



## Setting the Stage

Evil is the thorniest of theological problems for a Christian theologian and may well be, as some have claimed, the number one cause of lost faith. The problem, says philosopher J. L. Mackie, is that

God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere, and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.<sup>1</sup>

Evil poses a problem for many religions and philosophical systems, but it is especially acute for Christianity's God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) for the salvation of creation. How can it be that the omnipotent, omniscient, loving God allows so much evil, so much suffering?

The problem is, for the Christian, inextricably tied to claims

about the nature of God, human nature, the meaning of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, salvation, and eschatology—the entire theological system, in other words. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to explore the problem of evil without reference to these issues. The foundational claim for Christians is, after all, that God’s love for creation led to salvation from evil, sin, and death through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christianity faces the paradox that evil challenges belief in God, and yet the experience of evil is “a necessary condition of any religion of redemption.”<sup>2</sup> The theological situation is complicated further when we fail to recall that doctrines of atonement proclaim that God has power over and conquered evil, whereas theodicy approaches evil as a direct challenge to divine power and/or goodness.

Broadly speaking, there have been two general categories of theological response to this enigma. The first is that God is in some sense responsible at least for the possibility of evil. Theologies of this sort seek to preserve the classical view of God as omnipotent and claim either that evil serves divine purposes like justice and redemption or that what we perceive as evil only *seems* evil because of our limited understanding. On the other hand, perhaps things that seem to be evil to us are actually necessary for some greater good we do not yet understand. Alternatively, perhaps evil has no reality—because existence is good, its opposite, non-existence, must be evil. Others have seen evil as a teaching tool used by God to help us become spiritually mature.

The second general tendency is to say that God is in no way responsible for evil. These theologies tend to focus more on divine benevolence and say that God chooses self-limitation to allow free will. Some say evil is a necessary possibility so that we can have free will; it is the result of sinful choices, and

suffering is punishment for those sins. Some recent versions of the free will argument, like process theology, have gone further and claim that the structure of reality means that it is impossible for God to control everything—God *cannot* prevent evil because the possibility for it is woven into the very nature of existence. Theologies of evil can be puzzling because theologians over the centuries have often made claims that seem to try to make both assertions at once: that God could prevent but allows evil and also that God is not in any sense responsible for evil's presence. Satan and the demonic often play a part in these theologies, adding another layer of complexity. Traditionally Satan is portrayed as an angel who opted to devote his existence to the enticement of humanity away from God. Sometimes he is said to be doing the work of God, as in Martin Luther's theology, and sometimes he is portrayed as so independent of God and powerful that he almost seems to be another god.

Another source of confusion is that it is sometimes difficult to know whether the theologian is offering a defense or a justification. Some have focused on writing an apologetic for God, defending the existence of God against philosophical arguments that say evil undermines belief. Early Christians like Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 CE) wrote apologetic works in which they attempted to show that the Christian God is not invalidated by the reality of evil. This form of argument became common during the Enlightenment and continues into the present day. Arguments of this sort tend to take place in the arena of philosophy, often set forth in response to challenges from atheists or agnostics, and focus on determining whether and to what extent the existence of evil undermines claims that God exists. Since our primary focus here is on understanding the other side of this coin—how

theologians have explained the existence of evil in a world created by the omnipotent and benevolent God—we will not address the challenges to God’s existence posed by it.

Other theologians have written for the believer and focused more on justifying evil and the good God. Gottfried Leibnitz (1646–1716) coined the term “theodicy” (Greek *theos*, “God” *dike*, “justice”) for the kind of argument that attempts to explain why God allows suffering and evil. These theologies claim that although we do not always understand, there is no such thing as gratuitous suffering, defined as evils that are not tied to any permutation of goods that outweigh the suffering. According to these claims, even the Holocaust and World War II, with the systematic torture and murder of millions of men, women, and children in Nazi death camps and loss of more than 48,000,000 civilian and military lives in a few short years,<sup>3</sup> are balanced by goods that came out of all that evil. We will examine this issue in more detail later but for now note that the problem for the theologian is countering claims that the suffering caused by the Holocaust is far too great to imagine any outweighing good or combination of goods.

Finally, it is sometimes difficult to discern what writers actually mean by evil. The term is used to describe everything from people like Hitler and serial killer Jeffery Dahmer (known as the “Milwaukee Cannibal”) to destructive human actions like murder, rape, theft, and the suffering caused by earthquakes, typhoons, epidemics, and birth defects. Although I suspect most would agree that these are all terrible things, it is not clear that they are terrible in the same way as, or that they ought to be grouped together with, equivalent cases. In the theological context, it is important to distinguish between evils done by humans and sufferings caused by uncontrollable

natural events. Perhaps a look at definitions of the word can help clarify things.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following meanings for evil as a noun or adjective: “Antithesis of the good; Morally depraved, bad, wicked, vicious; Doing or tending to do harm; hurtful, mischievous, prejudicial; Causing discomfort, pain, or trouble; unpleasant, offensive, disagreeable; troublesome, painful.”<sup>4</sup> This covers a lot of territory, encompassing everything from moral depravity to physical pain, mental suffering, injustices, and pretty much anything interfering with our own plans or complicating our lives. Obviously, this is far too broad a range of meanings to be very helpful. Theologians have usually dealt with this by focusing on the OED’s first meaning, antithesis of the good, with the “good” conceptualized in terms of God’s own nature and plan for creation. That which is evil, then, is anything that opposes God’s intentions within the created order. It is common also to make a distinction between what we call moral evils and natural evils. Moral evil is evil done by conscious moral agents through misuse of free will. It covers intentional wrongdoing like murder and deception. Natural evil results from the operation of nature and covers cases where no human being can be held morally accountable for the evil. Natural disasters that result in enormous suffering and loss of life such as tornadoes, earthquakes, and typhoons; the suffering of non-human animals; illnesses like cancer and birth defects; and disabilities like blindness are all examples of natural evils. It is important to note that sometimes suffering that appears to have been caused by natural evil is actually a result of human choices and so would better be classified as moral evil.

Most agree today that moral evil—the evil done by humans through choices made—may (theoretically at least) be a

different problem from that of natural evil, as examples like hurricanes Katrina and Sandy illustrate. In the early history of Christianity, it was common to conflate moral and natural evil, attributing natural evils to the rupture of creation resulting from Adam and Eve's first sin. Interestingly, some conservative Christians today have gone further than early Christianity in linking the two. Jerry Falwell, Charles Colson, and Pat Robertson, for example, publicly proclaimed the loss of life and property from Katrina to be divine judgment or vengeance for everything from U.S. support of the removal of Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip, to punishment for failure to prepare adequately for terrorists before 9/11, and even for gay pride parades and Mardi Gras celebrations. This recent very anthropocentric and, as many would say, offensive worldview has never been part of mainstream Christian thought, but the idea that natural evil is due to the rupture of creation resulting from Adam and Eve's first sin has been. The idea that natural events occur due to human moral failings has become increasingly unsupportable over the last century because of historical-critical study of the Scriptures, scientific theories like evolution, and increased awareness of the capacity for suffering in many forms of non-human life. How can we possibly justify the suffering and violence that has happened and continues to happen to trillions of non-human forms of life since the dawn of creation by appealing to human moral choices? What kind of God would punish not just all humanity for the sins of two but every living thing over millions of years of evolution? Today new theologies of evil that attempt to take science and non-human suffering seriously are being offered in the ongoing effort to make sense of evil and suffering in a universe created by the good and loving God of Christian belief.

Each of the chapters in this book addresses an aspect of

these claims as they have developed over the two thousand year history of Christian thought but does not give much attention to philosophical arguments that use evil as evidence for doubting the existence of God. The philosopher usually starts from the premise that the existence of God must first be demonstrated through rational argument. The theologian starts with different premises; the theologian does not need to prove God's existence and so theorizes about evil in light of this belief. Chapter 2 looks at the role Satan and ideas about the demonic have played over the centuries. There has sometimes been a real difference between popular cultural ideas and formal theological reflection on Satan and the problem of evil. I have worked to maintain the focus on theology rather than philosophy or on popular attitudes as much as possible, noting, where appropriate of the differences in emphasis. In chapter 3, we explore the development of theological explanations for evil in the first few centuries of Christianity. During the early centuries, brilliant theologians like Origen of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Scotus Eriugena laid the foundations for all subsequent theodicies. Chapter 4 takes us from the late Middle Ages into the Enlightenment. There we see how Aquinas developed a synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Augustinian theology that became the dominant system of thought for the Roman Catholic Church. Satan makes a comeback during this period, shaping Martin Luther's theodicy and having a major impact on everyday piety, only to be sidelined during the Enlightenment, when human reason reigned over theological reflection. In chapter 5 we see how the optimism of Protestant liberalism, the Social Gospel movement, and Darwin's theory of evolution impact Christian understandings of evil. Chapter 6 brings us to the present day in addressing theodicies of the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, exploring how ideas have been shaped by the horrors of world wars, the Holocaust, and the challenges of science. Chapter 7 concludes our journey along this trajectory of Christian history with an examination of recent challenges to theodicy, which say the entire endeavor is an intellectual distraction from the work of addressing the realities of evil and suffering in human life.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

- Frances, Bryan. *Gratuitous Suffering and the Problem of Evil: A Comprehensive Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Larrimore, Mark, ed. *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

### **Notes**

1. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64, n.s., no. 254 (Apr. 1955): 200–212 (200).
2. Frances M. Young, "Insight or Incoherence? The Greek Fathers on God and Evil," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24, no. 2 (April 1973): 113–26 (118).
3. <http://warchronicle.com/numbers/WWII/deaths.htm>.
4. OED Online, s.v. "evil" (Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65386>.