

# Addressing Doubts about Evil & Suffering

## Campus Ministry Winter Retreat

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### I. The Reality of Evil

#### A. Forms of evil

1. Natural
2. Moral
3. Mixed

#### B. Evil is not only a problem for Christianity but a major problem for Atheism as well.

1. How can Atheism (Naturalism) account for “evil” to begin with?
2. Pain and suffering might occur, but why is anything “evil”?
3. If evil objectively exists, then this is actually an argument in favor of God’s existence.

“The problem of evil is known as ‘the rock of atheism’” (Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist*, 228).

VS.

“If evil does exist, such a fact would point us in the direction of God’s existence ....” (Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation*, 91).

“Rightly understood, evil surprisingly point us to a good God rather than away from him, to a confidence that goodness *must* exist, to hope rather than despair” (Copan, *Loving Wisdom*, 127).

#### C. Buddhism and Suffering:

1. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism
2. Contrast Buddhism’s approach to suffering to that of the \_\_\_\_\_ CHRISTIAN God.

### II. The Classic Problem of Evil for Christianity: It is contradictory or highly improbable that the Christian God exists in light of evil.

#### A. Evil exists.

B. If God were all-good (omnibenevolent), He would *want* to eliminate evil.

C. If God were all-knowing (omniscient), He would *know how* to eliminate evil.

D. If God were all-powerful (omnipotent), He would *be able* to eliminate evil.

E. Since evil exists, God must either not exist or not be all-good, all-knowing, or all-powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> The retreat webpage provides access to more complete outlines and links to audio and slides. You may also email questions.

### III. Prominent Types of Apologetic Responses (“theodicy” = *theos*, God + *dikaiois*, justice)

“The time to discuss the problem of evil is when someone is not staring it in the face” (R. Knopp).

#### A. Free Will Theodicy.

1. Even an omnipotent God CANNOT literally do EVERYTHING.
2. Even God could not create humans with free will and guarantee that they would not inevitably sin.
3. In general, the Free Will defense:
  - a. Suggests a GOOD REASON for God to create a world with evil.

#### B. Natural Law Theodicy.

1. There is a natural order in the universe.
2. This natural order is a necessary condition for moral good and for moral evil.
3. Both moral good and evil require ACCOUNTABILITY.
4. Such natural order invariably leads to suffering and death (e.g. walking off a cliff).
5. A Natural Law response helps to explain much of “natural evil.”

#### C. Soul-Making Theodicy.

1. The virtues take time to develop (e.g. reliance on God; patience; forgiveness).
2. Humanity “learns” righteousness (Isa 26:9-11; Lk 13:4-5) through pain and suffering.
3. Humanity experiences FINITENESS with pain and evil.

“Pain plants the flag of truth within a rebel fortress” (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 120).

D. These theodicies are very helpful but not adequate in themselves.

### IV. More Distinctively Biblical Perspectives on Evil Are Needed.

A. More focus on the BIBLICAL God.

“The God in whom the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to disbelieve had been invented only in the seventeenth century” (Alasdair MacIntyre, in *The Religious Significance of Atheism*, ed. A. MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, 14; cited in A. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God*, 101).

B. More appeal to distinctive Christian doctrines.

- “‘Christianity entered into the defense of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything Christian.’ Under the influence of Descartes, this approach to apologetics would prove to have devastating results” (McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God*, 101; citing Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 67).
- “Philosophical responses to evil must be placed within the broader theological framework of God’s revelation and work in Jesus Christ” (Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation*, 92).

C. More emphasis on what God HAS DONE.

A. Plantinga: “As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cooling [sic] observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering” (cited by Copan, *Loving Wisdom*, 134; Plantinga, “A Christian Life Partially Lived,” in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark (IVP, 1993, 71).

1. Sin is real and has consequences.
2. God *has acted* to eliminate sin and evil! (Matt 26:9)

“... more important than a logical answer to the problem of evil theoretically is a personal answer to the problem of evil practically. More important than an apologist is a Savior” (Kreeft & Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 143).

D. All suffering must be understood in the context of an eternal, righteous, and merciful \_\_\_\_\_ (Rom 8:18). **JUDGMENT**

**V. Considerations about the Very Purpose for God’s Creation.<sup>2</sup>**

A. Satan is real and a “\_\_\_\_\_” **COSMIC STRUGGLE** has existed with God since *before* the creation of this physical universe. (Is 14:12-15; Lk 13:16; Matt 17:14-21; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; 1 Jn 3:8; Matt 25:41)

B. One suggestion: God is performing a **COSMIC DEMONSTRATION**. He is demonstrating His righteousness and His mercy. (Rom 1:17; 3:24–26; 5:8; 9:17; Ps 22:31; 1 Pet 3:18–21; Col 2:15; Eph 3:8–10; Isa 26:9)

C. Intriguing questions and some tentative answers:

1. Why did God give “pre-fallen” humanity the capacity to do evil?
2. If God could not have created a world with human freedom without inevitable sin, how can He create a “new” heaven and earth without the same inevitability?
3. Will we be “significantly free creatures” in heaven?

D. Summary: I believe that God created our universe as He did (with human free will and eventual evil and suffering) *for good reasons* and that these reasons are connected to His ultimate resolution to this “cosmic struggle” with Satan.

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<sup>2</sup> This section is more speculative on my part. However, I find these considerations personally helpful as I wrestle with the reality of evil.