

## God and Evil<sup>1</sup>

It was a blistering Sunday afternoon in 1973. As teens so often are, fifteen year-old Cathy and her five friends were excited as they clambered into Harry Walker's motor home escaping the oppression of the August sun. Mr. Walker and his wife served as directors and, on this occasion, chauffeurs for the young adult chorale at the First Baptist Church of Abilene in central Texas. That night the chorale had been invited to sing in Brownwood a short 80 miles down highway 36. Laughing and talking they pulled out from in front of the church building as everyone settled in for a relaxing two-hour trip. Cathy and her friend Thyia sat with their legs folded on the rear bench facing the others in the open cabin.<sup>2</sup> As they cruised along the sun peeked through the canopy of blackjack oaks and elms that lined the shoulder of the two-lane road. Cathy was eager for this trip, she loved singing and through the influence of her church she was quickly developing a passion for ministry. The ministry driving her most, though, lived in her house. Her dad, John, was lost and she ached for him to trust Christ. Only a few weeks earlier, Cathy confided to her mother that she would be willing to die herself if only her dad could get saved. Such infectious zeal made her both an inspiration and joy to know. Tragically, it all ended that hot afternoon. As Walker pulled his motor home over to pass a slow moving oilfield truck, the unwitting driver swerved left hurtling the coach full of teens onto the soft shoulder. At 60 mph they slammed headfirst into a massive tree. Like human pinballs Cathy and Thyia were thrown forward and crashed into the lavatory compartment. The Walkers, however, though badly bruised and severely shaken, survived. Instinctively, Harry jumped out and raced to the back. Throwing open the door he frantically began pulling people from the mangled wreckage. One out, two ... three out, four, but as he disappeared inside the last time, the pungent odor of fuel had already saturated the air. Awkwardly stumbling forward to pull their broken bodies to safety his cries and theirs were silenced by the violence of the explosion. August 26<sup>th</sup> Harry Walker, Cathy Merrell, and Thyia Langford entered eternity.

It didn't take long for the agonizing news to make its way home to Cathy's parents. No words do justice to the bitter emptiness – the pain and shock – of losing your baby girl. Her father was inconsolable. Tears of grief streaked his face as he sought for answers to life's hardest question, 'why.' Not knowing just where to turn, he called his son, Gary, (my dad) who had recently become a Christian and was already preparing to attend Baptist Bible College. On the phone Gary listened as his father choked out the details through sobs of grief. It was crushing news and yet the brokenness in his dad's voice manifested a tenderness that had never been there before. His only thought was "Maybe God is going to use this – use me – to win my dad to Christ." But in the weeks that followed as he opened the Scriptures and spoke of Christ's love and sacrifice, the heart ripped open by pain was filled with the scar tissue of cynicism until at last in a voice of bitterness and cursing he cried "If there is a God and He allowed something like this to happen, I don't want anything to do with Him."

Similar scenarios and some far worse play out across our world countless times every year and always raise the same haunting question, 'why.' Why does God allow

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<sup>1</sup> Title taken from, Chad Meister ed. and James K. Dew ed., *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*: Intervarsity Press, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/46771707/>

evil? He's clearly "big enough" to prevent it. Why does He permit pain and suffering and why so much of it? Probably no question, no issue has dissuaded more people from trusting Christ, more people from even believing in God, than this. The existence of evil in all its forms is perhaps the single most persistent and persuasive argument against the existence of God. As such, it behooves Christians everywhere to wrestle with it.

### **The Evidential Problem of Evil**

In formal debate the argument comes in two forms: the evidential problem of evil and the logical problem of evil. As the name implies, the evidential problem of evil is the notion that "evil," whether moral or natural, offers *evidence* that God does not exist. Its main premise is that if God existed, He would need a morally justified reason to allow the horrific evil that surrounds us every day. However, He probably has no reason that would justify permitting evil to exist. This evidential problem is to be distinguished from the logical problem of evil, which maintains that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God is logically incompatible with evil. The logical problem of evil has been effectively refuted by Alvin Plantinga in his widely acclaimed book, "*God, Freedom, and Evil*."<sup>3</sup> However, as Alston notes, "the inductive argument (i.e., the evidential problem of evil) is still very much alive and kicking" (parenthesis added).<sup>4</sup> The evidential argument has remained on the table, in part, because it is much less ambitious than the logical problem of evil. It seeks only to establish that the kind, quantity, and distribution of evil make it unlikely – indeed very unlikely – that God exists.<sup>5</sup> Inasmuch as this is still an influential argument, in this article and those that follow I will contend that the evidential problem of evil fails to render God's existence unlikely for four reasons: (1) without God there can be no evil; hence it cannot cause a problem for God's existence. (2) The cumulative force of the free will, natural consequences, natural law, and higher-order goods theodicies are sufficient to justify God in permitting whatever evil exists.<sup>6</sup> (3) There may be many other reasons that God permits evil, which finite humans are not in a position to know. (4) The evidence and arguments for God's existence are of such consequence that, apart from evil, it is likely that God exists. Such evidence outweighs the problem of evil and therefore renders it likely that God does have a justifiable reason for permitting it. As an aside, I realize that intellectual arguments about God's reasons for allowing pain, suffering, and cruelty do little to soothe the raw emotions of those that have experienced tragedy. Time, caring friends, and pastoral guidance provide a much more healing balm. That balm, however, can only be applied within a certain intellectual and spiritual framework. If that framework is missing, damage is done that no balm can cure. Moreover, the best time to erect such a framework is *before* tragedy strikes inasmuch as we are then prepared to analyze our grief through the proper lens. With this understanding, let us consider our first argument.

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<sup>3</sup> WILLIAM L. ROWE, "Plantinga on Possible Worlds and Evil," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (10/11, 1973), 555.

<sup>4</sup> W. P. Alston, "Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition (Volume 5: Philosophy of Religion)," *Nous-Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (01/01, 1991), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Nick Trakakis, "The Evidential Problem of Evil," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/> (accessed 4/19, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> A theodicy is a vindication of God's goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.

## Without God, There Is No ‘Problem’ Of Evil

Atheists commonly assume that “evil,” particularly its perversity and pervasiveness, poses a problem for theists. What they often fail to consider, however, is that “evil” creates an equally difficult if not more difficult problem for their own worldview. Specifically, the problem is this: “if a personal God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.”<sup>7</sup> Secular Humanists such as Paul Kurtz and Greg Epstein are quick to counter that religion or even basic belief in God is not necessary for morality.<sup>8</sup> Although they are undoubtedly correct, their objection misses the point. It is not that *belief* in God is necessary in order for one to act morally; rather without God, morality lacks an ontological foundation. It becomes *subjective*, that is, grounded in the person, society, or culture making the moral judgment, rather than *objective*, that is, grounded in the validity of the moral claim itself. This approach, known as moral relativism, is more than problematic for the simple reason that any attempt to define morality on a local scale renders itself impotent to condemn atrocities outside its own context. This is repulsive. Could anyone seriously argue that the Holocaust was not immoral even for the Germans? Again, if morality is culturally/societally determined, then on what basis can we condemn the terrorists responsible for 9/11? They were, after all, simply living out the morality of their own culture. Moral relativism creates a further problem known as the “reformer’s dilemma.” If one’s culture determines one’s morality, then what are we to make of those who opposed their culture for the sake of a higher cause? For example, Martin Luther King Jr. opposed both the societal values and the laws of his day in the struggle for racial equality. Should he be condemned as a moral delinquent for his efforts? If one’s culture defines morality as claimed by moral relativists, then he should in fact “be deemed immoral.”<sup>9</sup> These and other problems leave atheists with two options: they can either (1) concede that objective morality does not exist, in which case no “problem” of evil exists for theists, or (2) they can attempt to establish a foundation for objective morality apart from God. Classic atheists from the mid-twentieth century tended to take the former route while the new atheists have generally adopted the latter.<sup>10</sup> The most logically consistent approach in this latter camp is to assert that moral values and duties are merely brute facts; part of the so-called “furniture of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> But even this approach suffers fatal flaws. As Richard Taylor observes, “a duty is something that is owed...but something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as duty in isolation.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the very concept of paying a moral debt *to the universe* seems absurd. If so, however, we are right back where we started: without God, there is no objective morality. Without objective morality, there can be no evil, and if there is no evil, then there can be no problem of evil. Unless God exists, the entire objection is meaningless.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 345.

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Kurtz, “Opening Statement,” in *Is Goodness without God Good enough?: A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); also Greg M. Epstein, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People do Believe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, 337.

<sup>10</sup> Craig J. Hazen, “Can we be Good without God,” <http://magazine.biola.edu/article/11-summer/can-we-be-good-without-god/> (accessed 4/19, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, 357.

<sup>12</sup> Richard C. Taylor, *Ethics, Faith and Reason*: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Ironically, in the end, the existence of evil is an argument *in favor* of God’s existence.

In the next article I will explore various theodicies and demonstrate why they justify God in permitting the evil that exists.