

Would a Good God Permit Evil and Suffering?

The Problem of Evil, and What Christianity Answers

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I. The Objection That Deserves Better

Every other argument on this site can be conducted at a certain distance. Contingency, fine-tuning, the reliability of the Gospels: a person can weigh these on a quiet afternoon and lose nothing by getting them wrong. The argument from evil is not like that. It arrives with a particular face attached to it, and for most people who abandon belief in God it is the reason, whatever else they cite afterward.

So it should be said at the outset that this essay does not solve the problem of evil. No essay does. What can be shown is narrower and still worth showing: that the existence of evil does not make belief in God irrational, that the strongest form of the argument proves less than it is usually taken to prove, and that Christianity says something about suffering which no other account says, and which is not a theory.

The reader who wants a tidy resolution should stop here. Anyone offering one has either not understood the question or is not being honest about the answer.

II. Two Arguments, Not One

The objection comes in two forms, and they fail and succeed differently. Running them together is the commonest source of confusion on both sides.

The logical argument claims that God and evil are strictly incompatible: that the propositions “an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God exists” and “evil exists” cannot both be true, so that the presence of any evil at all refutes theism outright. This is a claim about consistency, and it can be settled the way claims about consistency are settled.

The evidential argument concedes that the two are consistent and presses a different point. Given the amount of suffering in the world, and the apparent pointlessness of much of it, the existence of God is improbable. This argument does not claim to disprove anything. It claims that the evidence tells heavily against belief, and that is the version worth arguing with.

III. What Must Be Granted

A great deal, and it should be granted plainly rather than conceded slowly under pressure.

The suffering is real. It is not an illusion, not a lesson, not a shadow that makes the light visible. Children die of bone cancer. Whole populations have been starved by policy. An earthquake kills tens of thousands of people in a night, most of them asleep and none of them chosen. Any account that softens these facts to make them fit a doctrine has falsified the evidence before beginning.

The quantity is a difficulty in itself. It is one thing to say that suffering may serve a purpose and another to explain why so much of it is required. The scale is not obviously proportioned to anything.

Much of it appears to accomplish nothing whatever. A fawn burned in a forest fire, lying in agony for days before it dies, is not being taught anything, and neither is anyone else, because nobody sees it.

And Christians have made the problem worse. The pious cruelty of telling a bereaved parent that God needed another angel, or that everything happens for a reason, has done more damage to faith than any argument. Job's comforters are in Scripture precisely as a warning, and they are still with us.

IV. Why the Logical Argument Was Abandoned

The logical form of the argument was pressed most influentially by J. L. Mackie in 1955. He argued that a good being eliminates evil as far as it can, that an omnipotent being can do anything, and that the two propositions together entail that a good omnipotent being eliminates evil entirely, so the existence of evil disproves such a being.

The argument requires a hidden premise: that a good and omnipotent God could have no morally sufficient reason for permitting any evil at all. Stated openly, that premise is not obviously true, and no one has been able to demonstrate it. Alvin Plantinga's free will defense showed why. If it is even possible that God has such a reason, the alleged contradiction dissolves, since a contradiction has to hold necessarily and not merely usually.

The point is worth stating carefully, because it is often overstated by believers. Plantinga did not show that God has a good reason for any particular evil, and he did not offer his defense as a theodicy. He showed that the propositions are consistent. That is a modest result, and it is the reason the logical argument is no longer the live one. Mackie himself later acknowledged that the free will defense answers his formulation.

A Christian who declares victory here has misread the situation. What was refuted was the claim that belief in God is self-contradictory. Nobody who has watched a child die was ever moved by a claim about consistency.

V. The Evidential Argument, at Full Strength

The serious argument is the evidential one, and its most careful statement is William Rowe's. In 1979 he put it in three steps:

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- Therefore, (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism"
(1979)

The second premise is what most theists accept without argument: a good God does not permit suffering for no reason. The whole weight falls on the first, and Rowe was careful about what he claimed for it. He did not say it could be proved. He said that in the light of our experience it is reasonable to believe, in the way that many things are reasonable to believe without being demonstrable.

His examples were chosen to resist the usual replies. The first is a fawn trapped in a forest fire, badly burned, which lies in terrible pain for several days and then dies. The second, added in 1988, is not hypothetical: a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who was beaten, raped, and strangled by her mother's boyfriend on New Year's Day, 1986.

Notice what these cases are built to exclude. Neither can be explained by human freedom in the fawn's case or by any good the victim receives in the child's. Neither produces an observable benefit. The child's death was not a lesson to anyone; nobody was improved by it; it was over before it could mean anything.

Dostoevsky had put the same case in fiction a century earlier, and put it better than most philosophers have. Ivan Karamazov, having recited a catalogue of atrocities against children, refuses the eventual harmony that is supposed to justify them:

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to "dear, kind God"! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Book V, ch. 4

And a page later, the sentence everything in this essay has to answer:

It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.

The Brothers Karamazov, Book V, ch. 4

Ivan is not an atheist in the ordinary sense, and that is the point of him. He grants the premises and refuses the conclusion on moral grounds. It is the most formidable version of the objection precisely because it is not an argument about probability but a refusal to be bought.

VI. How Far Can We See?

The standard reply to Rowe is that his first premise moves from what we can see to what is there. We know of no good that would justify the fawn's suffering; he concludes that there is none. Stephen Wykstra called this a noseum inference, and argued that it works only where we would expect to see the thing if it were there.

The example usually given is the milk. Asked whether the milk has gone sour, a man opens the carton, smells nothing, and reports that it is fine. If he has a heavy head cold, his failure to smell anything establishes very little. The inference from "I detect nothing" to "there is nothing" depends entirely on how good the detector is.

So the question becomes whether human beings are the sort of creatures who would be able to see the reasons of an omniscient God, if there were any. Put that way, the confident answer looks strange. We routinely fail to see the point of what our own parents did until decades later. Chess players three ranks above us make moves we cannot account for, and the moves are good.

This line of reply is called skeptical theism, and it is stronger than it first appears. But its limits have to be admitted, and most defenders of it admit them badly.

Pushed hard enough, the same reasoning undermines moral judgment generally. If we cannot tell whether a horror serves an unseen good, we also cannot tell whether relieving suffering serves an unseen harm, and ordinary moral confidence starts to dissolve. A defense that saves God's goodness by making goodness unknowable has paid too much.

The honest position is narrower. Our inability to see a justifying reason is real evidence that there is none, and it is weaker evidence than it feels, because the gap between our vantage and an omniscient one is exactly the sort of gap that would hide such reasons. That does not dispose of Rowe. It lowers the confidence his argument can carry, and leaves the question where the rest of this essay has to take it up.

VII. Freedom, and the Evil We Do

Most of the evil that people actually encounter is done to them by other people. Cruelty, betrayal, theft, war, and the long human record of one group deciding that another is not quite human: these account for the majority of what the objection points to, and they have an answer that is not evasive.

A world containing creatures who genuinely choose is a world in which they can choose wrongly. The alternative is not a world of free creatures who always choose well, but a world of creatures who cannot choose at all, whose kindness is a mechanism rather than

an act. Love that cannot be withheld is not love, and a God who wanted love had to make beings who could refuse it.

The objection that God could have created only those who would freely never sin runs into the difficulty Plantinga pressed: it is not clear that such a set of persons is available to be created, since what a free creature would do in a given situation is not something even omnipotence determines.

None of this is a full answer even to moral evil, because the sufferer is usually not the one who chose. The victim's freedom was not enhanced by her attacker's. What the argument establishes is that the existence of a world with real agency in it is a good sufficient to bear the risk of agency misused, not that any particular abuse was worth it.

And it establishes nothing at all about the fawn.

VIII. Law, and the Evil That Befalls Us

Natural evil is the harder half, and the place where most theodicies overreach. Earthquakes, cancers, floods, and the whole apparatus of predation were not chosen by anyone.

What can be said is that a world of stable law is a precondition of nearly everything else worth having. Agents can act only in a world that behaves predictably; knowledge, planning, science, and moral responsibility all require that fire burn consistently and that gravity not be negotiable. A world in which God suspended the regularities whenever they were about to hurt someone would not be a world in which anyone could act at all, because no one could know what anything would do.

The same plate tectonics that levels a city also recycles carbon and keeps the planet habitable. The same cellular replication that makes growth possible makes cancer possible. These are not separate systems, one good and one wicked, but the same system seen at different moments.

This is a real argument and it should not be pushed past what it will carry. It explains why a law-governed world contains hazards. It does not explain why this much, or why distributed as it is. The child in the collapsed building is not consoled by the carbon cycle, and a theodicy that seems to think she should be has lost its way.

On natural evil the Christian answer is thinner than the Christian would like, and saying so is better than pretending otherwise.

IX. What Suffering Makes, and What It Destroys

There is a long tradition, from Irenaeus to John Hick, of treating the world as a place where souls are made rather than a place where they are kept comfortable. Courage, patience, compassion, and forgiveness are real goods, and none of them can exist in a world without difficulty. Compassion requires somebody to suffer.

The tradition has genuine force, and anyone who has watched a person grow through an illness has seen it working. C. S. Lewis put the harder version of it: that pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world, and that a man will attend to it who will attend to nothing else.

But soul-making has an obvious limit, and it is the limit at which honest treatments of this subject either stop or start lying. A great deal of suffering makes nobody better. It destroys people. It leaves the survivors bitter, frightened, and diminished, and it kills its victims before any growth is possible. The infant who dies in agony at four months has not been improved.

So the soul-making argument accounts for some suffering and not for all of it, and the residue is exactly the suffering Rowe selected. Any theodicy that claims to have covered the whole field with this argument has quietly stopped looking at the field.

X. The Charge That Theodicy Is Itself Obscene

A serious objection deserves recording here, and it comes as often from believers as from atheists. To sit at a desk explaining what a murdered child's suffering accomplished is to treat her as an instrument, and there is something corrupt in the exercise however carefully it is done.

The charge lands. Every general justification of suffering, offered from outside the suffering, has the character of an argument made by someone who is not the one paying. This is what Ivan Karamazov saw, and it is why his refusal is more powerful than any calculation.

The Christian answer to that charge is not a better calculation. It is the claim examined in the next section, which is of an entirely different kind, and which is the only reason this essay is worth writing.

XI. What Christianity Adds to Theism

Everything so far could be said by any theist, and most of it has been said by philosophers with no religion at all. What Christianity adds is not a further argument but a fact it claims about God.

The claim is that God did not remain outside the suffering He permits. He entered it as a participant, was betrayed by a friend, tried by a court that knew better, tortured by professionals, and executed in public. He did this as one of us and not as a visitor, and He did it voluntarily.

This does not explain suffering. Nothing in the Passion tells anyone why the fawn burned or why the child in Flint died. What it does is remove one particular objection with great force: that God, if He exists, is a spectator of an agony He does not share, disposing of other people's pain from a position of perfect safety.

That charge is answered, and it is answered by an event rather than by a theory. Whatever else is true, the sufferer who prays to the God of the Christians is not addressing someone who has never been where she is.

Dostoevsky knew what he was doing when he gave Ivan no philosophical reply. Alyosha answers him by kissing him, and then with the Passion, which is the only thing in the book that meets what Ivan has said. The tears are not explained away. They are said to have been atoned for, which is the one thing Ivan demanded and did not believe possible.

And the Christian hope is not that the suffering will be shown to have been acceptable, but that it will be undone. The resurrection of the body means the harm is reversed rather than compensated, and the Christian expectation is not a balancing of accounts but the wiping of tears from faces (Rev. 21:4).

XII. Job, and an Answer That Is Not an Explanation

Scripture treats this question at length in one book, and what the book does is not what either side expects.

Job's friends give the standard theodicy of their day, that suffering is punishment and Job must have earned it. Job denies it and demands a hearing. At the end God appears, and the friends are condemned for not having spoken rightly, while Job, who accused God to His face, is vindicated.

What God offers Job is not an explanation. The whirlwind speeches are a tour of creation, ostriches and wild goats and the constellations, and their effect is to enlarge the questioner rather than to answer the question. Job is never told about the wager in the prologue. He is given God, and reports himself satisfied, which is either the deepest thing in the book or an evasion, depending on the reader. Chesterton, introducing the book, judged it the deepest thing, and said why in sentences that have never been bettered: God comes in at the end "not to answer riddles, but to propound them," and Job "was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good

to be told. The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.”

Two things follow for anyone arguing this question. The first is that Scripture does not supply the tidy answer that Job’s friends supply, and treats the attempt as an offense. The second is that the biblical response to suffering is overwhelmingly protest rather than resignation. A third of the Psalms are complaints, several of them furious, and Christ Himself died quoting one of them.

XIII. What Is Claimed, and What Is Not

The logical argument fails, and its failure is agreed on both sides of the question. The evidential argument does not fail. It is weakened by the reach of the inference it requires, and it survives that weakening in reduced form, and an honest believer carries it as a difficulty rather than disposing of it.

Freedom accounts for the evil that people do to one another. Stable law accounts for a world in which harm is possible. Soul-making accounts for some suffering and visibly not for all. Each of these is a partial answer, and stacking partial answers does not produce a whole one.

One form of the argument remains, different from the logical and the evidential: not that suffering disproves God, but that its pattern—tracking geology and microbiology rather than desert—fits indifference better than providence. Two replies. First, the pattern is the one Christianity itself predicts. It is the skeptic’s hypothesis, not the Christian one, that expects a world where rain checks the character of the fields it falls on: Christ said plainly that the Father makes His sun rise on the evil and the good (Matt. 5:45), and that the tower of Siloam did not fall on the worst eighteen men in Jerusalem (Luke 13:4–5). A creation of stable natural law, in which desert is settled at a judgment rather than by earthquakes, is what the doctrine describes; finding law-like suffering confirms both hypotheses equally, and evidence that fits both moves neither. Second, the fit argument weighs only the suffering. On indifference, the anomaly is everything else—that the byproducts of geology and microbiology include creatures who grieve over geology and microbiology, measure the world against a justice nothing in it taught them, and cannot stop asking this very question. Suffering distributed without desert fits both stories; mourners who mind that it is so fit only one.

What remains is a question that has not been closed and a claim that changes its character. The claim is that the God accused of indifference submitted to the worst that the objection describes, and that the tears Ivan refused to see unatoned for were atoned for on a Friday afternoon outside a city wall.

A reader may weigh all of this and remain unconvinced. The problem of evil is the best argument the other side has, and this essay has tried to state it at its strongest rather than at its most convenient. What it denies is only that the argument is decisive, and what it offers instead of a solution is a person who did not stay out of the wreckage.

Endnotes

1. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955), 200-212. The argument is set out there in the form summarized in section IV.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Harper & Row, 1974), and the fuller treatment in *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), ch. 9. Plantinga presents the free will defense expressly as a defense rather than a theodicy: it aims to show consistency, not to identify God's actual reasons.
3. Mackie's later assessment is in *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford, 1982), 154, where he grants that the free will defense shows the central theistic doctrines to be consistent.
4. William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), 335-341. The three premises are quoted verbatim in section V. Rowe's own gloss is that we are not in a position to prove premise (1), but that it may nonetheless be rational to believe it.
5. The 1988 argument concentrates on two cases, labeled E1 and E2: the hypothetical burned fawn, and the killing of a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, on New Year's Day, 1986. See Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), 119-132.
6. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, ch. 4 ("Rebellion"), in the Constance Garnett translation. Both passages are quoted as printed there.
7. Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), 73-93. The condition Wykstra proposes is known by the acronym CORNEA; the sour milk illustration is standard in the literature that followed.
8. William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 29-67, argues that we are not in a position to judge that God has no reason unknown to us.
9. On the cost of unrestricted skeptical theism for ordinary moral reasoning, see the criticisms gathered in Michael Bergmann's and others' exchanges on the subject; the concern raised in section VI is widely acknowledged by defenders of the position.

10. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), ch. 6, for pain as God's megaphone. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) is the necessary companion, written after his wife's death, and considerably less confident.
11. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), for the Irenaean soul-making tradition set against the Augustinian account.
12. G. K. Chesterton, "Introduction to the Book of Job" (1907), quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library.
12. Catechism of the Catholic Church, sections 309-314 and 324, on why God permits evil and on drawing good from it; section 385 on evil as the privation of a good; and section 1521 on suffering united to the Passion. Thomas Aquinas takes the problem of evil as the first objection to God's existence at *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, and answers it by quoting Augustine: that God, being supremely good, would permit no evil unless able to bring good out of it.
13. Job 38-42, with the condemnation of the friends at 42:7. On lament as the dominant biblical response to suffering, see Psalms 6, 13, 22, 44, 88 and the book of Lamentations; Christ quotes Psalm 22:1 from the cross (Matt. 27:46).

For Further Reading

The Problem of Evil, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy—the logical and evidential arguments set out in full.

Skeptical Theism, by Timothy Perrine—Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, on what we are in a position to see.

God, Freedom, and Evil, by Alvin Plantinga—the free will defense against the logical argument.

The Problem of Pain, by C. S. Lewis—read with *A Grief Observed*, written after his wife's death.

The Brothers Karamazov, by Fyodor Dostoevsky—Ivan's case is Book V, chapters 4 and 5. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28054>.

Summa Theologiae, by Thomas Aquinas—evil is the first objection he raises to God's existence. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1002.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§309–314, "Providence and the scandal of evil". Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/100/>.

Salvifici Doloris, by John Paul II—on the Christian meaning of human suffering. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html.

Spe Salvi, by Benedict XVI—§§36–40 on suffering, consolation and hope. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

Introduction to the Book of Job, by G. K. Chesterton (1907).

Evil and the God of Love, by John Hick—the classic modern theodicy; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/evilgodoflove000ohick>.

The Nature of Necessity, by Alvin Plantinga—the free-will defense in full rigor; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/natureofnecessit000oplan>.

The Miracle of Theism, by J. L. Mackie—the opposing case at its strongest; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/miracleoftheisma000omack>.

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Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic response to the problem of evil and suffering*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.