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# The Problem of Evil: an introduction

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# Outline

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- Preliminaries
- The Logical Problem
- The Evidential Problem
- The Religious Problem
- Summary

# Preliminaries

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## ■ Why Bother?

- Perhaps the major stumbling block for non-believers
- Can precipitate a crisis of faith in believers
- The topic generates an enormous amount of discussion.
- 1 Peter 3:15 –the context is not apologetics *per se*, but defending your hope in the midst of trials.

# Preliminaries

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- It is not “One” problem
  - Logical (deductive) Problem
  - Evidential (inductive) Problem
  - Religious (emotional) Problem
- These must be addressed clearly, because the Christian response necessarily differs on the basis of which problem is in question.

# What is evil?

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- That which makes us ask “Why?”
- That which evokes the response “This ought not to be”
- That which causes pain, suffering, fear, confusion, doubt, defiance...

# What is evil?

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- Augustine: *privatio boni* (privation of the good). Evil lacks ontological “essence”; it does not exist by itself, but as a parasite of the “good” (taken up by Thomists also)
- NT Greek lends some support to the privative view via the common use of the Greek prefix “a” – *anomos, adikos, asebes...*

# What is evil?

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- Proverbs 8:13 *All who fear the Lord will hate evil.*
- Habakkuk 1:13 *You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness.*
- Proverbs 16:17 *The highway of the upright is to depart from evil*
- Biblical language is clear: hate it, depart from it, purge it.

# Preliminaries

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- Types of evil:
  - Moral evil (sin)
  - Natural evil (suffering)
  - Special topics
    - Gratuitous evil
    - Magnitude, duration
- Again, our Christian response must carefully consider these distinctions.

# Preliminaries

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- What is our view of God?
  - Sovereign?
    - Omniscient, omnipotent
  - Good?
    - Wholly good
    - Whose perspective?
- What is our view of man?
  - The Fall?
  - Free will?

# Preliminaries

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## ■ Sovereignty:

- **Isaiah 46:10:** *“I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’.”*
- **Mt 10:29** *”Not a sparrow will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.”*
- **Ephesians 1:** *In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works **all things according to the counsel of His will***
- **Phil 2:13** *for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*
- **Proverbs 16:9** *A man’s heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.*
- biblical view upholds God’s sovereign control over all creation, **and over evil.**

# Preliminaries

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- The fact that God has sovereign control over evil does not mean he “created” it.
  - Genesis 1:31 *Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*
- Evil is real, & present— it’s origin is a subject of considerable debate

# Preliminaries

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- Views on free will
  - Determinist
  - Compatibilist
  - Incompatibilist (libertarian or autonomous)
- We might view these on a continuum as opposed to discrete categories

# Preliminaries

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- Theodicy

- From *Theos* (God) and *dike* (justice).
- Often taken as an endeavor to justify God
- In modern use, can mean an attempt to provide the specific/actual reason(s) God allows evil

- Defense

- Offers *possible* reasons as opposed to specific reasons for the existence of evil.

# The Logical Problem

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- Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion
  - “Epicurus’ old questions are yet unanswered. Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then evil?”
- The logical, or deductive problem purports to show that it is ***not possible*** to simultaneously hold that God is omnipotent and good, while allowing for the existence of evil. This “trilemma” makes the belief in God logically impossible.

# The Logical Problem

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- Theistic Responses:
  - Free will defense: Augustinian roots
  - Response to moral evil by attributing it to freely chosen sinful/evil acts by man.
  - Does not conflict with Augustine's view of foreknowledge in that God's advanced knowledge of events "does not compel them to take place"

# The Logical Problem

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## ■ Contemporary Discussions

### ■ Plantinga:

- contra Hume, Mackie, Flew, and others, Plantinga has made a convincing case that the coexistence of an omnipotent, good God and the existence of evil are NOT logically contradictory; it is ***possible*** for the 3 to coexist.
- If we grant the *possibility* of libertarian free will in the creation of man, then the *possibility* of evil can not be prevented.

# The Logical Problem

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- Widely accepted (even among atheists) that the “Logical” problem has been solved.
  - JL Mackie, “The Miracle of Theism” *“The problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another.”*
- Note that there are several other Theistic responses that are also logically consistent which “solve” this problem.
  - Hick’s “Soul Building Theodicy”
  - Yandell’s “Greater Good defense”
  - Feinberg’s “Non-glorified humans defense”

# The Evidential Problem

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- Sometimes called “inductive”, or “probabilistic”.
- Concedes the existence of God is not a logical impossibility.
- Arguments goes to “how likely” or plausible such a belief is, given the evidence of evil (magnitude, duration, apparently gratuitous evil).

# The Evidential Problem

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- In a sense, a more difficult problem for theists, as one must now argue plausibility, not just possibility.
- Is theism *reasonable*, given the scale of evil?
- Major figures include William Rowe as a proponent of the problem, and Plantinga, Swinburne, and other theists.

# The Evidential Problem

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- We must be clear that inductive and probabilistic arguments are NOT the same thing.
- Theists must also insist that ALL evidence be given a hearing, not merely the existence of evil (e.g., ontological, teleological, moral)

# The Evidential Problem

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- Problems with this approach:

- Plantinga:

- perception of the viability of an evidential defense is a function of one's "noetic structure"
    - Given this, theists and atheists bring vastly different *a priori* probabilistic assumptions to the table.
    - So... probabilistic arguments may be no more than "autobiographical" comments. They reinforce what one believed *a priori* because of the probability commitments of being an atheist or theist.

# The Evidential Problem

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- Can a theist address the problem of apparently gratuitous natural evil?
  - Rowe: Uses a case of apparently gratuitous animal suffering, in which no obvious “good” arises. Hence, it is more likely that there are none (The “Noseeum” argument)
  - Wykstra: Do we have reasonable epistemic access to make such a determination?
  - Trau: improper leap from inductive to universal

# Key Points

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- The logical form of the argument from evil has been “handled” by theists.
- The evidential argument continues to generate heated debate. If we accept Plantinga’s arguments about fundamental differences in noetic structure, this may never be wholly resolved.

# Key Points

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- There are a variety of satisfactory (to a theist) solutions to the evidential problem.
- Our limited epistemic status, problems related to arguing from ignorance, and the inappropriate leap from induction to universals are all examples.
- Theists are not obliged to concede the existence of gratuitous evil.

# Key points

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- An “offensive” theistic response to the “whence evil” problem:
  - Where does the idea of “evil” arise within an atheistic worldview?
  - The “problem” presupposes **objective** moral and natural evils.
  - Ask an atheist to explain the source of such objectivity.

# The Religious Problem

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- Plantinga: “Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.”
- Perhaps also not a time for theological enlightenment either, at least initially?

# The Religious Problem

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- Romans 12:15 *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.*
- 2 Corinthians 1: 3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.*

# The Religious Problem

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- Some thoughts on redeeming suffering:
  - May display the works of God (Jn 9:1)
  - A dose of humility (2 Cor 12:7)
  - Demonstrate genuine faith to the Deceiver (Job)
  - Opportunity to testify to the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15)

# The Religious Problem

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- Some thoughts on redeeming suffering:
  - May demonstrate what we mean by the “body of Christ” (Jn 13:35, 1 Cor 12 & Gal 6:2)
  - Encourage sanctification (1 Peter 4)
  - Education (Romans 5: 3-4, Hebrews 5:8, Js 1:3-4, 1 Peter 5:10)
  - Imitate Christ (1 Peter 3:17-18, cf. Is 53)

# Summary

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- The “Problem of Evil” is in fact both “problems” and “evils”
- “The Problem” is not solely an issue for Christianity.
- An “objective” sense of evil (moral or natural) presupposes a standard by which to judge right and wrong. Thus, “whence evil” from an atheist perspective?

# Summary

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- Scripture NEVER dilutes the reality of evil, and never suggests we compromise with it.
- Scripture is abundantly clear that MAN bears moral responsibility for sin (moral) evil. (and, arguably, natural evil).
- Scripture also clearly points to an ultimate victory – a heaven free of evil, free of sin.

# Summary

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- 2 Corinthians 4 & 5

- 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

**5** For we know that if our earthly house, *this* tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in *this* tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing *is* God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

# Selected readings

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- The following 4 are classics; influential treatments of the problem from different perspectives.
  - Plantinga, Alvin. *God, freedom, and evil*. NY. Harper & Row. 1974.
  - Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. London. Macmillan. 1966.
  - Mackie, JL. *Evil and Omnipotence*. In B. Mitchell, ed. *Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford Univ. Press. 1971.
  - Mackie, JL. *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford Univ. Press. 1982.

# Selected Readings

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- Feinberg, John S. The many faces of Evil. Theological systems and the problem of evil. Wheaton, IL. Crossway Books. 2004. *This is a magnificent and encyclopedic treatment of the problem. Feinberg considers virtually all the major positions (theistic and atheistic), and offers his own defense. Perhaps the best “all in one place” treatment.*
- Blocher, Henry. Evil and the cross. Kregel Publications. 1994. *A small, but wonderfully written volume. Very “Scripture-centered”.*
- Van Inwagen, Peter. Ed. Christian Faith and the problem of evil. Eerdmans. 2004. *A collection of essays by major players from a variety of perspectives.*
- Lewis, C.S. The problem of Pain. Macmillan. 1962. *Classic Lewis; very readable.*

# Selected Readings

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- Moreland, J.P., and W.L. Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. Intervarsity Press. 2003. *Essential reading on a broad range of topics, some of which impinge on this discussion.*
- Craig, W.L., Ed. *Philosophy of Religion. A reader and guide*. Rutgers University Press. *Includes essays by Rowe and Draper (atheists), and the theists Alston, Van Inwagen, and Stump.*
- Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought*. Princeton University Press. 2002. *Not written from a theistic perspective, but wide-ranging and informative.*
- Kelly, J.F. *The problem of evil in the Western Tradition. From the book of Job to modern genetics*. Liturgical Press. 2002. *Interesting historical perspective, written by a theist. Confronts literary, philosophical, theological, and scientific approaches to the problem. Uncomfortably liberal (for me) view on historicity, dating of biblical accounts, and other areas.*