christian theologians have adopted known as process theodicy.

Process theodicy holds that God cannot be unlimited in power but interacts with the process of the universe, which God has not created but is nevertheless able to influence.

A systematic version of this theology is offered by a leading contemporary Christian theologian David Ray Griffin's publication: **God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy**: “ *God does not refrain from controlling the creatures simply because it is better for God to use persuasion, but because it is necessarily the case that God cannot completely control the creatures .*” 6

According to Process Theodicy God is a part –though a uniquely basic part– of the universe itself, unable to either barrier its fundamental structure or to intervene directly in its evil, since it is not within God's power to prevent it. According to this, all evils are just part of the actual process of the universe.

Obviously this is a free ticket to ancient Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism of dualism, which is far from the God of the Bible let alone the Quran. Process' God is not worthy of worship and praise since he is not an omnipotent deity.

1. Why I am not a Christian, p. 144

2. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 1779

3. One of the most famous novels on the subject of God and evil is “ When bad things happen to good people” [3] by Rabbi Harold Kushner. His son's long illness inspired him to write a book on the subject to help many who have been in the similar predicament as his. Yet, in spite of confirming that God is indeed all-good, he fails to affirm that God is also all-powerful

4. Theodicy (justice of God) is a technical term formulated by Leibniz for attempts to solve the theological problem of evil.

5. Philosophy of Religion, p.41

6. p.276

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