

God and Evil (part 2)

When I began this series of articles on God and evil I did not anticipate and could not have imagined the heartrending devastation of hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria. The near apocalyptic scenes are indelibly stamped upon our collective conscience. Hundreds of lives have been lost, including those of children and even some who volunteered in the rescue effort.¹ To make matters worse, the livelihoods of thousands have been ruined and many hundred thousands more are threatened. Damage estimates for Hurricane Harvey alone have come in as high as \$190 billion which, if true, would make it the costliest disaster in US history. The numbers from Irma are still rolling in. But totals range from \$50 billion to \$100 billion.² After such a horrific tragedy, for many people it is tempting to conclude that God does not care and may not even exist at all. After all, what could possibly justify such catastrophic suffering? Indeed if God is a loving heavenly Father as we are told, who cares deeply about the welfare of His creatures then why are we confronted with recurring episodes of senseless suffering not to mention grotesque displays of vile wickedness? It would be wonderful to know. Unfortunately, a complete answer is probably beyond our ken. There are, however, four features of the world, which entail the possibility of evil and suffering that are nevertheless of such value that they justify God's decision to include them despite the suffering that might ensue. The first is freedom.

Free Will

God desires a relationship with His creatures in which they voluntarily choose to worship and serve Him (Joshua 24:15). He also desires for us the opportunity to experience the joy both of freely giving and freely receiving the love of others (Leviticus 19:18). Indeed, it is freedom, and freedom alone, that enables meaningful relationships.³ For as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out,

“The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. He is not bent on becoming the object of passion which flows forth mechanically. He does not want to possess an automaton, and if we want to humiliate him, we need only try to persuade him that the beloved's passion is the result of a psychological determinism. The lover will then feel that both his love and his being are cheapened... If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.”⁴

However, for creatures to be free to love, they must have the like capacity to abuse their freedom. Moreover, God could not simply block the evil consequences of our decisions without reducing our relationships to a sham. They would essentially be a simulation akin to a cosmic video game and thus not ultimately meaningful. Since arguably the greatest conceivable goods in life are meaningful relationships supremely with God Himself, yet such relationships are impossible without permitting evil, then God seems justified in allowing it to exist.⁵ Of course, someone might counter that since God knows prior to creating how each of His creatures will behave, He could create a world in which everyone *always freely* chooses to do the loving thing. After all, He is omnipotent; thus He could instantiate any possible world. It follows that God could make a world wherein His creatures enjoy personal freedom, deep responsibility for others, and love *without* there being any evil at all. Thus, these goods cannot justify His permission of evil.⁶

“This objection, however, relies on the thought that *if God is omnipotent, then he can create any world he pleases*. This is false. For if God creates free creatures, he must leave it up to them what world results from their choices. Let's develop this point briefly.

Out of all the possible creatures God could create, suppose he aims to create me, and suppose he considers whether to make me free with respect to planting roses along Walhout way, a little section of my garden. If he did, he would have to place me in a situation in which it is *up to*

¹ <http://www.breitbart.com/texas/2017/09/04/drowned-harvey-rescue-volunteer-daca-recipient-says-family/>

² <https://www.vox.com/explainers/2017/9/18/16314440/disasters-are-getting-more-expensive-harvey-irma-insurance-climate>

³ By freedom is meant 'libertarian' freedom. A person is free only if “no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't.” See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*: Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1977, c1974, 29.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness : An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*: New York : Philosophical Library, 1956], 1956), 367.

⁵ Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

⁶ *Ibid*.

me whether I plant roses or refrain from doing so. Now, if he placed me in such a situation, either I would freely plant or I wouldn't. For the sake of illustration, suppose I would. Now imagine that God tries to make a world in which I freely *refrain* from planting. Can he? Not if he leaves it up to me whether I plant. For, given our supposition, if he left it up to me, I would *not* refrain; rather, I would plant. So, given that I would freely plant roses along Walhout way if it were left up to me, God — even though omnipotent — cannot make a world in which I am in that situation and I freely refrain from planting roses. To make that world God would have to *make* me so that I refrain, in which case I would not *freely* refrain.

Therefore, the assumption made by this objection is false. If God creates free persons, he cannot create just any world he pleases, even though he is omnipotent. Which world results from his creative activity is, in no small part, up to his free creatures.

We can go further. For we can now see that, for all we know, it was not within God's power to create a world with persons who always freely choose the good. How could this be? Well, as we just saw, if God creates free creatures, then he can't create some worlds. In the example above, God cannot create a world in which I freely refrain from planting roses along Walhout way. That's because I would freely plant if God left it up to me. Now, what if it were true that for *any* world that has at least as much good as ours and in which every person always freely chooses the good, no matter how God started things off, persons would freely go wrong at least as much as we (actual humans) go wrong? If that were true, then no matter how hard God tried, he simply could not create a world with persons who always freely choose good, at least not one with as much good in it as our world. And here's the rub: for all we know, maybe that's the way things are."⁷

Natural Consequences

God's desire for meaningful relationships with His creatures leads to a further consideration. In our sinful state, separated from God, we are so thoroughly ruined and blind to our need for Him that often we will not seek reconciliation apart from some significant physical reason to do so.⁸ Thus, it behooves God to allow us to reap the natural consequences of our separation from Him for in so doing He is incentivizing our reconciliation with Him. Allowing, then, the terrible evil that frequently occurs as a natural consequence of our alienation from God is justified since it awakens us to our need for God and provides strong motivation to enter a loving relationship with Him.

Natural Law

A third reason, which builds off the previous two, is suggested by Inman, namely, "natural evils are the necessary by-products of freedom-permitting worlds."⁹ To unpack what is meant here, consider a world in which the laws of nature were irregular and sporadic instead of stable and constant. Suppose the first time "Johnny" threw his rock it skipped across the lake as intended but the next time he did so, it boomeranged and hit him in the head. Or consider what would happen if the laws of aerodynamics were suspended or reversed or worked only randomly. It would make flight completely impossible. Not only would this be supremely irritating, it would virtually eradicate our freedom for "without a great deal of order and regularity in nature we could not predict the effects of our choices... [thus] how things came out would be completely out of our control."¹⁰ Accordingly, the stable laws of nature are necessary components of a world in which freedom is possible. This truth, however, has two edges for "the same laws of thermodynamics that enable us to communicate with one another are also responsible for tornadoes. The same laws of momentum that enable me to exercise control over my body are also responsible for hurricanes and landslides."¹¹ Nevertheless, since freedom and the ability to function predictably are both good and necessary, God is justified in permitting the evil they entail.

Higher-Order Goods

In the throes of agony, it is commonly forgotten that certain goods, often the ones we treasure most, are only possible if evil, or at least its potential, exists. This is partially the point of the story of Adam and Eve

⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁸ Romans 3:10-18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Genesis 3:1-20; Proverbs 1:24-33; Hosea 2:14-15 5:15; Jonah 2:2.

⁹ Ross D. Inman, "Problems of Evil" (SWBTS Classroom Lecture Notes, , Spring 2017).

¹⁰ Howard-Snyder, *God, Evil, and Suffering*, 12-13.

¹¹ Inman, *Problems of Evil*

in the Garden of Eden. Even in that perfect environment, God planted a tree in the midst of the garden but ruled it off limits. Without the opportunity for disobedience and defection from God, it would have been impossible to evaluate their obedience or appreciate their faithfulness. Of course, they *were not* obedient and faithful; but they *could not* have been without the potential for their evil decision. In a similar way, so-called “higher-order goods” such as courage, sympathy, mercy, grace, longsuffering, and forgiveness each require evil. Since these are among the greatest conceivable character traits, and they are not possible to develop apart from the presence of evil, God seems eminently justified in permitting evil to exist. Admittedly, God could remove actual evil and instead allow us to confront only illusory evil. But if we were aware that He had done so, it would disable our ability to develop real character since we would know that we were not risking or investing anything real. At the same time, whether we knew it were illusory or not, it would divest our relationships of any meaning for even if we thought we were exercising forgiveness, no one would truly be forgiven. “It seems, then, that if God were to fit us with a capacity to develop, exercise and confirm our characters *in the context of persons forming relationships with each other*, He must permit evil” (italics original).¹² In sum, while one may not be persuaded by any single argument, together these four reasons seem compelling. After all, any world that lacked freedom, a strong motivation to reconcile with God, the ability to interact meaningfully with others or the environment, and all the character attributes we admire most would not be a world worth creating. Hence God is more than justified in permitting evil to exist.

¹² Howard-Snyder, *God, Evil, and Suffering*, 15.