

God's Problem: Why Do We Suffer?

R606 - OLLI Spring 2016

Presented by: Jack Dalby



Ground Rules

- Be open to, or at least tolerant of, those whose views and beliefs differ from your own.
- For the sake of moving the discussion along, we will work under the premise that you can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God.
- Our sources for understanding God are the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.
- For the purposes of these discussions, we will consider “evil” and “suffering” to be synonyms.
- Philosophers and Theologians have been debating why we suffer since before the time Jesus. There are many answers, but not many agreed upon answers.

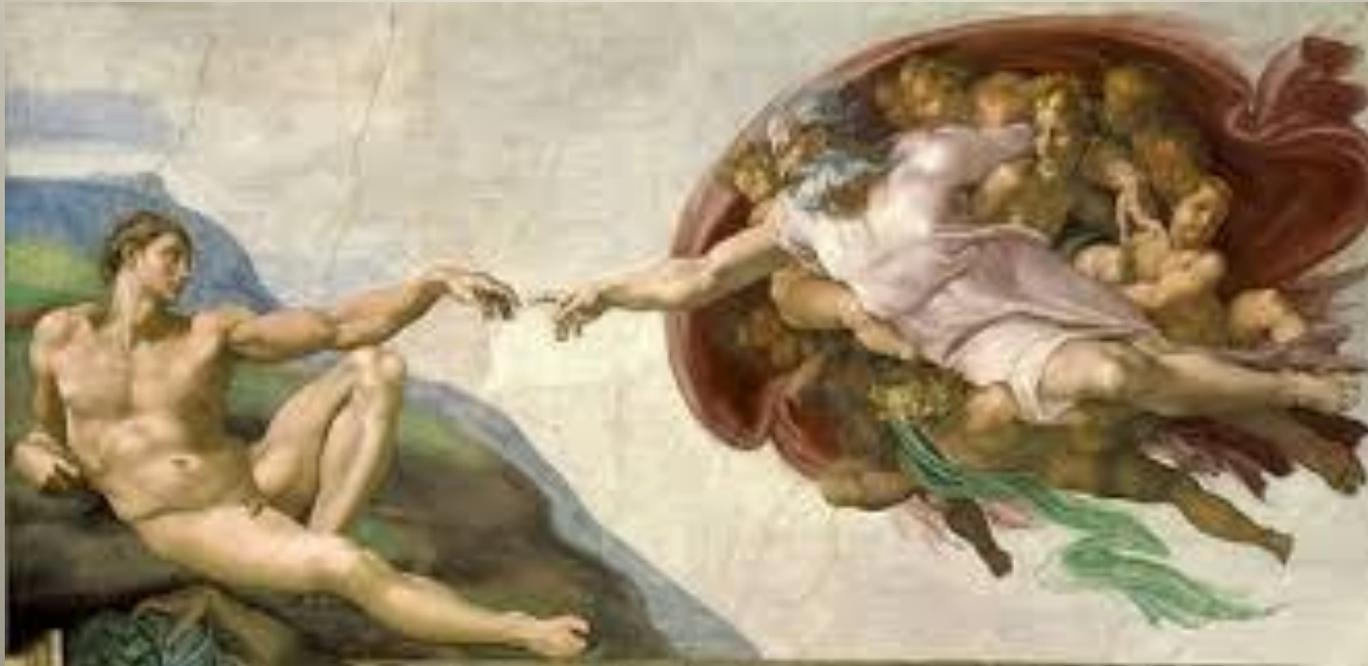
Whence Evil?

David Hume, the 18th Century Scottish Philosopher asked the following question of God concerning evil:

“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?”

God In the Old Testament



How Do We Define God?

1) *capitalized* : the supreme or ultimate reality:
as

a : **the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness** who is worshipped as creator and ruler of the universe

- Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 11/15

God the Almighty

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” – Genesis 1:1-2 ESV

God The Not So Almighty

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him...So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” **The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”** But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. **He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”**

- Genesis 18:9-15

The Character Of God



God's Absence In The OT

In the Old Testament, “God is not obviously present...On occasion, intense manifestations of God’s presence occur, in theophany or miraculous deliverance. **At times, though, an intense experience of God’s absence deserves to be taken seriously.** Human suffering and distress cannot be simply swept aside.

- Joel Burnett, Where Is God?

The 10 Commandments

Exodus 20:2-17

- “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. **You shall have no other gods before Me.**
- “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. **For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,** but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.
- “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, **for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.**
- “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God.** In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

The 10 Commandments

Exodus 20:2-17

- “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.
- “You shall not murder.
- “You shall not commit adultery.
- “You shall not steal.
- “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

The Fall



God Creates Man Version 1

Then God said, “**Let us make mankind in our image,** in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

**So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.**

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. —
Genesis 1:26-28

God Creates Man Version 2

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. **Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being...**

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. **Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man,** and he brought her to the man. – Genesis 2:4-7 & 20-22

God Punishes Adam & Eve

To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. - Genesis 3:16-24

The Flood



Why Did God Flood The World?

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, **the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.** Then the LORD said, “My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.” **The Nephilim were on the earth in those days**—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. **And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.** So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. – Genesis 6:1-8 NRSV

Sodom and Gomorrah



The Righteous of Sodom & Gomorrah

Then Abraham came near and said, “**Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?** Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! **Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?**” And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking... “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.”...Suppose thirty are found there.”...Suppose twenty are found there.”...Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “**For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.**” And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. – Genesis 1:23-33 NRSV

Death of the Egyptian First Born



God Hardens Pharaoh's Heart

Moses said, “Thus says the LORD: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. **Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave** who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again...Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, ‘Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.’ After that I will leave.” And in hot anger he left Pharaoh. The LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.” Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; **but the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.** – Exodus 11:4-9

NRSV

The Slaying of the Midianites



Why Does Moses Slay the Midianites?

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm some of yourselves for war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian...And Moses said to them: “Have you kept all the women alive? Look, these *women* caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man intimately. **But keep alive for yourselves all the young girls who have not known a man intimately.** – Number 31:1-18

Job



Why Does Job Suffer?

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the LORD said to Satan, **“Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”** Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” **And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.”** So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. – Job 1:6-12 NRSV

The Torah On Why We Suffer

Bart Erhman- 2:52-5:21



Thy Kingdom Come



God's Apocalyptic Vanquishing Of Evil

- Jewish apocalypticists believed in “dualism;” that two forces controlled life: good and evil. God was good. Satan was evil.
- For unknown reasons, evil reigned in the current times and that humans were powerless to improve their lot.
- At his choosing, God would intervene in a cataclysmic act of judgement by sending a messiah.
- Those on God's side would enter the earthly Kingdom of God. Those against God would receive eternal punishment.
- God's act of judgement was imminent.

Jesus The Apocalypticist

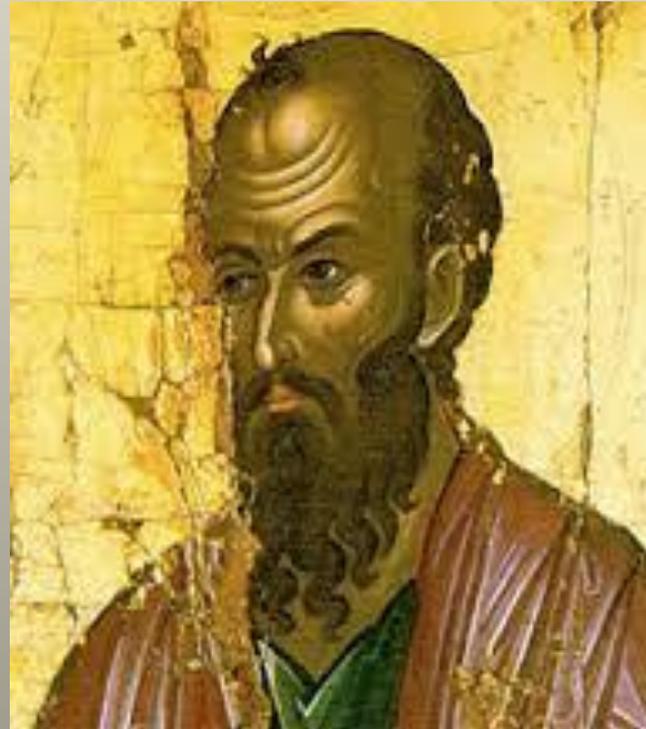
- Jesus is baptized by, and becomes a follower of the apocalyptic prophet, John the Baptist.
- Jesus' ministry emphasizes the imminence of the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus is executed for claiming to be the King of the Jews.
- With the belief in His resurrection, Jesus' disciples come to believe that he would soon usher in the Kingdom of God.

Questions

- Why were the powers of darkness and evil allowed to torment man?
- Was Jesus' message for all men or was it meant only for other Israelites?
-

Paul

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, **that Christ died for our sins** in accordance with the scriptures...” – 1 Cor. 15:3



St. Paul On The Sin of Adam

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come...

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. – Romans 5:12-

Why Do We Need Salvation?

“Paul’s logic seems to run like this:

in Christ, God has acted to save the world;
therefore the world is in need of salvation; but
God also gave the law; is the law then against the
purpose of God which has been revealed in
Christ? No, it has the function of consigning
everyone to sin so that everyone could be saved
by God’s grace in Christ.” – E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian*

Judaism

Questions

- Was Jesus' death an act of God's love?
- Did God have other ways to forgive mankind?
- Was missionary work the best way to spread the message of a belief in Jesus' atoning death?

What Is Theodicy

(From Greek *theos*, “god”; *dikē*, “justice”) Explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil. **The term literally means “justifying God.”** Although many forms of theodicy have been proposed, some Christian thinkers have rejected as impious any attempt to fathom God’s purposes or to judge God’s actions by human standards. Others, drawing a distinction between a theodicy and a more limited “defense,” have sought to show only that the existence of some evil in the world is logically compatible with God’s omnipotence and perfect goodness. – Encyclopedia Britannica, 11/15

The Irenaean View

The Irenaean view, by contrast, looks to the future and assumes an evolutionary perspective. Adam's sin is seen mainly as a lapse due to weakness and immaturity. **The Fall is understood not as a catastrophe for the human race but as something from which humans can learn.** In this account, the world is seen as a mixture of good and evil, an environment of growth and development in which humans can mature toward the perfection for which they were created by God. – Encyclopedia Britannica, 11/15

Irenaean Theodicy



St Augustine

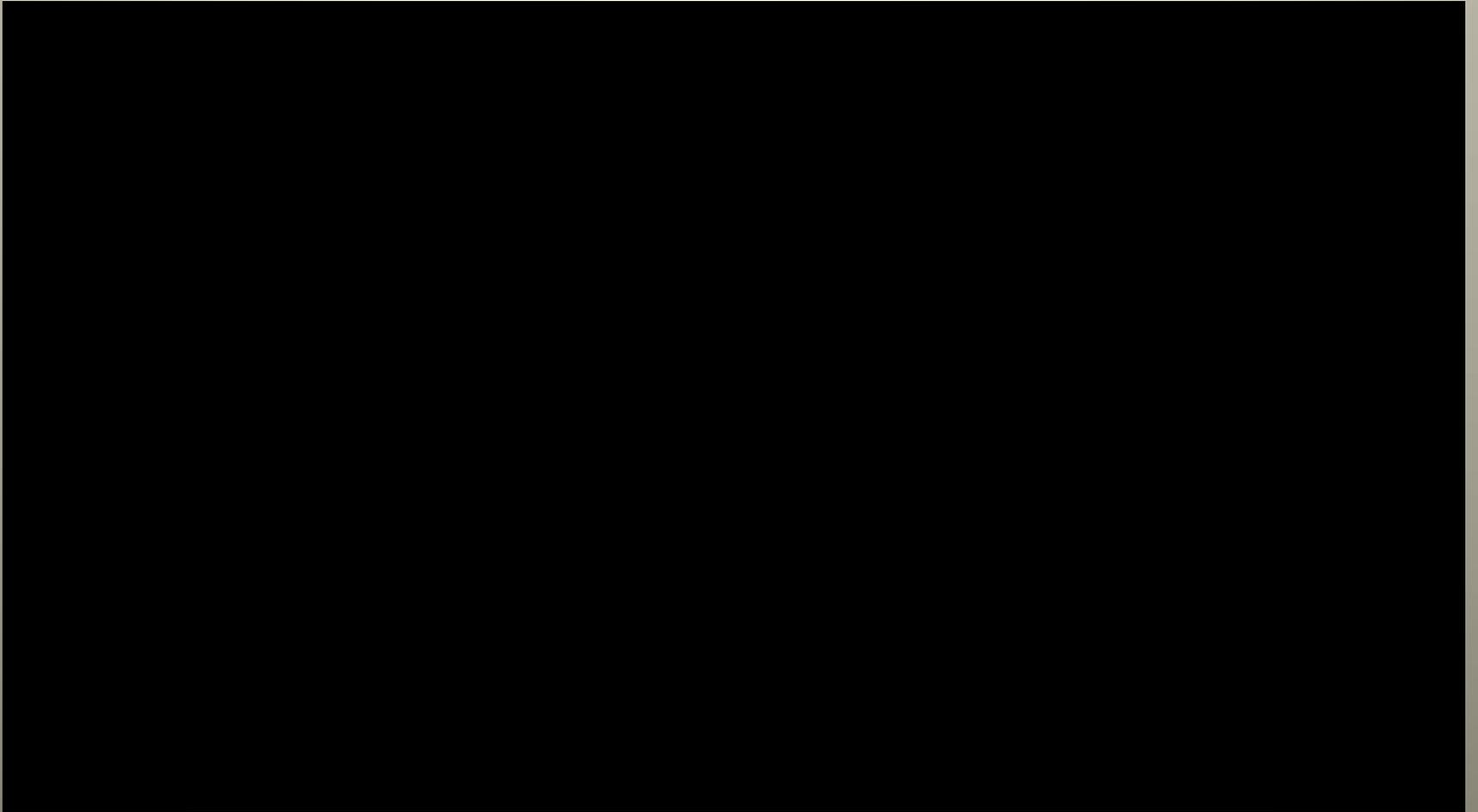
St Augustine (354-430) is the father of western Christianity. His struggle with his own sinful lust led him to discover the explanation as to why everyone desired to sin.

With St Paul as inspiration (“all men had sinned in Adam), Augustine came to believe that all humans were born sinners.

Augustine believed that Original Sin was transmitted via semen during intercourse.

At the end of his life, he came to believe that humans could not even choose to embrace God’s mercy. Instead, God chose those to be saved.

Augustinian Theodicy



The Father Of Original Sin

We do not say that God is the author of evil, and yet we can correctly say that human beings are born evil as a result of the bond of original sin with God alone as their creator.

- St Augustine, Unfinished Work In Answer To Julian

Questions On Original Sin

- Are we in some sense the same as Adam, and therefore share in his sin?
- Did Adams sin ruin our relationship with God?
- Do religions require original sin to stay relevant?

Free Will

1. “Circumstantial Freedom” is “freedom from coercion or restraint” that prevents acting as one wills.
2. “Natural Freedom” is freedom to will what one desires. The natural free will is inherent in all people.
3. “Acquired Freedom” is freedom “to live as one ought.” To possess acquired free will requires a change by which a person acquires a desire to live a life marked by qualities such as goodness and wisdom. – Mortimer Adler

Questions On Free Will

- According to Augustine, God created a perfect world. Can perfect beings make imperfect choices?
- Are all choices the same?
- Being omniscient, is God responsible for creating those he knows will do evil?
- What if man could only choose good?

Suffering For A Greater Good

Greater good responses to the problem of evil argue for **the existence of goods of great value which God cannot actualize without also permitting evil**, and thus that there are evils he cannot be expected to prevent despite being omnipotent. Among the most popular versions of the "greater good" response are appeals to the apologetics of free will. Theologians will argue that since no one can fully understand God's ultimate plan, no one can assume that evil actions do not have some sort of greater purpose. Therefore, the nature of evil has a necessary role to play in God's plan for a better world. – Wikipedia, 1/16

Suffering As Soul Making

One very important type of theodicy, championed especially by John Hick, involves the idea that the evils that the world contains can be seen to be justified if one views the world as designed by God to be an environment in which **people, through their free choices, can undergo spiritual growth that will ultimately fit them for communion with God.** – Stanford

Encyclopedia of Philosophy

The Suffering Of Children

"In our world we see many small children suffer and die. Some are born in abject poverty and starve. Some are tortured and beaten to death by their own parents. Some are cruelly put to death in war. Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov cried out that he would never forgive a Creator God for such injustices. **For these children have not deserved such suffering. And nothing else can justify it, not even the eternal punishment in hell of those who harmed the children.** I agree. No just God could ever be forgiven for tolerating such a situation." - Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil"

Natural Evil

There are two kinds of evil in the world: moral and natural; both appear to exist in abundance. Natural evils are those evils that occur as the result of natural processes: earthquakes, forest fires, tsunamis, etc. The problem of natural evil is thus the problem of explaining why God allows this latter kind of evil to occur.



Questions On Natural Evil

- Is Natural Evil a punishment for our sins?
- Can good exist without evil?
- Is Natural Evil required in order for humans to achieve higher good?

Moral Evil

Moral evils are those evils that are freely inflicted upon humankind by humankind: deceit, murder, theft, etc.; they result from the choices of free agents.



Questions On Moral Evil

- Do we have free will?
- Is God like a loving but just parent?
- Are there some evils so heinous that a loving God should stop them?

C. S. Lewis: The Problem Of Pain



The Problem Of Pain

“But all civilizations pass away and, even while they remain, inflict peculiar sufferings of their own probably sufficient to outweigh what alleviations they may have brought to the normal pains of man. That our own civilization has done so, no one will dispute; that it will pass away like all its predecessors is surely probable. Even if it should not, what then? The race is doomed. Every race that comes into being in any part of the universe is doomed; for the universe, they tell us, is running down, and will sometime be a uniform infinity of homogeneous matter at a low temperature. All stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter. **If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction.** Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil or else an evil spirit.” – C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis On The Reason For Pain

- The proper good of man is to surrender to its creator.
- Man, corrupted through “millennia of usurpation”, is in rebellion against God.
- The World is a dance in which good, descending from God, is disturbed by evil arising from rebellious man.
- God exploits that evil for his redemptive purpose.
- Pain teaches us that we are not self sufficient.
- The function of pain is to make man’s submission to God easier.

C. S. Lewis – A Grief Observed

...And you will never discover how serious it was until the stakes are raised horribly high, until you find that you are playing...for every penny you have in the world. Nothing less will shake a man...out of his merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs...**Only torture will bring out the truth.** Only under torture does he discover it himself.

And I must surely admit that, if my house was a house of cards, the sooner it was knocked down the better. And only suffering could do it. **But then the Cosmic Sadist and Eternal Vivisector becomes an unnecessary hypothesis.**

Is this last note a sign that I'm incurable, that when reality smashes my dream to bits, I mope and snarl while the first shock lasts, and then patiently, idiotically, start putting it together again? And so always? However often the house of cards falls, shall I set about rebuilding it? Is that what I'm doing now? – C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, Pg. 38

The Logical Problem of Evil

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 9/3/15

- If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
- If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
- If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
- If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
- Evil exists.
- If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
- Therefore, God doesn't exist.

Miracles

A miracle is **an event not explicable by natural or scientific laws**. Such an event may be attributed to a supernatural being (god or gods), magic, a saint or a religious leader. – Wikipedia, 1/16



Questions On Miracles

- What is a miracle?
- Does God intervene in human affairs?
- How does God choose?
- What about the validity of miracles in other faith traditions?
- Are miracles worthy of God?

Heaven As A Final Reward



Questions On Heaven

- Heaven has no moral evil. Why not earth?
- Are there degrees of heaven based on who did the most good?
- Do you have free will in heaven?

Satan



Questions On Satan

- Satan, like all God's creatures, was created perfect. Can a perfect creature rebel?
- Why did God create Satan if he knew he would rebel?
- Why doesn't God eliminate Satan?
- Is Satan part of God's divine plan?

Hell As Eternal Punishment



Questions On Hell

- Is Hell just? Is eternal damnation a just punishment for earthly crimes?
- Can God offer justice if he can only offer two alternatives: heaven or hell?

When Bad Things Happen To Good People

“Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people?...The response would be...to forgive the world for not being perfect, **to forgive God for not making a better world**, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all...no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened.” – Harold S. Kushner