

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

The problem of evil is the most serious of all problems concerning God's existence. It has been expressed in many different ways. David Hume said, "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 Atheist Niclas Berggren states the theodicy problem as such:

1. If God exists, he is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good.
2. The existence of suffering is incompatible with the existence of God.
3. Suffering exists.
4. God does not exist.²

Though this is deductive reasoning (I will show how inductive reasoning is far better in the area of apologetics) and attacks theodicy (I will show that defense is superior to theodicy), it does show the problem Christian apologists have to face. Ronald Nash puts it this way:

Since evil and suffering exist, it seems to follow that it is reasonable to believe that God doesn't want to eliminate evil (thus casting doubt on his goodness) or doesn't know how to eliminate evil (raising questions about his knowledge) or lacks the power.³

Some people have rejected God's omnipotence because of this reasoning.⁴ Others claiming to be Evangelicals have rejected God's omniscience in the sense of his knowing the future in every detail. Richard Rice expresses this idea:

As an aspect of his experience, God's knowledge of the world is also dynamic rather than static. Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires. We call this position the "open view of God" because it regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world.⁵

¹As quoted in Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 10.

²Niclas Berggren, Does the Free-Will Defense Constitute a Sound Theodicy? (Internet, Internet Infidels 1995-1997).

³Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 178.

⁴Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

⁵Clark Pinnock, etc., The Openness of God (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), p. 16.

These are serious deviations from orthodox Christianity as well as rational philosophy as even atheist Niclas Berggren pointed out in his first point. The problem of evil is serious, and an explanation is not easy. God is good, omnipotent (all-powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing). He does exist, and he does allow evil. We will see how all this can fit and how it is not irrational to believe in God even though evil is rampant in our world. First, we will look at the issues of deductive versus inductive reasoning and the difference between a theodicy and a defense. Next, we will look at the element of mystery. Third, we will look at the three defenses most commonly used for God's existence in the face of evil's existence. Finally, we will see how God has provided comfort and strength to live in a world filled with evil.

Different Ways of Dealing With the Problem of Evil

There are many different ways people deal with the problem of evil philosophically. The Zoroastrians, Manichaeists and others have embraced dualism. This philosophy says that there are two eternal principles equal in strength locked together in conflict (like Star Wars). They say that good will eventually win, but this is in direct conflict with their basic philosophical presuppositions. If these two eternal principles have been battling for eternity, then they have had eternity to see if one can win and therefore neither principle could ever win. This view is rejected by Christian philosophy because there is only one eternal Being who allowed evil to transpire. Think of it like this: What happens when an unstoppable force hits an immovable object? Obviously, one of them is not infinitely strong; this conundrum reveals that there can only be one infinite being. Dualism is found to be in error.

Another way of dealing with evil philosophically is to deny it. Hinduism as well as Christian Science denies the actuality of evil, pain and suffering. Hinduism teaches that all diversity and suffering are simply *maya* or illusion. This philosophy fails the pragmatic test; it doesn't work, and no one actually lives by it, because pain and suffering are real. Christian Philosophy rejects this philosophy as a form of escapism unfounded in Scripture or reason. 1 Peter 4:19 says, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." It is clear evil exists and in some sense, God wills it.

The atheist's solution to the problem of evil is that there is no problem because there is no god; this not only does away with the problem, it also does away with evil. If there is no objective standard (God), then everything becomes relative. If everything is here by chance and will eventually be gone when the Sun burns out, who's to say what I do to someone is morally significant? One could even argue that if we evolved by survival of the fittest then for the strong to take advantage of the weak is only natural, not morally wrong. Intuition (a source of knowledge which is debatable but seems to be evident) and conscience tells us that certain things are morally wrong. The Christian certainly must reject the atheist's solution because the Bible declares there is a God and there are morally binding laws on people (see Genesis 1:1). James Orr says:

I lay it down as a first principle that, in the Christian view, sin is that which absolutely *ought not to be* (authors emphasis). How that which absolutely ought not to be is yet permitted to exist under the government of a wise and holy God, is a problem we may not be able to solve; but the first thing to do is to hold firmly to the conception of sin itself. Sin, as such, is that which unconditionally ought not to be, which contradicts or infringes upon an unconditional law of right, and therefore can only be understood in the light of that which ought to be - of the moral good.⁶

The Christian philosophy says there is a God and there is evil, but how do we show that there is no problem with the problem of evil? Before we look into the problem we must state two preliminary ideas on how we will answer the problem. First, we must see that it is better as Christian apologists to argue inductively rather than deductively. Deductive arguments have the advantage of absolutely proving something, but they have the disadvantage that if the statement can't be shown to be absolutely true it is thrown out. Inductive arguments show the reasonableness of an argument, but not the logical certainty. There are some good arguments for the reasonableness of Christianity and there are some difficulties (i.e. the problem of evil). The case for Christianity cannot be absolutely proven logically, but it can be shown to be highly probable. Blaise Pascal said, "There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition."⁷ There are some good answers to the problem of evil, but they are not logically certain answers. There is room for faith, though faith founded on fact.⁸ There is a sense in which the problem of evil can be called an "inscrutable mystery."⁹

This leads us to the second preliminary idea that it is better to propose a defense rather than a theodicy. This idea was propounded by Alvin Plantinga who says, "A theodicy, then, attempts to tell us why God permits evil. Quite distinct from a Free Will Theodicy is what I shall call a Free Will Defense. Here the aim is not to say what God's reason is, but at most what God's reason *might possibly be*."¹⁰ A theodicy "seeks to 'justify the ways of God to man' (Milton), showing that God is in the right and is glorious and worthy of praise despite contrary appearances."¹¹ A defense merely seeks to show that the critic has not proven his or her case; it seeks

⁶James Orr, The Christian View of God and the World (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1989 [originally published 1887]), p. 171.

⁷As quoted in Bernard Ramm, Varieties of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1962), p. 46.

⁸John Warwick Montgomery, Faith Founded On Fact (Newburg, Indiana: Trinity Press, 1978).

⁹Henri Blocher, Evil and the Cross (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), p. 128.

¹⁰Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 28.

¹¹Edited by Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright and J.I. Packer, New Dictionary of Theology (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), p. 679.

to show that even under the difficulties, God's existence is possible. A defense burns the bridges that lead to disproving God's existence and leaves the building of new bridges that lead to accepting God's existence as probable to the positive apologetics (i.e. cosmological argument, teleological argument, moral argument). The theist only has to show the possibility of an explanation of why God allows evil even though he is benevolent, all-powerful and all-wise; he or she does not have to prove the explanation.

The Element of Mystery

A good defense for the Christian will consist of both Biblical and philosophical persuasions. The Bible does not deal directly with the question of "How can a good, all powerful God allow evil to run rampant in his universe?" The primary emphasis of Scripture is not the "whys" and origin of evil, but rather how to deal with evil and the end result of the eradication of evil. However, there are some implied understandings of Scripture that can be applied to our question. A major problem with the question itself is that it is anthropocentric rather than theocentric. If there is a God, then who are we to question his decisions? Job believed he was suffering unjustly. He did not understand the problem of suffering, which is a similar question to the problem of evil - How could a good, all-powerful God allow innocent people to suffer? Job demands an interview with God, so he can vindicate himself (Job 23:1-7). He gets the interview, but it doesn't go the way he expected. God does confront Job in Job 38-39. In rapid-fire succession God questions Job to see if Job has enough knowledge to understand the question and even accuse God. In 40:4-5 Job replies: "I am unworthy - how can I reply to you: I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer - twice, but I will say no more." God then barrages Job with more questions starting with the warning, "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" This is the question the proud atheist must answer as well. Job's final reply in 42:2-3 is worth noting:

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

Job admits that humans don't have enough data available and probably don't have the capacity to understand enough of all that the question entails to make a proper judgment. There is mystery involved in the question of why there is evil in this world because we probably don't have the capacity to understand (finiteness), and because we don't have the receptivity to understand (sinfulness). Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." There are things God doesn't reveal to us. The Bible teaches that God is transcendent, meaning he is so far above and beyond us that unless he reveals himself to us we could not know anything about him. The Bible also teaches that God is immanent, meaning that he has revealed himself to us and is close to us. A

part of his transcendence includes that his ways are not like our ways. Isaiah 55:8-9 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 29:16 says, "You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He did not make me'? Can the pot say of the potter, 'He knows nothing'?" If there is a God, then to question his justice is blasphemy. If there is a God then it makes sense that we would not be able to fully understand all of his ways - that would only be possible if we were God, which we are not. If there is a God then it is his standards of justice that are ultimate. This does not mean that God can change his standards or that he is above right and wrong. It does mean that right and wrong are not above him - in fact good is good because God is good - it is a part of his character. It is even impossible for God to lie because truthfulness is a part of his character (Hebrews 6:18). God's answer to a similar question as ours should cause a hesitancy to blurt out blasphemies: "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'why did you make me like this?'" Habakkuk asked a similar question to our question in Habakkuk 1:13: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" God never gives him an answer, but he does speak to him. In speaking to Habakkuk, he responds in faith, recognizing God will bring about justice in the end and he will give him strength to endure in the meantime.¹² The problem of evil does not disprove God as we will see and so we must practice humility and recognize our finiteness rather than rejecting God or judging God just because we don't understand him. We are finite and sinful people and therefore mystery must be allowed to enter the equation. Gerald Bray says, "Sin and the fall are realities which God has dealt with according to his wisdom. We may not understand their cause, but we have access to their cure, and it would obviously be silly to reject the latter simply because we cannot fully understand the former."¹³ We will look at the cure later.

The philosophical defense of Christianity consists of three major defenses. These three defenses can be used to answer both deductive as well as inductive arguments against God. They do not prove the Christian position and therefore are not properly theodicies, but they do show that there are possible reasons for a good, all-powerful God to allow evil for a time.

Answering the Deductive Problem of Evil

¹²Habakkuk chapter 3.

¹³Gerald Bray, The Doctrine of God (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), p. 92.

The atheologist claims that the Biblical set of beliefs are contradictory at least implicitly because "If we add the at least initially plausible premises that good is opposed to evil in such a way that a being who is wholly good eliminates evil as far as he can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do, then we do have a contradiction."¹⁴ There are two parts to this accusation that are far from being proven in the deductive sense. First, are there no limits to what an omnipotent being can do? Rubel Shelly answers this question:

Omnipotence is best understood as the ability to do anything that is not self-contradictory or in violation of moral perfection. To say that the deity is unable to make a rock so big he cannot lift it, an automobile whose dimensions are larger on the inside than the outside, a knife so sharp it can slice bread thinly enough to have only one side, or a round square is not to admit that things have been discovered that God *could* do if he had more power than he presently possesses.... To say that God cannot act in violation of his own moral perfection is simply to insist that he cannot act contrary to his inherent qualities, which cause him to be good, and to wish all things to be like him insofar as possible.¹⁵

Second is it true that a being who is wholly good will eliminate evil as far as he can? More than likely Mackie means eliminate evil immediately because the Bible does teach that God will eventually eliminate evil. In fact the Bible says God is waiting in order to give more opportunity for people to accept his forgiveness so they won't be caught in judgment when God does eliminate evil.¹⁶ Mackie probably means eliminate evil in the sense that it never exists. Ronald Nash gives a good summary of a Christian response to this problem:

Suppose that it is logically possible for God to eliminate some evil, but the elimination of that evil would result either in the existence of a greater evil or in the nonexistence of a greater good. If I hit my thumb with a hammer, the resulting pain is an evil. Suppose a doctor tells me he can eliminate the throbbing in my thumb by amputating my hand at the wrist. While the doctor would have eliminated one evil, he would have done so at the cost of a much greater evil. There seem to be many evils in the world that can be eliminated only by producing situations containing more evil or costing us some greater good. Suppose that many evils result from human free will or from the fact that our universe operates under natural laws or from the fact that humans exist in a setting that fosters soul-making. And suppose further that a world containing free will and natural law that fosters soul-making

¹⁴J.L. Mackie as quoted in Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason, p. 182.

¹⁵Rubel Shelly, Prepare To Answer (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 78.

¹⁶2 Peter 3:8-9.

contains more good than a world that does not. If it makes no sense for God to eliminate an evil that would bring about a state of affairs in which there would be less good or more evil, our newest candidate for the missing proposition - that a good being always eliminates evil as far as it can - may safely be dismissed as neither true nor an essential Christian belief.¹⁷

In an inductive defense of Christianity rather than a deductive theodicy the Christian only has to show a possible solution to the problem. It certainly cannot be proven that a supreme being could not have a good reason to allow evil for a time namely that eliminating the evil prematurely would bring about a greater evil or eliminating a greater good in the process of eliminating the evil.

The inductive problem of evil is formidable. This is a move from the claim that theism is illogical and proven to be false because of the existence of evil, to the claim that theism is probably false due to the quantity of evil in the world. We will now deal with the inductive problem of evil with three defenses (which also work for the deductive problem of evil).

Free Will Defense

The first and best defense is the Free Will Defense, which we will call FWD. As a theodicy free will has been used for centuries but with legitimate rebuttals. Free will does not prove God's existence in spite of the presence of evil, but as a defense it does give a possible reason why God allows evil. Dan Story states the FWD well:

God created Adam (and all people) to worship, obey, and have fellowship with Him - to love Him. Genuine love is inseparable from free will. God could have created Adam, and all other people, to think and act like robots. By divine mandate, God could have caused Adam not only to obey Him but to love Him. Would this have been genuine love? Of course not. Love can't be programmed; it must be freely expressed. God wanted Adam to show his love by freely choosing obedience. That's why God gave Adam a free will. A free choice, however, leaves the possibility of a wrong choice. Adam made the wrong choice, thereby allowing sin to enter the world.¹⁸

God allowed evil into this world possibly because it was the only way possible for the greater good of having people that freely choose to love him and each other. Hugh Ross says, "Without the element of free choice there wouldn't be the possibility for the expression of love - we would literally be robots."¹⁹ He gives the illustration of how a person could program their computer to tell the person it loves

¹⁷Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason, p. 186.

¹⁸Dan Story, Defending Your Faith (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), p. 170-172.

¹⁹Hugh Ross, Video "How Could A Loving God...?" (Pasadena: Reasons to Believe, 1992).

them, even with loving intonations, but it is just not the same as that person's wife telling him she loves him. Love demands freedom and freedom demands the possibility of evil. Berggren gives three arguments against the FWD:

1. FWD does not cover non moral evils.
2. People don't have free will according to the Bible.
3. God could have made people free without choosing evil.²⁰

We will answer these objections in reverse order. The third argument is well stated in the form of a question by J.L. Mackie: "If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?"²¹ Mackie seems to misunderstand what it means to freely choose. Plantinga explains, "Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*."²² Plantinga goes on to say that it is possible that "God is omnipotent, and it was not within His power to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil."²³ We have already seen that God's omnipotence does not mean he can do absolutely anything including the logically impossible. Creating free humans that will choose to do good always is logically impossible, because he would have to make them choose the good which takes away from their freedom.

Berggren's second argument is that people don't have free will if they are born with a sinful nature. This is certainly a problem for the pure Calvinist. R.K. Wright, a Calvinist who rejects the FWD, says:

God is the first cause of everything that happens (including all evils), because as the Creator he causes "whatsoever comes to pass." "Second causes" are the later things in the sequence of events (like Satan, Adam or me), from whom sins directly proceed. These secondary causes are the author(s) of sin because they are the direct causes of it. According to the Westminster Confession, God is holy and separated from my sin by not being the direct cause (or author) of it. A cause may be ultimate (of which God is the original cause) or it may be proximate, such as the sinner. Therefore the sinner, not God, is the author of sin for the same reason that a father is not the author of his son's book.²⁴

²⁰Niclas Berggren, Internet article.

²¹As quoted in Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason, p. 190.

²²Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 30.

²³Ibid., p. 45.

²⁴R.K. McGregor Wright, No Place for Sovereignty (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996), p. 200.

First of all Wright's example of a father not being the author of his son's book is a non sequitur - his father was not the first cause of the book. But this argument is also silly and makes God the author of sin. If in billiards I shoot the white ball and it hits the eight ball into the corner pocket, it is certainly not the white ball's fault as the secondary cause - it is my fault as the first cause. If I hire a hit man to kill someone, I am at fault even though I was not the immediate cause of the death. If God causes us to do evil then he is the author of evil and is guilty. But James 1:13 says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." Matthew 18:6 says, "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." This would certainly be true of God as well as humans. If the doctrine of original sin strips humans of free will in all senses of the term then it does hinder the FWD. But humans don't always choose to sin. Total depravity (the result of the sinful nature we inherit from Adam) does not mean we are as bad as we could be. We do, in some sense, still have a limited free will. If the idea of prevenient grace is true then it is possible for God to bring us to a place of freedom of choice, like Adam, even after we sin when the word of God comes in the power of the Spirit. This idea is accepted by Arminians and even some Calvinists (i.e. Millard Erickson²⁵). Also it is not at all clear that the Enlightenment view of the autonomy of humans, including radical individualism is true. We are our brother's keeper and we are all in this together as even social Darwinists would concede. James Orr states:

The former idea, at all events, is now thoroughly incorporated into modern habits of thinking, under the name of the "solidarity" of the race. There is an individual life, and there is a social life in which we all share. The race is an organism, and the individual, if we may so speak, is a cell in the tissue of that organism, indissolubly connected for good or evil with the other cells in the unity of a common life. From this follows the conception of heredity, which plays so important a part in modern theories. Man is not simply bound up with his fellows through the external usages and institutions of society. "He has been produced by, and has become a part of them,...he is organically related to all the members of the race, not only bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, but mind of their mind." He is a bundle of inherited tendencies, and will in turn transmit his nature, with its new marks of good and evil, to those who come after him. It is easy to see that this conception of heredity, and of the organic unity of the race, is but the scientific expression of a doctrine which is fundamental to the Scriptures, and which underlies all its teaching about sin and salvation.²⁶

²⁵Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1985), pp. 930-933 though Erickson would call it effectual calling and see it is irresistible.

²⁶James Orr, The Christian View of God and the World, p. 169-170.

Would it have been better for God to have created autonomous, individualistic, non-interdependent humans? I doubt it. We are in this together. The Bible does say I will not be eternally punished for someone else's sin (including Adam's) in Ezekiel chapter 18. Prevenient grace seems to be a Biblical option (Acts 16:14).²⁷ Therefore the doctrine of original sin does not hinder the FWD.

The last problem Berggren had with the FWD is that it does not cover non-moral evils such as earthquakes, hurricanes, etc. It is certainly true that the world is messed up. The "creation was subjected to frustration" and longs to be "liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:20-21). A curse has been placed on this earth because of Adam's sin (Genesis 3:17-18). What we call natural evils can be direct punishment by God on humanity (the flood in Genesis 6), or indirect tragedy on humanity because of the curse's pervasive nature. Also much of what Berggren calls non-moral evil is actually moral evil caused by Satan and his demons. This is what Gregory Boyd calls a "warfare worldview":

Stated most broadly, this worldview is that perspective on reality which centers on the conviction that the good and evil, fortunate or unfortunate, aspects of life are to be interpreted largely as the result of good and evil, friendly or hostile, spirits warring against each other and against us.²⁸

Though this answer might seem repugnant to "enlightened" people, it is certainly not illogical. Einstein postulated the possibility of up to eleven dimensions of space and time. Whose to say there isn't an unseen realm where angels and demons reside? How else can we account for the amount of evil in humanity? Hugh Ross says:

Many who argue that the existence of evil and suffering proves the nonexistence of an all-powerful, all-loving Creator have no idea that it proves just the opposite. Naturalistic materialism, the notion that the natural world accounts for itself and needs no outside explanation, cannot account for the evil and cruelty we see among humans. Survival of the fittest does not result in the behavior humans exhibit all over the planet toward the land itself and toward animals and fellow humans.²⁹

When we look at Satanism, Voodoo, Mass murderers, world leaders like Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin it is not too farfetched to say they might be possessed. Ravi

²⁷See Thomas Oden, The Transforming Power of Grace (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), chapter two.

²⁸Gregory Boyd, God at War (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), p. 13.

²⁹Hugh Ross, Beyond the Cosmos (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), p. 176.

Zacharias gives an illustration of someone converting to Christianity after seeing the amount of evil in this world:

One of the most remarkable conversions to Christianity was that of the poet W.H. Auden.... Jacobs narrates an event in 1940 when Auden entered a predominantly German section of a movie theater in Manhattan where the Third Reich's filmed version of its conquest of Poland was being shown. To the sheer shock and dismay of Auden, every time a Pole would appear on the scene, the angry screams of the crowd would resound in the theater. "Kill him...Kill them!" they would shout, somewhat reminiscent of the bloodthirsty cries of the Roman masses as they thronged the arena to witness the gladiatorial orgies of savagery and sadism.

Auden left the theater tremendously shaken and confounded by this experience of unmitigated hatred he had witnessed. His dismay lay not merely in his inability within his humanistic framework to find a solution to such a moral plague, but in his obvious inability to even explain the existence of such inhuman passions holding the mind in its grasp. He was having difficulty "spelling" evil, given his presuppositions. That struggle led to his Christian conversion, which coherently provided an explanation both to the depravity of man and an answer for its cure.³⁰

The plausible idea of Satan and his demons who rebelled against God before humanity's rebellion, answers both the problem of non moral evil as well as the extent of evil. One last thing in response to the extent of evil being a problem:

Before we begin to worry that there might be too much evil in the world, we need to answer a number of preliminary questions: Is there a limit to the amount of evil we might reasonably expect to find in a world created by God? What precisely is that limit? How might anyone arrive at a knowledge of that limit? Of course, there are no answers to these questions. And since there aren't, there is no objective means by which anyone could determine that a reasonable quantity of evil in the world had been exceeded. Claims that the existence of God is somehow made less plausible because of the quantity of evil in the world rest on the quicksand of subjective opinion.³¹

The FWD can really be seen as a part of the "Greater Good Defense" or GGD. Doug Erlandson defines the GGD: "A being is not morally culpable in allowing preventable evil if he has a 'morally sufficient reason' for so doing."³² Once again in a defense, as

³⁰Ravi Zacharias, Can Man Live Without God? (Dallas, Word, 1994), pp. 48-49.

³¹Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason, p. 198.

³²Doug Erlandson, "ANew Perspective on the Problem of Evil" (Internet: www.wavefront.com/~contra_m/antithesis/v2n2/ant_v2n2_evil.html), p. 1.

opposed to a theodicy, one only has to show the plausibility of the argument, not the actuality of it. I include the FWD in with the GGD because the greater good that comes out of free will is love. If love is forced it is really rape, not love. When we are allowed freedom to love we also have the option not to love. God deemed this love relationship with us important enough to allow the possibility of evil. This love relationship is seen as ultimate in importance to God when we see what he deems as the greatest commandment of all, and thus the most important commandment of all. A Pharisee asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" and Jesus responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."³³

To freely love God is a greater good that gives reason for why God would allow evil, even the amount we see in the world, for a time. This GGD also gives reasons for why there is not absolute proof for God's existence. If there was so much evidence that it would demand the unwilling to capitulate, there would be no reason for a loving response; this may be why God doesn't perform more miracles than what we see. God gives plenty of evidence for the sincere seeker to find him, but not so much that the disinclined would be forced to believe. There is room for faith, but it is faith founded on fact.

This proposition has been shown to be possible and therefore the atheologian has been answered. Even if the FWD is rejected the problem of evil can still be answered from a defense perspective. We don't have to know what God's reason is for allowing evil. We just need to know that it is not illogical that God could have a reason for allowing evil. Paul Helm, who rejects the FWD, says, 'One is that God has a good reason for permitting or ordaining evil, but that none of us has an inkling what that good reason is.'³⁴ Two other defenses can be added to the arsenal of the theist. They do not prove God's existence on their own, but they do compliment the FWD: The Natural Law Defense (NLD) and the Soul-Making Defense (SMD).

The NLD is defined by Ronald Nash (he actually defines the Natural Law Theodicy, but for our purposes we will use the same definition): "The natural law theodicy states that the existence of a lawlike and orderly creation is a necessary condition for a number of divine objectives. Just as it makes sense to believe that God endowed humans with significant moral freedom, it is also reasonable to believe that God placed these free moral agents in a universe exhibiting order."³⁵ In an orderly universe if the natural laws are broken consequences must follow. If someone shoots me with a bullet it will rip into my body and hurt me. Some might complain and say "Why didn't God create a different universe?" But no one has been able to show the possibility of this alternative universe. Others may say, "Why

³³Matthew 22:36-37.

³⁴Paul Helm, The Providence of God (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994), p. 200.

³⁵Ronald Nash, Faith and Reason, p. 200.

doesn't God intervene when bad is about to happen?" God indeed does intervene at times, but if he intervened at all times there would be no order, only a destabilized world where free and responsible actions would be impossible.

The final compliment to the FWD is the SMD. Nash defines the SMD: "The soul-making theodicy states that in order for God to produce the virtuous beings with whom he wants fellowship, these individuals must face challenges that teach them the intrinsic worth of the virtues he possesses perfectly."³⁶ John Frame counters this stating:

However, I think that it is unbiblical to turn this principle into a full-scale theodicy. For one thing, Scripture teaches that Adam was not created morally immature with a need to develop character through suffering. He was created good, and had he obeyed God, he would not have needed to experience suffering.³⁷

The SMD cannot be used as a theodicy or even as a defense unless it is accompanied by the FWD. But with the FWD it makes sense. Most would agree that the spoiled brat who is spared all pain and difficulty lacks good character. Character, like muscles is developed with difficulty – "No pain, no gain." Suffering develops character. The SMD and the NLD fit the FWD well. In many cases suffering can result in good. It helps build patients and character. The student who suffers through poverty to finish his education will benefit in the end. The disease of leprosy shows the necessity of pain. Pain is a warning system in our body to alert us of danger. Because the leper has no pain system he destroys his body unknowingly. Philip Yancey gives an excellent example of what can happen when we resist the blessing of pain:

A tragic example of someone not heeding the warning occurred in an NBA basketball game in which a star player, Bob Gross, wanted to play despite a badly injured ankle. Knowing that Gross was needed for the important game, the team doctor injected Marcaine, a strong painkiller, into three different places of his foot. Gross did start the game, but after a few minutes, as he was battling for a rebound, a loud *snap!* could be heard throughout the arena. Gross, oblivious, ran up and down the court two times, then crumpled to the floor. Although he felt no pain, a bone had broken in his ankle. By overriding pain's warning system with the anesthetic, the doctor caused permanent damage to Gross's foot and ended his basketball career. Pain is not God's great goof. The sensation of pain is a gift - the gift that nobody wants.³⁸

³⁶Ibid., p. 204.

³⁷John Frame, [Apologetics to the Glory of God](#) (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P and R Publishing, 1994), p. 164.

³⁸Philip Yancey, [Where Is God When It Hurts?](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 34.

Two Further Problems Answered

Albert Camus asked the question that if suffering is God's will then when we try to stop suffering (i.e. hospitals, medicine, etc.), we are fighting God. This can be answered when we realize God permits evil rather than causes it. God has both a permissive will and a causative will. Sometimes God causes what we might consider evil as punishment. When he does, it cannot logically be called evil, because it is justice, and justice is good. Sometimes God allows evil in the world to bring about the greater good (GGD, FWD). In this sense he doesn't cause it. When we understand this Francis Schaeffer's response to Camus is justified:

We can fight evil without fighting God, because God did not make things as they are now - as man in his cruelty has made them. God did not make man cruel, and He did not make the results of man's cruelty. These are abnormal, contrary to what God made, and so we can fight the evil without fighting God.³⁹

Another question some have is that if in heaven we don't have evil, why didn't God create us in heaven in the first place? And if we have free will in heaven then whose to say we won't choose evil again? When we freely choose God's way of salvation we also freely give up our freedom. Romans 6:20-22 says:

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

We must recognize our past freedom to sin was actually a slavery to sin. But when we are saved we voluntarily become slaves to righteousness - no longer free to sin. When we make Jesus our Lord we give up our freedom, but it is worth it. It is like marriage. Before we get married we decide to love and cherish our future spouse. When we get married we can no longer decide to love someone else the same way we commit to love our spouse - we give up our freedom, but it is worth it. But we need the freedom before the marriage otherwise it is not love. Our relationship to God is actually likened to a marriage in Revelation 19.

But the argument still goes that If God is all-powerful then why doesn't he get rid of evil? Let's suppose that you are God and you have the ability to make the decree to annihilate all evil. What would happen when you made that decree? For one thing you would be gone because you still have evil selfishness within you. Everyone else

³⁹Francis Schaeffer, The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1982), Vol. 1, p. 301.

would also be annihilated because we are all selfish and we all sin against what we know to be right. So do you see the difficulty with our easy solutions? Walter Martin makes an excellent point in discussing this problem:

If God interferes in our world and stops everything right now, man becomes autonotoms because only a sovereign decree superseding all human rights of choice can halt the evil which is within our nature exercising itself. But if he chooses not to do that and permits us to go on with evil then we raise our voices and our fists to heaven and we say, "You're cruel and inhuman and unjust, because you have the power to do it and you won't." Either way God can never win. If he interferes we are robots and we are no longer free and we protest. And if he doesn't interfere he is guilty because he doesn't use his omnipotence to stop us. Our solutions never work. That's why we must look at it from the perspective of heaven.⁴⁰

Pastoral Considerations

The above arguments entail the philosophical problem of evil. This is not very comforting to the person who is existentially experiencing evil. As I said before, the Bible does not deal so much with the "whys" of evil as it does with the solutions to evil. I would like to conclude with four helps for those in the midst of the struggle.

First don't blame God. This is our first inclination but it only compounds the problem. We have the freedom to choose our course in life. We do not have absolute freedom due to our situation in life, but we do have a limited but real freedom. In order to be free the possibility of choosing against God's will must be allowed; this results in evil. God allowed the possibility of evil but we brought it about by our choice. It is wrong to blame God for evil; we must blame ourselves.

Imagine this scenario: vandals break into a museum displaying works from Picasso's Blue Period. Motivated by sheer destructiveness, they splash red paint all over the paintings and slash them with knives. It would be the height of unfairness to display these works - a mere sampling of Picasso's creative genius, and spoiled at that - as a representative of the artist. The same applies to God's creation. God has already hung a "Condemned" sign above the earth, and has promised judgment and restoration. That this world spoiled by evil and suffering still exists at all is an example of god's mercy, not his cruelty.⁴¹

Freedom of choice is necessary for real love to be possible.

⁴⁰Martin, Walter. *The Existence of God*. San Juan Capistrano, California: Christian Research Institute, 1980 (Cassette).

⁴¹Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, p. 67-68.

In a perfectly fair world, morality would operate according to fixed laws, just like the laws of nature. Punishment for wrongdoing would work like physical pain. If you touch a flame, you are “punished” instantly with a pain warning; a fair world would punish sin just that swiftly and surely. Extend your hand to shoplift, and you'd get an electrical shock. Likewise, a fair world would reward good behavior: Fill out an IRS form honestly, and you'd earn a pleasure sensation, like a trained seal given a fish.

That imaginary world has a certain appeal. It would be just and consistent, and everyone would clearly know what God expected. Fairness would reign. There is, however, one huge problem with such a tidy world: it's not at all what God wants to accomplish on earth. He wants from us love, freely given love, and we dare not underestimate the premium God places on that love. Freely given love is so important to God that he allows our planet to be a cancer of evil in his universe - for a time.⁴²

The second thing we need to understand is that God is waiting for a good reason. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” If Jesus would have come back before January of 1976 I would not have the eternal life God promises to those who believe. I don't mind the suffering I endure now because I know that others will receive this wonderful gift of eternal life.

The third thing we need to understand is that Jesus is coming back someday and therefore suffering and evil are only temporary. Though seventy years of pain, even sheer torture is difficult, it is bearable when seen in the light of eternity. Seventy years is a blip on the time-line of eternity, next to nonexistent. After a few billion years in eternal bliss with God our pain will be a distant memory. Our hope is in the coming of Jesus - not in this life (though as we will see God comforts us in this life). Right now God is allowing evil to run its course so we can see that God's will is the best choice and so that as many as possible can be saved from evil's clutches. The origin of evil may be mysterious but its outcome is certain: justice and love shall overcome and reign for eternity. Christianity offers resources for coping with pain and overcoming evil, so even though evil exists we have not been abandoned and we are given a hope of deliverance from it.

Joni Eareckson Tada tells of a time when she visited a home for the mentally retarded. Usually when she visits a care facility and recounts her life story, speaking from a wheelchair, she keeps her audience spellbound. These patients, however, of varying ages but all with undeveloped minds, had

⁴²Ibid., p. 90.

trouble with attention span. When Joni reached the part about imagining what heaven would be like, she could tell she had lost their interest entirely.

It was a warm day, and Joni could feel perspiration rolling down her body as she struggled to continue. Finally, in desperation, she said this, "And heaven will be the place where all of you will get new minds." As soon as the words came out, she regretted them - what if they sounded paternalistic, or cruel? But instantly the atmosphere in the room changed. Spontaneously, the patients started cheering, with loud applause. Joni had tapped into their deepest hope.⁴³

Christians are not promised a life without suffering, but suffering is seen as temporary. We may suffer horrendously for seventy years or so, but we are promised an eternity without suffering. When seen in this light, suffering can be endured. Any philosophy must deal with death. Sigmund Freud wrote, "And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be."⁴⁴ Aristotle said, "Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end."⁴⁵ Apart from the hope given in Christianity the future is very bleak for humankind. Of course if Christianity is not true then what I have said is also not true. All I have shown is the pragmatic value of Christianity. But the hope given in Christianity does help us understand and cope with the riddle of pain, suffering, and evil.

The final thing I would say about evil and suffering is that we can receive the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit right now to help us cope until Jesus returns. John 14:16-18,27 says:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor [comforter, advocate] to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

⁴³Ibid., p. 214.

⁴⁴As quoted in Warren Wiersbe, Be Wise: 1 Corinthians (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1988), p. 155.

⁴⁵As quoted in James Stewart, A Faith To Proclaim (London: Hadder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 135.