

*AN APOLOGETIC WORK
DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF EVIL*

A Paper

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Anticipating vast suffering through famine, war, disease, natural disasters, etc., and knowing that most people would go to hell, and spend eternity in torment there, God went ahead and created the world as he did. He would have violated nobody's freedom had he simply not brought mankind into existence. How can he be excused for undertaking creation at all, since he could foresee the dreadful consequence?

Introduction

The question posed above represents one of the most divisive quandaries plaguing humanity. Not only is it prone to frame the broadest debate between atheism and theist convictions, but it also tends to sift and then segregate cultures, religions, sects, denominations, and individuals. In many ways the “problem of evil,” so aptly described in the aforementioned premise, is interpreted through the perception of one’s worldview. Consequently, how a person answers the quandary of evil is typically linked to the position from whence they ask the question. Atheists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and more all have their own interpretation of evil and its peripheral, defining dilemmas. Consequently, the lines of distinction drawn in response to the question posed above extend beyond the grave. In as much as the issue defines one’s beliefs about God, the position a respondent takes will subsequently reveal their eternal destination.

This paper will attempt to answer the question from a conservative, evangelical, Christian worldview. With that said, the Bible, as God’s revealed Word, will serve as both judge and jury on all accounts. While teleological, cosmological, ontological, and moral arguments will be offered as rational support for the existence of God, in the end, the debate is not over logic or rationale, it is theological. Therefore, knowing that all truth is God’s truth, this work will reflect Scripture’s response to the problem of evil. Herein, perspectives on God, Creation, Providence, Sin, and Apologetics will be offered.

How Does God Fit Into The Debate?

Let us begin at the beginning. Genesis 1:1 says: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Thus, God is the Creator. As a result, all other entities are creatures. These two pithy statements are simple but profound. Together they lay the foundation upon which all other issues (in this paper *and* creation) are formed. A God capable of speaking creation into existence out of nothing, by definition, defends the Ontological Argument, which simply says that there is a being that is beyond which any other being can be conceived.

As the originator of creation, another way of acknowledging God’s role is that of “first cause.” The Cosmological Argument validates the reality of God by recognizing Him as the initial cause in what is widely accepted as a cause-and-affect universe. In a related sense, the sophistication of our reality, its hyper-sensitive eco-systems and mind-boggling, micro-intricacies, all make the Teleological argument nearly impenetrable. The teleological argument is notarized by the famous analogy which states that every watch must have a corresponding watch-maker. One variation of the teleological response is the Anthropic/Aesthetic Argument which challenges its adversaries to contend with the fact that there is no “saving” or “sustaining” value in the beauty of creation, thus it cannot be explained by anything other than random chance OR God’s architectural selections and the blessings that come from them.

There is also a Moral Argument for the existence of God. It comes out of man’s inherent sense of right and wrong. The simple fact that all societies and cultures accept the reality of some form of right and wrong tells us that there is a moral code in creation. While not all codes are alike, the fact that there exists a sense of right and wrong speaks

to the fact that God has written His truths on everyman's heart. What some might call a conscience, others would refer to as evidence in support of the moral argument.

Conversely, those who reject the moral argument and defend a creation without the boundaries of right and wrong need only be assaulted in a personally appalling way to have the frailties of their position exposed. It stands to reason that anyone who would, under any circumstance, claim to have been wronged, is by default a proponent of the moral argument.

What Does Creation Have To Do With It?

The answer is everything! The Genesis account of creation is foundational to the Bible's unfolding story line. Dr. Stephen Wellum offered the following synopsis in his Theology II lecture notes at Southern Seminary in the spring of 2004.

“In insisting on the goodness of God's initial creation, the Bible sets the stage for what goes wrong – sin, death, destruction, and the development of the plot-line that issues in a Redeemer to set it right (=Adam→2nd Adam links). Ultimately the plot-line anticipates the restoration of goodness, even the transformation to a greater glory, of the universe gone wrong (Rom 8:21f), and arrives finally at the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21-22), the home of righteousness (2 Pet 3:13). As God's plan unfolds, after the Fall, redemption is viewed in terms of creation, but now a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17; Eph 2:1, 10). The new creation is not intended to replace an original creation that God somehow failed to keep on course. Redemption was part of God's plan before the world was created (1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:5-11; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2). The new creation represents the goal of the old.

It is within the framework of the creation account that we learn who God is, the proper understanding of the God-world relationship, who we are as human beings, how we fit into God's perfect plan, the world's original condition, what eventually went wrong with it, and ultimately how the story of creation is going to unfold. It is all there in the first three chapters of Genesis.

Providence: The Sovereignty/Free-Will Question

The issue of providence goes to the heart of the problem of evil, as well as the specific question posed as the premise to this paper. In short, “providence is God’s prior knowledge of and provision for the world” (Wellum). This is where many theological battles are fought. Philosophers like Hume would contend that it is fair to say that an omnipotent, wholly good deity would minimize or eliminate evil; the world is plagued by evil; therefore, there must not be an omnipotent, wholly good God. On the other hand, Augustine and the Reformers championed a different understanding:

“*Augustine* linked God’s control of all things with the doctrine of foreordination and predestination. However, by defending the reality of 2nd causes, he protected the holiness of God and affirmed human responsibility. The Augustinian position was reaffirmed by Thomas Aquinas and the Reformers, particularly Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Heinrich Zwingli.” (Wellum)

While the above reference offers a glimpse into the polarized views of conservative Christianity and atheism, what follows is an overview of the two positions widely held and often debated within the ranks of evangelical Christianity. Calvinism and Arminianism differ in their interpretations of God’s omnipotence and the balance between divine sovereignty and humanity’s free-will.

“*John Calvin*: God rules over all things by caring *and* controlling all that comes to pass in a purposeful and deliberate manner. For Calvin, providence is not mere foreknowledge, but active determination. For Calvin, God’s will is personal, good, and wise – not impersonal (linked to the Trinity). As with Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin distinguished between *primary* and *secondary* causality thus emphasizing that God is *not* the author of evil and that humans are responsible to their Lord.” (Wellum)

“*Jacobus Arminius* (1560-1609): Arminianism attempts to preserve human freedom at the expense of God’s providential involvement in or control of history in *every detail* (God’s purposes in the world are much more *general* in scope). Instead, God *responds* to human choices and actions as they come about and does so in such a way that his purposes are ultimately accomplished in the world.” (Wellum)

Whereas the debate often forms around the “either/or” positions of God’s complete sovereignty or man’s libertarian free-will, there is a theological position that embraces all of Scripture’s truths, representing the “both/and” option - without compromise. As a proponent of said position, I offer the following explanation of its tenets:

“Compatibilistic Specific Sovereignty. This view argues that the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility is not contradictory or paradoxical as long as one holds to a ‘compatibilistic’ view of human freedom. Thus, even though human actions are causally determined (=compatibilism), they are still free as long as the agents act according to their wishes, i.e. without constraint. According to this view, God did not have to create anything, but having decided to create, he chose our world from among a number of possible worlds. His decision to create this world was unconditional, i.e. it was based on nothing other than his sovereign purposes and the counsel of his will. Because God’s plan (=decree) is efficacious, whatever God plans comes to pass, and Scripture teaches that the decree covers all things. Hence God is absolutely sovereign and has not limited that sovereignty to make room for human freedom. But humans still have free will in the compatibilistic sense of it. Furthermore, to say that God decrees all things and works them out according to the counsel of his will means that he decrees every action and event, and the means to those actions and events. These actions and events are part of a whole interconnected world, so God can will means to ends and can see how his plans for one person affect his plans for others. Divine omniscience lets God see all the interconnections of everything in any possible world, and divine power allows him to bring about whatever possible world he chooses. Scripture says that God not only wills all things but works them out according to his foreordained plan (Eph 1:11). This doesn’t mean that God does every action that ever occurs.” (Wellum)

The theological beauty of the Compatibilist position is that holds to the indisputable claims of Scripture. Namely, God is considered totally sovereign while man’s responsibilities are wholly maintained. Secondly, humanity is acknowledged as “morally responsible creatures... who choose to rebel, obey, believe, defy, and make decisions – and they are rightly held accountable for such actions.” (Wellum) Lastly, God is always, totally, good. The interactions of the first two points are never such that God is portrayed as evil, nor an accomplice to or author of evil (see Gen 50:19-20; Isa 10:5-17; Jonah 1:14-15; 2:3; John 6:37-40). Our omnipotent God is good all the time.

Sin: The Crux Of The Matter

Why, you might ask, if sin is the crux of the matter, is it last in the process of explanation. Many would assume it to have been the first, if not the only issue needing attention in a work addressing God's explanation of evil. However, without a biblical understanding of God, His Creation, and the relationship between divine sovereignty and man's free-will, one is ill-equipped to properly interpret the origin, consequence, or solution for sin. Dr. Wellum contends:

“...there is a ‘common’ theme that runs throughout all non-Christian worldviews – i.e. the ‘human condition/problem’ is ‘structural’ *not* ‘moral.’ And the main reason for this is due to a denial, not only of creation and the God of creation, but also of a *historic* fall. Furthermore, it is also the Christian conviction that these ‘other’ explanations are not really explanations at all. In the end, they do not take seriously enough the human condition/problem. In other words, they end up *underestimating* the problem, which inevitably leads them to underestimate the radical solution necessary to solve the problem – the cross work of Christ.

Once again our work takes us back to the beginning. To understand the origin, consequence, and solution for sin, as well as the entire story line of the Bible, we need to go back to Genesis – Genesis 3. Herein sin is introduced to humanity and the desperate condition it brings is explained and expanded. Furthermore, Genesis 3 reveals the universal consequence of sin for future generations. As for sin's ultimate solution:

“Genesis 3 refuses to equate finitude and creatureliness with sin. Since the fall is presented as a historical event, it stresses that the human problem is not metaphysical, but moral. Our ‘problem’ is not bound up with us being finite, i.e. in the very ‘structure’ of being made human. Rather our problem is ‘sin’ – our willful transgression of God's law (1 Jn 3:4). This is good news! Why?

1. Because if our problem is structural, then what it means to be human is to be fallen. Ultimately, the Creator would have to be held responsible.
2. In addition, given this view, it is nigh impossible to account for hope and salvation. Where shall a solution be found to our cruelty? A solution can only be found if our problem is moral; if we were originally different than we are now; if God intervenes in a supernatural way on our behalf. And that is the message of Scripture.” (Wellum)

Not only does Genesis 3 reveal Christian clarity for the conundrum of evil, it also offers an encapsulation of the Bible's timeless message. Consider the following:

“Genesis 3 gives us the needed rationale for the whole story line of Scripture leading to Christ and then to the consummation – a ‘whole Bible theology.’

Genesis 3 is situated in the canon not only to set up the human problem but also to prepare for God's gracious redemption. After describing the effects of sin upon the human race in a fourfold way – (1) Alienation *between* ourselves; (2) Alienation *within* ourselves; (3) Alienation *with* nature; (4) Alienation *from* God – the narrative in graphic ways underscores the desperate nature of our problem. From all that was ‘good,’ we move to Genesis 4 (murder) to Genesis 5 (‘And they died...’) to Genesis 6-9 (flood) to Genesis 11 (Babel). The only hope for such a solution is if the God of creation also becomes the God of redemption. And that is precisely what happens (cf. Gen 3:15; Abraham, Israel → Jesus Christ). Genesis 3 makes it very clear that there are two great mistakes when it comes to sin: (1) underestimate its power; (2) underestimate its cure in Christ...

In terms of the relationship between God's sovereign plan and the origin of evil, historic Christian theology has affirmed that God stands behind ‘good’ and ‘evil’ *asymmetrically*. In other words, God's sovereign plan encompasses everything, but God stands behind ‘evil’ in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him: it is always chargeable to secondary agents and causes.” (Wellum)

Apologetics: The Best Defense Is A Strong Offense

Thus far, this paper has endeavored to explain the systematic, theological credibility behind a conservative, evangelical worldview in light of the challenge of evil. In the remaining pages a more direct approach to the question of “how can God be excused for undertaking creation, since he could foresee the dreadful consequences” will be offered. First some biblical principles will be shared along side a corresponding passage. A brief note on the role of mystery will follow. Then, the paper will conclude with a theodicy offered by Dan Treier which this writer affirms.

On October 16, 2002 Dr. Albert Mohler preached a Heritage Week Bible Conference sermon in chapel at Southern Seminary that addressed the problem of evil. In his sermon which used John 9: 1-12 as a text, Dr. Mohler pulled the following

principles out of Jesus' healing encounter with the man born blind. First, the question of "how" suffering came into this world was answered – sin brought evil into humanity. Then six principles were shared from this passage to help us deal with evil. Number one, we are to accept the reality of evil and suffering. Scripture does not skirt away from evil. The Bible acknowledges the presence of evil in a world where God is both omniscience and omnipotent. Consequently, we do not have to avoid the subject of evil or minimize the perceived paradox it creates. The playwright Archibald McLeeSe penned "If God is great he is not good... if God is good he is not great" but we know that God is both good and great – all the time. Secondly, we know that evil and suffering are traced back to sin. The Bible tells us the "fall" brought sin and death into the world. At the same time, we dare not assume God's role and attempt to connect the events of evil to the specific sins of another person's life. Third, suffering has meaning. While we may never have the specific meaning revealed to us on this side of eternity, we are assured in Scripture that there is meaning. Fourth, just because we do not understand something in God's sovereign plan, we cannot dismiss the validity of ultimate goodness in God's will. Another principle to remember is that this is a temporary problem. Suffering and sin are facts of life on earth but not in heaven. Moreover, Romans 8:18 reminds us that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come. Lastly, there is a principle that says our response to suffering is a test of our faith in God's sovereignty.

With all that said, there is still a place for biblical mystery in the processing of evil and suffering. Confidence in knowing there is an answer should never be replaced by an inappropriate arrogance that assumes to know what that answer is in all instances.

“Mystery is not only acceptable within Christian theology, it is also necessary. Logic derives its validity from the character of God. He himself determines ultimately what is possible and he alone has exhaustive knowledge. Our knowledge is true, yet finite. It is *limited* by our created status and by God’s limitation of revelation. Because we do not know *all* the truth we do not know *all* the interconnections between the truths. *Mystery* is simply the result of our ignorance about the interconnections. In many doctrinal areas, we do not know fully *how* various elements of the revelation of God come together, but we do know that because it comes from God, it must come together. Thus, when two truths are taught in Scripture, we use our reason to bring them together, but if they cannot be brought together, we leave them alone.” (Wellum, Spring 2004)

The last component of this work is the sharing and advocacy of Dan Treier’s: GOD & TIME: 2 PETER 3 AS THEODICY FOR THE PROBLEM OF MORAL EVIL, one of the Evangelical Theological Society Papers for 1997, presented March 22-23, 1996.

Treier rightly observes that the message of 2 Peter 3 is straight forward: Christians are to maintain their moral virtues “in spite of the contradicting false teachers.” He notes how verse three reminds us all that “in the last days mockers will come...” whose intent it will be to convince others that sin is free of consequence. Their message will be: there is no such thing as sin, no such thing as judgment, no such thing as God. But in verses five through thirteen Peter reminds his readers that there will in fact be divine judgment. Peter goes as far as to say in verse three that God used the same water that was instrumental in forming the world to wipe the world out with the great flood. Moreover, in verse seven Peter tells us that God already has a plan in place that will address the evil in the world. Lastly, in terms of content, in verses nine and ten Peter tells his readers that God’s delay is an act of mercy which may be in place to give sinners additional time to repent. However, the fact remains that judgment will come without warning, unexpectedly.

Treier's theodicy can be contextualized as a response to the mockers of modernity. What follows is an abridged outline of his position. First, like Peter, we should accept the existence of evil rather than debate its origin. Peter's allusions to Genesis, in harmony with other biblical texts, attribute evil to the fall of man. Keep in mind many philosophers of our day are like the mockers in Peter's passage. While they typically call for our responses, Treier warns: "we must be wary of waging a war which the Scriptures do not fight." Secondly, Peter focused on the duration of evil vs. the origin of evil. Treier notes that if God had brought judgment (as the Bible guarantees He will do) in the eighteenth century, Hume's argument would not even exist, let alone serve as the pinnacle of some philosophical problem. Third, in reality, the problem of evil is not philosophical, it is just futuristic. Evil is not a "what," or "why" issue. The decisive victory over evil has already been won. Consequently, Peter's argument in essence is: this is a matter of "delay" not doubt, of "waiting," not wondering... Lastly, God has promised that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The evil of this world will be dealt with in God's time. In the end, God will purify the earth - renovation is coming.

In closing, my position is straight forward. Both divine revelation and a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ assure me that God is omnipotent and wholly good. As creator, He chose to create a drama, rich in contrast and color. He alone is omniscient; therefore, He alone is capable of connecting all of creation's dots in a way that makes perfect sense. By faith, I trust in Him alone and believe that heaven will bring with it a greater understanding of the mysteries experienced in mortal life. C.H. Spurgeon put it this way: "When you cannot trace God's hand, trust His heart."