



A Note on the Problem of Evil

The recent air crash in Colombia that resulted in the death of seventy-five people, including most of the Brazilian football team, Chapecoense, was a terrible tragedy. There was a little team triumphing against the major clubs and reaching the final of a continent wide competition for the first time. Now, such understandably great joy has been wiped out at a stroke. I watched a television news program dealing with the crash and its aftermath. There in the center of the screen was a young man, a supporter of the team, his arms raised skyward in supplication. The words he spoke, undoubtedly from the heart, were, “How could God allow this to happen?” He was voicing what is probably the most commonly raised objection to the existence of God, namely what is usually referred to as the problem of evil. Even more recently there has been the loss of life resulting from the crash of the Russian military plane carrying members of an army orchestra. Many people will be voicing similar sentiments at this time to the one reported above. Nevertheless, it is important to contest the implication behind them, which is that God does not exist.

This short article makes no claim to originality. It arises from a surprise on its author’s part at the seeming frequency of hostility to God even among so-called specialists in philosophy and theology. A good example of this was the attitude taken by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, at the time (2004) that the tsunami struck the shores of the Indian Ocean with resulting great loss of life. Dr. Williams described the tsunami as “a challenge to faith” and went on to dismiss conventional statements of God’s comfort as “vacuous

words pouring out about the nature of God’s power or control, or about consolations of belief in an afterlife”. As was pointed out at the time by a member of the Archbishop’s flock, Peter Mullen, why on earth should the Gospel words of the Divine comfort, effective down the ages, be only vacuous for thoroughly modern Christians? In reality there is much to be said and it is utterly ridiculous to blame God for the disaster. Catholics need to know this, particularly in a time when they are under almost constant attack from the group known as the “New Atheists”. So, what follows has important apologetic purposes in these days when that art is sadly in demise. It cannot be emphasized enough that the arguments put forward must be good solid ones. As St. Thomas Aquinas stated, bad arguments for God’s existence do more harm than good, since they give unbelievers an occasion to laugh.¹

The Problem Posed

The classic objection to the existence of God in the light of evil and suffering is generally expressed in a similar way to how it is stated by the Dominican philosopher and theologian Father Brian Davies, OP:

Whatever our beliefs about God, few of us would deny that there is a great deal of evil in the world. People behave in ways that are morally despicable. And there is a great deal of suffering and pain. In that case, however, how can we affirm that God is good?²

Or in the words of St. Augustine of Hippo, “Either God cannot abolish evil or he will not. If he cannot then he is not all

powerful; if he will not then he is not all good”.³ Finally, the philosopher Boethius put it even more concisely when he asked “If God exists, whence comes evil? If God does not exist, whence comes good?”⁴

Moral Evil and Natural Evil

The key to understanding this whole issue is the drawing of an important distinction, that between moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is what in an earlier age one would refer to as sin. The fact of moral evil is no argument against the question of the existence of God. The philosopher John Haldane explains this as follows:

So far as moral evil in general is concerned, the solution lies in recognizing that there is a great good in living a self-directed life. This, though, requires the capacity for judgment, deliberation and free action, and these are not trivial skills. Also, they can be used for bad as well as for good purposes. . . . One cannot create free beings while also constraining their actions so that they do only good. . . . Accordingly, moral evil is not something that God creates, though it is something that he anticipates as a possible consequence of creating free agents.⁵

Moral evil, then, arises from the sins of rational creatures. God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. God permits it, however, because He respects the freedom of His creatures and, mysteriously, knows how to derive good from it. Almighty God, because He is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in His works if He were not so all-powerful

and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself.

We know not whether moral fault was involved in the Colombian air crash, but it seems unlikely that someone deliberately targeted the plane and its passengers, for example by the use of an explosive device or by the pilot's deliberately crashing the plane, as in another case some time ago. No such evidence has emerged thus far. With regard to the Russian plane, it is too early to say anything with complete confidence.

What about naturally caused suffering, for example evil stemming from volcanoes, avalanches, earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, and, as may be the case here, a plane crash caused by ordinary wear and tear undetectable beforehand, or even where there was some negligence involved, but no moral fault? Can these be reconciled with a wholly good and omnipotent God? Well, certainly such events do result in great suffering and grief, and it does seem at first sight unfair that one innocent person should be caught up in the disaster and another escape it. In the Colombian case one player missed the trip through a previously sustained injury. However, even allowing for such understandable feelings, it is in fact relatively easy to see that this does not in any way negate the existence of God. Several powerful arguments are available to support the theist position. It is also very important to put these forward, because, rightly or wrongly, many people are put off religious belief due to a faulty interpretation of this issue. Others may also conclude that their existing belief is rendered null by such things. It is proposed, therefore, to set out five arguments showing the case for the existence of God even in the face of evil and suffering.

1. Imagining a World Without Evil

The argument here is put best by the religious commentator Clifford Longley in a comment on a particularly horrific murder case involving the beating to death of a young child:

Faced with a daunting or even insuper-



able “problem of evil,” attempt the mental exercise of constructing an imaginary world without evil. It leads to interesting conclusions. The challenge to faith presented by some sudden catastrophe is usually in the form of “How can there be a God who loves us if he allows *this* to happen?”

So what does the hypothetical “world without suffering” look like? Much suffering results from mechanical failure, for instance from metal fatigue in an aircraft part which might cause a catastrophic breakage leading to tragedy. So does our all-powerful, all-loving God ensure that no metal parts ever fail from metal fatigue, and by the same token, that no engines ever fall off because somebody forgot to tighten a bolt? But what then is the point of maintenance, or research into aircraft safety? We are postulating a world

where, every time some unforeseen misfortune overtakes an aircraft in flight, a miracle is performed automatically to put it right. And we have to say the same about every other form of human activity.

It is, in short, a world where the law of cause and effect has been abolished. . . . Actually it is worse than that. The principle of cause and effect is the fundamental reason why we find the world rational: do this, and that follows; do it over and over again, and we have a scientific law by which means we can begin to make sense of the world. Furthermore there is an extraordinary (and surely divinely arranged) association between the rationality of the world, and the rationality of our minds. If the world was irrational . . . our minds would surely be irrational too. Would we even exist?⁶

2. The Human Well-Being Argument

The witnesses I call in this case are two-fold. The first is another philosopher, Timothy Chappell. He puts the point in this way:

The idea that the existence of naturally caused human suffering provides an *insuperable* obstacle to belief in the goodness and benevolence of God . . . depends on the suppressed premise that human well-being is what matters most in the world. But as soon as we acknowledge . . . that our world-view should not be anthropocentric like this, we can give up that assumption. . . . If God did indeed create the world, then there may be deeper purposes working themselves out in the natural world than we humans have or can have the slightest inkling of . . . Both Christian and sceptic ought, when debating natural evil, to drop the easy assumption that if God is supposed to have made the world *good*, then he must be supposed to have made the world *convenient for humans* (and not for example dangerous for them). . . . As Descartes pointed out in his *Principles of Philosophy* (1.28): “When dealing with natural things . . . we should not be so arrogant as to suppose that we can share in God’s plans”.⁷

The second witness is the sociologist Eugene Genovese, then an atheist, but later to become a Catholic, who writes of a confrontation he had with a Unitarian group that had invited him to give a talk to them. Genovese was known for his trenchant style and it is certainly in evidence here:

Apparently with the intention of putting me at ease, someone asked how anyone could believe in God in view of the constant horrors across the world. Would He have permitted the recent terrible earthquake in Nicaragua, in the aftermath of which the great Roberto Clemente lost his life in an attempt to bring relief to its victims?

“Would a good God permit such evil?”

I gasped. How could well-educated and intelligent people talk such rubbish? Stunned and momentarily forgetting my atheism, I responded with an impassioned defense of Christian theology. I may not have believed in God, but I considered their objections an insult to my intelligence. I interpreted their remarks as meaning that God, to be worthy of worship, had to do whatever they wanted Him to—that God had to follow the dictates of their various consciences. I reminded my Unitarian hosts of the words of Genesis 23:50: “The thing proceedeth from the Lord. We cannot speak unto you bad and good.” I returned home shell-shocked. A “church” of unbelievers!⁸

3. God as a Moral Agent?

If the previous argument denying God can be said to be fixated upon a supposed judgment from the perspective of human beings, the next one places a false emphasis on the behavior of God. The best analysis of this argument is provided by Fr. Brian Davies, the Dominican theologian referred to earlier:

In most contemporary discussions of God and evil, God is treated as though he were a creature, an inhabitant of the universe with a moral case to answer. Time and again the basic question asked of him is, “Is he well behaved?” . . . This question does not make sense because it derives from a kind of category mistake. . . . The notion that God is a moral agent as people are (and is therefore subject to moral censure or moral justification) is completely unbiblical and would have been thought comic by generations of Christian theologians. I can only marvel that it is currently so popular among philosophers of religion, including many who claim to speak on behalf of Christianity.

These philosophers attempt to offer

moral exonerations of God while both failing to grasp that God is not a member of a moral community and by failing to see how badly their attempts to defend God *morally* fall short of anything like a justification of God’s moral integrity. Confronted by God as these authors conceive of him, we might intelligibly rebel against him. But, there are religiously profound ways of thinking of God which do not depend on trying to explain evil away as part of some morally justified divine scheme—ways in which God is found in whatever comes to pass, ways in which the notions of God’s moral goodness (or possibly moral badness) simply does not arise, ways which allow us to see God in terms of sacrifice and with reference to figures like the crucified Christ.⁹

4. A Problem for the Atheist

Thus far we have considered arguments that attempt to refute the atheist position; however, there is a very strong argument that exposes the important fact that the problem of evil itself has what might be called a kick in its tail for the atheist. This is brought out very well by the writer on mathematics and philosophy, James Franklin. Here is what he says:

Consider, for example, the materialist world-picture which most atheists believe in. Is there really evil in the materialist world? Of course, there are animals in pain and distress, but one who takes an absolute perspective can well ask, why does that matter? Ordinarily one thinks that the suffering of a human is a tragedy but the explosion of a dead galaxy is just a firework. Materialism though, denies the distinction between the two, since it takes humans to be the same kind of things as galaxies, namely, moderately complicated heaps of matter. If the fate of a galaxy cannot give rise to a problem of evil, because its fate cannot in any absolute sense matter, then neither

can the fate of a brain. In posing the problem of evil, the materialist who does not really believe in positive worth is cynically trading on our sense of the importance of those who suffer, knowing he will undermine it later.

The atheist's argument from evil has a moral force behind it. It engages our attention—and rightly so—by forcing us to remember how terrible evil is. Evil matters because it happens to things of great value—at least ourselves and those with whom we share a common humanity that allows us to understand their suffering. If the conclusion of the problem of evil entails a reduction of that notion of value, as well as of the existence of a good God, then it will have undermined itself by “proving too much.” The atheist who poses the problem is left in the end with the conclusion that evil was really not worth worrying about in the first place. That is bad faith, and what seemed to be the moral force of his position is exposed as a mere self-serving indignation. The materialist view of evil is frivolous. If all there is to evil is that I have a personal dislike of suffering, there is no moral standpoint from which I can criticise God for failing to alleviate it.

So the very existence of evil as a matter of absolute seriousness is a substantial reason to believe that the materialist world picture is false. Since the leading alternative theory involves a good and powerful God, that is a reason to believe there must be some solution to the problem of the evil.

5. The Christian Solution

By now it should have been seen that not only is the problem of evil something to which the theist has a strong reply, but that the very same problem provides a real dilemma and difficulty for the atheist. A final point must be made, namely that it is also the case that if the theist position in its traditional Christian form is adopted, then there is a further support for asserting the existence of God despite cases of evil and

suffering. In other words, by contrast with the atheist, the believing Christian does have a specific solution to the problem of evil and that of course is Christ. Germain Grisez expresses it well:

Jesus himself—the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*—is the real Christian response to suffering. While his death and resurrection do not explain each particular instance, they do make it clear that God allows suffering for the sake of a great good, that the way to deal with suffering is to accept it with a love which overcomes hatred and sin, and that God responds to such love by making suffering end not in death but in new and perfect life.¹⁰

In addition, we should cite that redoubtable lady, Dorothy L. Sayers, in this context. She was already by the time of World War II very doubtful about much writing supposedly in the Christian tradition, but which she quite rightly accused of being much closer to the heresy of Arianism than to authentic Christian teaching. She was appalled at what she saw being put forward even then as Christian teaching, as can be seen in the following passage from one of her letters:

If you were God and had taken the trouble to go through all that humiliation and suffering to redeem the world, wouldn't you be a bit hurt in your feelings to find that, two thousand years after, people were *still* saying they didn't think there could be a God, or he wouldn't allow nasty things to happen, and your own bishops (yes, bishops!) were bleating that they couldn't understand why God in His inscrutable providence allowed the suffering of the innocent? Good heavens! If they don't understand by this time, they ought to. Christians are the only people who have no atom of excuse for not understanding. What on earth have they been about?—I know what they have been about. They have been saying: “Be

virtuous and you will prosper,” like the Old Testament Jews, instead of saying like Christians, “Be good and you will be crucified; the innocent always pay, because they are the only people who have anything to give—that's what it means to be part of the mystical body of God, who was good and paid the price. So far as you are bad, of course, you are suffering the consequences of badness, and leaving others to redeem it, but just so far as you are good, you are helping God to pay for you and for everybody else.” There's plenty left in that to argue about and explain—but how anybody calling himself Christian can have the face to say he doesn't know why the suffering of the innocent is allowed or what it's *for*, beats me. I tell you . . . they've never read the story. They can't have. Of course, they may think it an untrue story or an immoral story. If they do, they should stop pretending to be Christians and be something else. But they've no right to suppress the story or tell a different story altogether.¹¹

The development of thought down the ages on the present subject is littered with bad arguments, which come under the caveat expressed by Aquinas, cited earlier. It is submitted that the five dealt with above have a considerable force. In addition, when it comes to the problem of evil, one must be careful not to get things out of perspective. As the philosopher Ralph McNerny makes clear:

One ought to start with the problem of good. Why are there so many good things, why do so many good things happen to us and so forth? Good outweighs evil many tons of times. I think we ought to start off that way and marvel at the goodness of our lives and of the universe and so forth before we start whining about the evil which is usually due to us anyway. I think it is an overblown thing. People pretend to be absolutely discombobulated because

there was an earthquake in Lisbon or something and they have to write *Candide*. But most days there aren't earthquakes in Lisbon and maybe we ought to marvel at that.¹²

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