

"DEFEATERS" I: EVIL AND SUFFERING

'DEFEATERS' AND YOU

Technically, very few people who disbelieve in Christianity really hold that "Christianity is not true." To say "A is not true" means "I have examined and weighed the claims and evidence for 'A' (Christianity) and have found it lacking." Rather, what most skeptics are actually saying is: "Christianity just *can't* be true". This statement means "I know that 'B' is true, and if 'B' is true, then 'A' (Christianity) simply can't be." In philosophical terms, the skeptic is saying that she has a 'defeater' for Christianity. A defeater is a one belief that automatically makes another belief invalid. A non-believer with a 'defeater' is saying: "I don't really have to sit and listen and examine and weigh all the Christian claims and evidence. I know that it just cannot be true."

What are the 'defeaters'? The following list is distilled from books and experience. They mainly operate informally, in 'oral tradition' among educated (and less educated) people in our culture. There are others still around, but these are the ones particularly potent today.

1. The 'Freud/Marx Objection'. *People believe Christianity because it is useful to their psychological and social purposes. a) Freud version: You have a psychological need to believe. It is a way to deal with shame and the sense of helplessness in the universe. b) Marx-Neitzsche version: You have a social-cultural need to believe. You need to legitimize your exercise of power over other races or classes groups of people. Religion is exclusionary by definition.*

2. Historical criticism. *We can't trust historical documents like the Bible. a) Modern version: These documents record miraculous events; they cannot be empirically accurate. b) Post-modern version: All history is written from the perspective of the winners. The Bible was written by church leaders to consolidate power. We must use a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' on it.*

3. Religious pluralism. *Look at all the religions of the world. Most are have served their cultures well. How can Christianity possibly insist that it is the only true one, or the superior one? Don't you see that you'd not even believe Christianity if you were raised in a different culture?*

4. Evil and injustice. *a) Theoretical version: Look at all appalling evil and suffering in the world. If God is good and powerful, he'd stop it. Therefore the traditional all-good, all-powerful God can't exist. b) Practical version: I just can't believe in a God who would allow X to happen to me (or, to these people I know and love).*

There are multiple reasons why you as leaders need to know how to think through these.

- You need it, primarily, to help newer or younger Christians with their own doubts and struggles. They are surrounded by people and institutions that take for granted the potency of these objections to overturn any serious Christian faith. You need to help them think them through and show them that they do not 'defeat' faith.
- You need it for yourself personally. The reason these defeaters are so widely held is because they are all 'half-truths'. They are partly right, or they do a valid critique on forms of 'religion' that the Bible critiques as well. Because they are partly right, they are going to pose challenges to nearly *any* thoughtful person in this culture. If you are reflective, they will force you to wrestle and come out more clear and grounded in your faith. You shouldn't avoid taking them on for yourself, or denying that they are a problem for you.
- You need it, thirdly, to talk to people who don't believe. I put it third because Christians are too eager to take counter-arguments (like the ones I'm going to give you) and "use them on people". This often hardens opposition and even confirms a doubter's worst fear about the heavy-handedness of believers! You should be completely aware of and conversant with the basic responses to each defeater so you can draw on them in pieces as you engage friends who don't accept Christianity. Never 'dump' a whole set of arguments on someone! Salt and pepper your conversation with them when appropriate.

Introduction to the problem of 'evil and suffering':

It is important immediately to distinguish between the 'personal' or pastoral problem of evil and the 'theoretical' problem of evil. **1) Personal.** The Bible is filled with the cries of people--including the Biblical authors (!)--who are deeply perplexed and baffled by the magnitude and the unjust distribution of instances of evil and suffering. When you taste of this bitter cup, it creates a personal problem with God. This problem is not necessarily directed at belief in whether there is a God or not. It may or may not tempt you to doubt God's *existence*, but you will at least be tempted to mistrust, resent, or even hate God. **2) Theoretical.** On the other hand, many thinkers have said that evil and suffering also poses a powerful argument against belief in the very existence of the all-powerful-but-good God of traditional faith. This is called the 'a-theological argument from evil'. (An "atheological argument" is an argument proving that God can not or probably does not exist.)

Why to distinguish the two: **1)** First, we should never treat a personal problem theoretically. It is cruel to argue with a person theoretically who is in the grip of suffering herself, even if she states the problem theoretically (as an emotional defense mechanism, perhaps). You may win the argument, but we want to connect to hearts, not win arguments. **2)** Second, we should also remember that the theoretical 'defense' (theodicy) of God in an unjust world hasn't failed just because it doesn't make you feel better. In other words, the practical and the theoretical problem of evil usually come together in our lives. We experience injustice and thus we pick up the theoretical objection-to-God-from-evil and say, "Sounds right to me!" When this happens, the doubter will frame his objection in a theoretical way, and he may get an excellent answer that really puts the theoretical to rest, but because of internal hurt, he won't concede it. But just because an argument doesn't make you feel good, doesn't mean it is invalid.

In short, the two problems have to be 'worked on together'. An answer to one is *not* necessarily an answer to the other. There are 'resources' in the Christian faith that address both problems, and in general I have found that you need to work a bit on both together. It's like walking: you need to step with one foot, then another. There are exceptions: a) If a person has had a very comfortable life (so far), and if his or her objection-to-God-from-evil is almost completely theoretical, it may be possible to lay it to rest with a purely theoretical treatment. b) More often, a person who is rather deep in suffering can be helped spiritually without any "arguments" at all--just through your being their faithful, non-preachy, sensitive, sympathetic friend. But most people need some address of both.

THE "THEORETICAL PROBLEM" OF SUFFERING

The Classic Statement of the Argument Against God from Evil.

Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered.

Is he 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?¹

The Most Potent Recent Statement. The most influential modern proponent of the a-theological argument from evil has been John Mackie. In his famous article "Evil and Omnipotence" he argued that evil makes the possibility of a good-but-omnipotent God impossible. Later, in his posthumous *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982) he seemed to back away and say that evil only made the existence of God improbable. Nevertheless, the modern version of the argument inspired by Mackie goes something like this:

1. *If God exists, there can be no evil unless he has a reason that would justify his permitting it.*
2. *There is evil.*
3. *There is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil.*
4. *Therefore, God does not exist.²*

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1980) p.63.

² As summarized by Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering", in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. M.J.Murray, (Eerdmans, 1999), p.84.

A Summary of Possible "Reasons" for Allowing Evil and Suffering

Obviously, it is crucial for answering the Atheological argument from evil to respond to the assertion ("Premise 3") that "there is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil". These have traditionally been called 'theodicies'. They are not without value, so here they are (briefly):

1. *Punishment* Theodicy. "Because humankind rebelled, the suffering of the world is just our deserved punishment for sin." *Helpful*: It is quite true that most objections to evil presuppose that we deserve a comfortable life from God. But that premise has been 'smuggled in' without support. How can you be so sure what kind of life we deserve from God? Maybe the 'problem of evil' is really--why does God allow so much happiness? *Problems*: But why does God allow the distribution of the 'punishment' to be so random, unfair? And why did God allow human sin-and-thus-evil in the first place? (John Gerstner)

2. *Free Will* Theodicy. "If God wanted us to freely choose the good, we would have to have been free to choose evil. The greater good of having true children (rather than robots) entails the risk of abuse of free will."³ *Helpful*: Human freedom is an enormous good. (Indeed, without freedom, *human* beings don't exist.) Perhaps this is worth the terrible evil that results from abuse of free will. *Problems*: But this still doesn't account directly for 'natural', non-human evil like earthquakes. Why is that necessary? Above all, why couldn't God have blocked the harm to others of our bad choices? Do I let my child run out in front of a speeding car 'to let him exercise his free will'? No! I block major harm to my child. Why doesn't God do that? (Alvin Plantinga)

3. *Natural Law* Theodicy. "Without a great deal of order and regularity in nature, we could not predict the effect of our choices, and if we can't predict the effect, our choices are meaningless. We can't have free will without natural laws that, if we break, rebound on us." *Helpful*: This is designed to answer the objection to the "Free Will" theodicy "why can't God let us choose and then shield us from harm?" *Problem*: Why couldn't God have set up natural laws that are less devastating in their effects. But mainly--this is too abstract. Most suffering does *not* happen in an orderly way, proportionate to bad choices. It is often random, undeserved, horrific. (Richard Swinburne, C.S.Lewis)

Why did we look at these, if none of them really provide a sufficient reason that would account for God's permission of evil and suffering? a) First, put together, they actually do provide plausible reasons for *some* of the evil in the world--maybe even a great deal. b) Yet, all together, it is hard to insist that they allow us to see how God would be justified in permitting all the evil we see in the world.

The Power of Neither Denying nor Providing a Reason for Allowing Evil and Suffering

It is much more humble, wise, and Biblical *not* to try at all to posit or provide a 'reason' for why God allows evil and suffering. On the other hand, it really is rationally invalid to insist that there cannot be one.

I look inside my pup-tent and I don't see a St. Bernard. It is then very probable that there is no St. Bernard in my tent. That is because if there were one, it is highly likely I would have seen it. It's not easy for a St. Bernard to avoid detection in a small tent. Again I look inside my tent and I don't see any noseems (very small midges with a bite all out of proportion to their size). This time it is not particularly probable that there are no noseems in my tent. The reason is that even if there were noseems there I wouldn't see 'em; they're too small to see.

³ J.P. Sartre puts this very well: "The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved...If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone." *Being and Nothingness* (New York: 1956), p.367.

Now the question is whether God's reasons, if any, for permitting such evils...are more like St. Bernards or more like noseeums. Suppose the fact that God has a reason for such evils. Is it likely that we would be the first to know? Given that he is omniscient and given our very substantial epistemic limitations, it isn't at all surprising that his reasons...[might] escape us.⁴

Why does God permit all this evil...? Christians must concede that they don't know. That is, we don't know in any detail...But our grasp of the fundamental way of things is at best limited...and so there is no reason to think that if God did have a reason for permitting the evil in question, that we would be the first to know...[So] we may know that God [could] permit evil because he can achieve a world he sees as better by permitting evil than by preventing it [immediately]; and what God sees as better is, of course, better. But we cannot see why our world..would be better, or what, in any detail, is God's reason for permitting a given specific...evil. I should like to mention [a] point, however, that is of special significance.⁵

In short, the Atheological Argument from Evil falls apart at 'Premise 3'. That premise is based on the following *non sequitur*:

1. God would have to have a good reason for allowing evil and suffering.
2. I can't think or perceive of any.
3. Therefore, there cannot be any.

That obviously is fallacious reasoning. In fact, whatever possible reason there might be for allowing suffering and evil, it would be extremely complex. Most of us would recognize that *Henry V* is more valuable than a comic strip, but would a 5 year old child be able to grasp what that value is? Would he be able to do so with any amount of explanation? No. In the end, a 5 year old would have to take it on the teacher's or parent's authority. When it comes to the issue of evil and suffering, wouldn't the difference between our knowledge and God's be considerably greater than that?

If you look up the discussion by Plantinga footnoted above, and especially if you look up the recent work of Christian philosophers he cites, I think it is would be fair to conclude that there is no longer any confident consensus among philosophers that Evil and Suffering 'disprove' the Christian God. That may have been a prevailing view in mid-century, but a rather large hole has been punched in the old David Hume objection. We've summarized that "hole" above.

The "Boomerang" Effect of the Argument Against God from Evil

Not only does the Argument Against God from Evil not succeed, but it actually has a 'boomerang effect'. Again, we look to the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga.

It is indeed true that suffering and evil can occasion spiritual perplexity and discouragement; and of all the anti-theistic argument, only the argument from evil deserves to be taken really seriously. But I also believe there is at least as strong an...argument [for the reality of God] from evil as against....The most appalling kinds of evil involve human cruelty and wickedness: Stalin and Pol Pot, Hitler and his henchmen....But could there really be any such thing as horrifying wickedness if [there were no God and we just evolved]? I don't see how. An [atheistic] way of looking at the world has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort....and thus no way to say there is any such thing as genuine and appalling wickedness. There can be such a thing only if there is a way that rational creatures are supposed to live, obliged to live....Atheism can [speak of] foolishness--acting contrary to what you take to be your own interests, but it cannot accommodate appalling wickedness. Accordingly, if you think

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: 2000), p. 466-467.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived" in *Philosophers Who Believe* ed. Kelly James Clark, (IVP, 1993), pp.72.

there really is such a thing as horrifying wickedness (...and not just an illusion of some sort), then you have a powerful...argument [for the reality of God].⁶

If there *is* a God, then evil creates a very grave personal problem. Why is God doing this? Doesn't he understand? But if there is *no* God, then you don't really even have a good basis for being outraged. After all, nature is 'red in tooth and claw'. Death and destruction is perfectly natural. How can you consider *nature* to be *abnormal* when the 'strong eat the weak'. You can only object to injustice if you already believe in some kind of 'super-natural' moral standard (some standard that comes from outside of nature). And where does such a supernatural standard come from, if there is no God?

SUMMARY

1. If you object to the very existence of God because of suffering and evil, you are assuming that God cannot have a good reason for allowing suffering and evil. But why should there be no reason just because we can't think of one? *If you have a God great enough to be mad at for not preventing evil, you must have at the same time a God great enough to have a reason for allowing evil that we can't discern.* You can't have it both ways.
2. If you object to the very existence of God because of suffering and evil, you are actually creating *more* trouble for yourself intellectually. If there is a God, evil creates big problems. But if there is *no* God, you have even more problems. Injustice and evil are really illusions. They are perfectly natural.
3. Though we cannot discern the reason (the 'greater good') that God might have for allowing evil, we have a remarkable assurance that he does have one. He himself has suffered infinitely with us, for us, on the cross. Surely this proves: a) he is not indifferent to our suffering, since he became involved, but b) he has some good reason that he will not simply end it with a snap of his fingers. See below for more on this.

THE "PERSONAL PROBLEM" OF SUFFERING

There is no cogent argument that evil and suffering is incompatible with the existence of a holy and all-powerful God. But this does not mean that evil cannot constitute a 'non-argumentative defeater' for the reality of God. Horrifying evil is overwhelming. It is even worse when horrific evil happens to relatively good people while relatively bad people have really comfortable lives.

All of the arguments listed above can really be 'cold comfort' to a hurting heart. They must be made, but they usually only 'clear the ground' for what I believe is the *real* answer of Christianity to the problem of evil.

A Non-Argument Comfort to a Non-Argument-Doubt

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering....Some claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was [sent] to endure the agonies of hell itself...So we don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to accept suffering of which we can form no conception. The chief difference between Christianity and the other...religions lies just here. This doesn't answer the question "why [exactly] does God permit evil? But it helps the Christian trust God as his loving father...His aims and goals may be beyond our ken, but he himself is prepared to share much greater suffering than we in the pursuit of those ends. Christianity in this regard contains a

⁶ "A Christian Life Partially Lived", p.73

resource for dealing with this existential problem of evil--a resource denied in other theistic religions.⁷

Confronted with a particularly loathsome example of evil, I may find myself to be angry or resentful: "Why should I or my family suffer...when I don't have even a glimmer of an idea as to how my suffering contributes to some good?" But when I think of the divine willingness to endure greater suffering on my behalf, I am comforted or, at any rate, quieted...Notice that the comfort involved here does not go by way of probabilistic reasoning. [Just as the 'defeater' does not come by reasoning.]...And here is a respect in which Christian theism has a resource for dealing with evil that is not available to other forms of theism."⁸

An Existentialist's Testimony

Remarkably, Albert Camus recognized the power of the Christian 'answer' to evil and suffering, even though he did not personally embrace it.

[Christ's] solution consisted, first, in/ experiencing them. The god-man suffers too, with patience. Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to him since he suffers and dies. The night on Golgotha is so important in the history of man only because, in its shadows, the divinity ostensibly abandoned its traditional privilege, lived through to the end, despair included, the agony of death. Thus is explained the 'Lama sabachthani' and the frightful doubt of Christ in agony.⁹

Three Writers' Testimonies

*The other gods were strong, but Thou was weak.
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne.
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone.*

--Edward Shillito (quoted in E.Elliott)

We bow in gratitude for His willingness to take the cup the Father gave Him, a cup so immensely more bitter than the one He gives us. Shall we refuse it, or shall we grasp it with both hands, as it were, realizing it holds just what is most needful for our spiritual wholeness? It has been sweetened, as Rutheford put it, "at the lip of sweet Jesus". We drink it--by trustful acceptance--and God transforms it for His glory. Thus our very suffering may become the substance of sacrifice--a love-offering to God and a sacrifice of praise.

-- Elisabeth Elliott, *A Pathway through Suffering*

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, of the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.

-- Doestoevsky, *Brothers Karamozov*

Understand the general purposes for suffering.

⁷ "A Christian Life Partially Lived"., p.73.

⁸ *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.488

⁹ *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p.444. Translated and quoted by Bruce Ward in "Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus's Account of the Western Quest for Justice", *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1991), p. 213.

Christ suffered--not that we might not suffer, but so that in our suffering, we might become like Him.

We may group God's reasons into four categories. First, we suffer for our own sake: That we may learn who God is (Ps.46:1; Dn.4:24-37), That we may learn to trust (2 Cor.1:8-9) and obey (Ps.119:67-71) Him. That we may bear fruit (Jn.15:3) and be shaped into Christ's image (Rom.8:29) and reach maturity of character (Jas.14; 2 Cor.9:2,12:9; Rom.5:3-4; Heb.12:1-13). Second, we suffer for the sake of God's people: That they may have courage (Phil.1:14) and grace (2 Cor.4:15). That because of 'death' working in us, life may work in them (2 Cor.4:12; Gal.4:13; 1 Jn.3:16). Third, we suffer for the world's sake: That it may be shown what love and obedience mean (Jn.14:31; Mt.27:40-43). That the life of Jesus may be visible in ordinary human flesh (2 Cor.4:10). Fourth, we suffer for Christ's sake: That we may identify with him (Gal.2:20). That we may share in his sufferings and glory (1 Pet.4:12-13; Phil.1:29, 2:17, 3:8,10; Rom.8:17-18; Heb.2:9-10; 2 Cor.4:17).

-- Elisabeth Elliott *A Path through Suffering*

*His wise love feeds us with hunger. It fattens us with famine.
Lord! Spoil my fool's heaven here below, that I might have thy true heaven forever.*

--Samuel Ruthford, *Letters*

A Pastoral Letter to someone in suffering.

Your sister is much upon my mind. Her illness grieves me: were it in my power I would quickly remove it: the Lord can, and I hope will, when it has answered the end for which he sent it. I trust he has brought her to us for good....I wish you may be enabled to leave her, and yourself, and all your concerns, in his hands. He has a sovereign right to do with us as he pleases; and if we consider what we are, surely we shall confess we have no reason to complain: and to those who seek him, his sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace.

All shall work together for good; everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds....

You have need of patience, and if you ask, the Lord will give it. But there can be no settled peace till our will is in a measure subdued....Look upon him as a physician who has graciously undertaken to heal your soul of the worst disease, sin. Yield to his prescriptions, and fight against every thought that would represent it as desirable to be permitted to choose for yourself.

When you cannot see your way, be satisfied that he is your leader. When your spirit is overwhelmed within you, he knows your path: he will not leave you to sink. He has appointed seasons of refreshment, and you shall find that he does not forget you. Above all, keep close to the throne of grace. If we seem to get no good by attempting to draw near him, we may be sure we shall get none by keeping away from him.

- John Newton, *Letters*

SUMMARY

The problem of evil and suffering is the strongest objection by far to the Christian faith. It is strong because it is an *irreducible* problem. It can never be removed by argument. It continues to weigh down Christians.

However, it is no real reason to abandon the Christian faith, because evil and suffering creates a *greater* problem for all alternative views and positions. Are you an atheist? Then you have no rational basis to even be outraged at suffering and evil. Are you a believer in Eastern religions, or Islam, or some other faith? Then you have a God who *does not suffer*. If, as in the Eastern

religions, God is impersonal, then your misery and outrage before suffering is illusory and unjustified. If you are the adherent of some other religion, you still have a God who has not suffered. Only the Christian faith shows us a God who takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself.

And what confirmation do we have that God has *some* good reason for allowing suffering and evil to (temporarily) continue? The cross. He *must* hate evil, too, or he wouldn't have done that. But he must have some good reason for letting history continue too. Maybe there is no way for him to destroy evil without destroying all of us, unless Jesus came and died for us.