

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology The Problem of Evil

We now come to the most important argument in support of atheism that needs to be examined, and this is the argument from the suffering and the evil in the world. This goes by different names. Sometimes it is called “the problem of pain” or “the problem of innocent suffering.” Among philosophers, however, the problem usually goes under the name “the problem of evil.” So I will often refer to it under that title. But it needs to be understood that it is not technically just about moral evil but natural evil as well; that is to say, the suffering that results from disease, accidents, natural disasters, and so forth.

Undoubtedly, the problem of evil is the most important argument in support of atheism. When you consider the extent and the depth of human suffering in the world, whether it is due to natural disasters or to man's own inhumanity to man, then I think we have to admit that it is hard to believe in God. The horrible suffering in the world certainly seems to be evidence of God's absence.

To illustrate, in 1985 when Jan and I were living just outside of Paris, the problem of evil came home to me in a new and powerful way through two incidents that were shown on French television. In the first of these, a terrible earthquake occurred in Mexico City which devastated blocks of high-rise apartment buildings. As the rescue teams in the aftermath of the quake searched through the rubble for survivors, they came across a ten-year old boy who was trapped alive somewhere in the recesses of a collapsed building. During the next several days the whole world watched as the rescuers attempted to clear away the rubble to try to get to the boy.

They could communicate with him. They could hear him, but they couldn't reach him. His grandfather, who had been trapped with him in the building, had already died. The little boy cried, "I'm scared!" The rescuers were desperate to get to him. But after several days had passed, there was silence. He was heard no more. Alone in the darkness, without food or water, afraid, this little boy died before the rescue teams could get to him and free him.

That same year, a mud slide swept over a village in Colombia. As the rescuers came to help survivors, they came across a little girl who was pinned up to her chin in muddy flood waters. For some reason or another that I can't understand, they were unable to free her from the water or stop the water that was flowing around her. Every night on the evening news we would watch this little girl's decline. It was the most pathetic sight that I've ever seen. She stood there unable to move with this muddy water constantly flowing into her mouth, spitting this water out. As the days went by she became more and more exhausted, and deep dark circles formed under her eyes. She was dying before our very eyes, as we watched on television. Finally, the evening newscaster reported that she was gone.

These two incidents rent my heart. "Oh, God," I thought, "why did you permit these children to suffer so terribly?" If they had to die, so be it! Let the little boy be killed instantly in the collapse of the apartment building. Let the little girl drown suddenly. But why these lingering, pointless, agonizing deaths? I think we've got to be honest – when you see things like this going on, it's hard to believe in God.

But as one colleague rightly remarked to me, as a philosopher I am called upon to say what I *think* about an issue, not how I *feel* about it. As difficult as the problem of evil may be emotionally, that is no reason in and of itself to think that God does not exist. So in dealing with the problem of evil, I think it is absolutely vital that we make a distinction between what is called the intellectual problem of evil and the emotional problem of evil.

The intellectual problem of evil concerns whether it is plausible that God and the suffering in the world can co-exist. By contrast, the emotional problem of evil deals with people's dislike of a God who would permit suffering. I think it is vital that we keep these problems distinct because the answer to the intellectual problem is apt to appear very dry and uncaring to the person who is suffering emotionally from some terrible evil in his life. For example, I remember that when Joni Eareckson suffered her paralyzing diving accident, a parade of people came to her hospital room trying to explain how it is that God could have permitted this tragedy in her life. As I read her account of these, I thought some of these were actually pretty good explanations! But to her, who was suffering emotionally, these people came across like Job's comforters – uncaring, irrelevant, arid. She needed someone to comfort her and to encourage her. She was suffering emotionally. It wasn't intellectual answers that she needed.

By contrast, someone who is not going through emotional suffering but is contemplating the problem of evil as a purely abstract philosophical problem is very apt to find the answer to the emotional problem of evil to be superficial and just based on

emotions and not really providing good answers to the philosophical questions that are raised.

So it is important that we keep these problems distinct. The intellectual problem of evil lies in the province of the philosopher. The emotional problem of evil lies in the province of the pastoral counselor.

I am convinced on the basis of my experience that for the majority of people the problem of evil is not really an intellectual problem. It is an emotional problem. Most of them have not thought deeply about this issue at all, much less read the literature on it. Rather, their unbelief is born out of *rejection* of God, not *refutation* of God. It is not that they have a refutation of God's existence; it is just that they reject him. They want nothing to do with a God who would allow them or others to suffer terribly. Nevertheless it is still important to discuss the intellectual problem of evil because many people *think* that their objection is intellectual, even though it is, in fact, emotional. By defusing the intellectual problem of evil, we can get to the real problem and try to help them emotionally.

I. Intellectual problem of evil

In discussing the intellectual problem of evil, it is again important that we draw some distinctions. We need to distinguish between the *logical version* of the intellectual problem of evil and what can be called the evidential or *probabilistic version* of the problem of evil.

The logical version of the problem of evil says that there is a logical inconsistency between God and the evil or suffering in the world. If God exists, then evil cannot exist. It is impossible. By contrast, it is impossible that if evil and suffering do exist, then

God exists. Since evil obviously exists, it follows that God does not exist. God and evil are like the irresistible force and the immovable object – if one exists, the other one does not exist. And since obviously suffering and evil do exist, it follows that God does not exist.

By contrast, the evidential or probabilistic version doesn't claim that God and the suffering in the world are logically incompatible. It is logically possible that God and the suffering in the world might co-exist, but nevertheless, the objector says, it is highly improbable. Given the evil and the suffering that we see in the world, it is improbable that God exists.

Before we discuss these two versions of the problem, I think it is important to keep in mind just who has the burden of proof in this discussion. We are considering arguments *for* atheism. In the previous section of this course we were looking at arguments for God, and so it was the believer who had to bear the burden of proof. But now it is the atheist's turn. We want to hear from him some good arguments against God. So it is the atheist who has to bear the burden of proof here. It is up to him to give us an argument leading to the conclusion, “Therefore God does not exist.”

All too often I find that believers allow unbelievers to shift the burden of proof onto the believer's shoulders. The unbeliever says, “Give me some good explanation for why God permits suffering.” Then he just sits back and plays the sceptic at whatever explanation the believer might offer. The atheist winds up having to prove nothing. This might be a clever debating strategy on the atheist's part, but it is philosophically illegitimate and intellectually

dishonest. So in conversation, don't allow the unbeliever to shirk his intellectual responsibilities. He is the one who is claiming that the co-existence of God and evil are either logically impossible or improbable. So it is up to him to give us an argument and to support the premises of his argument. Now it is the Christian's turn to play the sceptic and to question whether the atheist has really proven that God cannot or does not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. Insist that the atheist bear his share of the burden of proof when it is his turn to present his case against God.

Because the intellectual problem of evil comes in different versions, when you are talking to the unbeliever it is also important to find out which version it is that he is supporting. Just ask him straightforwardly, "Are you saying that it is impossible that God and the suffering in the world co-exist? Or are you saying merely that it is improbable that God and the suffering in the world co-exist?" If he is like most atheists, he has probably never thought about the question, and so he doesn't have a clue which version he is supporting. Here you may need to help him to clarify what he himself believes by explaining the two versions to him. Ask him questions to help him understand what exactly it is that he believes, and then how he responds will determine your reply – whether you need to reply to the probabilistic version or to the logical version. But in either case, keep in mind that it is the unbeliever who has the burden of proof here, not you.