The Problem of Evil

The problem described

God is good, holy, and righteous. Evil is utterly contrary to His nature, and it grieves His heart.

Genesis 6:5 "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of heaven, for I am sorry that I have made them."

God is all-powerful, and sovereign over all things.

Daniel 4:35 "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'"

Isaiah 46:9-10 "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose."

God's sovereignty extends to the hearts of men, even the most powerful among us.

Proverbs 21:1 "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He will"

God has the power to prevent sin.

Genesis 20:3 "Then God said to [Abimelech] in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, **and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.**"

Philosopher David Hume put the problem of evil this way: "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 is evil?"[1] Hume's argument is a forceful one, one in which he is claiming that it is a logical impossibility that the Christian God, a God who is both all good and all powerful, exists.

1 – God is completely good.

2 – God is all powerful

3 – Evil exists

How can it be that God, who the Bible describes as hating sin, and who is sovereignly in control of all events, how can it be that He allows evil? Again, "If God is all-powerful, then He must be able to prevent or remove evil, if He wishes. If God is all-good, then certainly He wishes to prevent or remove evil. Yet it is undeniable that evil exists."[2]

Some attempts at answering the problem

1) Evil exists because of free will

a) The problem with this as a solution is that the Bible teaches that in heaven there will exist no evil, and yet we will still have free will. In other words, in heaven, God creates a state of affairs in which people will freely worship and obey, in perfect holiness and righteousness, for all eternity. If God is sovereignly able to do that in the consummation, then He certainly could have chosen to do so from the beginning. NOTE: I am here speaking of freedom of will in the sense that we have the God-given ability to freely choose that which we desire to do. In other words, we are not biologically, or psychologically predetermined to do what we do; we are not mere biological machines. However, due to sin, our freedom is limited; without the regenerating and empowering of Christ's Spirit we can only freely choose to do that which is evil and contrary to God. Yet, when we choose to sin, we do so freely and willingly because it is what we most desire to do at that moment. Therefore, our will is free in the sense that it can choose what it wants, but it is in slavery to sin in that, prior to regeneration, it only chooses to sin.
2) Similar to the above is the claim that evil exists because this world is the best possible world God could have created.
   a) As above, the problem with this proposed solution comes from the fact that God is sovereignly able, in heaven, to create a state of affairs in which evil cannot and will not exist. Therefore, if He is able to do so in the consummation, it would appear that He could have decided to do so from the beginning.
3) Evil exists because it enhances the good, or, because evil produces some good results.
   a) There is some biblical support for this. For instance, God uses evil to test, prove, and refine His people (e.g., Job; James 1:3, 1 Peter 1:7). However, we need to be careful lest we make evil out to be a good! In other words, this argument can be inadvertently used (not that anyone would say it this way) as a means of saying, "evil really isn't so bad. In fact, it's actually good that evil exists because of the good that sometimes can come out of it." In my estimation, this appears to be a conflating what evil is, and what God is able to sovereignly do with it. Evil is truly evil, and it does not enhance or produce good. But our God is able to redeem it and turn it for good and for His glory (e.g., Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). God is omnipotent, and as such He is able to redeem, renew, recreate; He is not overcome by evil, but rather, being sovereign He is able to subdue it and work it for His loving purposes; He overcomes evil with good. Evil is no match for our Sovereign Lord.
4) Evil is a necessary counterpart to good; you can't have one without the other.
   a) Biblically-minded Christians should be able to quickly dismiss this one outright. For, if good cannot exist without evil then it would necessarily follow that prior to creation, prior to entrance of sin into God's good world, God would have had to have within His very being both good and evil; if good cannot exist without evil, then God's nature would have to include both. Yet, Scripture affirms that there is no evil intrinsic to God (e.g., 1st John 1:5; James 1:17).

For whom is the problem of evil really a logical problem?

When unbelievers confront us with the problem of evil, we need to ask whether they are able, from within their own particular worldview, to justify their insistence that evil exists. Dr. Bahnsen asks, "What does the unbeliever mean by 'good' (so that "evil" is accordingly defined or identified)? What are the presuppositions in terms of which the unbeliever makes any moral judgements whatsoever?"[3] How

does one determine right from wrong? Are there rules for determining which events/acts are evil, and if so, who determined those rules, how can we know about them, and why should they be an authority over us? What needs to be true about the world in order for us to be able to rationally and logically assert that people should be held accountable for their actions?

Evolutionary biologist, and former professor at Cornell University, William Provine, stated, "Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear. And I must say that these are basically Darwin's views. There are no gods, no purposeful forces of any kind. No life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be completely dead. That's just all. That's gonna be the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans, either."[4]

With views such as the one above, is it logically consistent for the unbeliever to insist that some acts are evil? Can such a view take evil as seriously as the unbeliever wants to? It appears that, deep down, the unbeliever knows that evil is objectively real and terrible, but in his rejection of God and His Word, he leaves himself unable to justify the existence of evil. What the unbeliever needs is to be rescued from the folly of his current way of thinking; he needs to turn to the Living God and be saved in body, mind, and soul.

What, then, is the Christian's answer to the logical problem of evil?

How can it be true that God is both all-good and all-powerful, and yet evil continues to exist? The answer lies in providing a fourth premise, one that is derived from the Bible's teaching about God, to the three originally given above:

1 – God is completely good.

2 – God is all powerful

3 – Evil exists

4 – God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil that exists in the world

God, as Creator and Lord, has revealed in Scripture what He is like. He is perfectly righteous, holy, just, and good, and He is almighty and sovereign over all. Therefore, if evil exists, and it does, then God must have a morally sufficient reason for its existence. Unsurprisingly, it, then, boils down to a matter of faith. Are we going to take God at His Word and trust Him, or will we remain in unbelief? If we reject His revelation of Himself and the world He created, where would that leave us in the face of the evil we'll inevitably encounter in life? Where else can we turn for life and hope?

Some final thoughts and applications

Evil and the terrible destruction it wreaks is real and pervasive. In our interactions with others, evil should not be trivialized, minimized, or treated as a mere intellectual talking point in a debate. Greg Bahnsen counsels that "it is important for the Christian to recognize – indeed, to insist upon – the reality and serious nature of evil. The subject of evil is not simply an intellectual parlor game, a cavalier matter, a whimsical or relativistic chose of looking at things a certain way. Evil is real. Evil is ugly."[5] Whenever unbelievers point out an actual evil act, we need to point out that in order for them to take evil seriously, they need to repent (turn from their unbelieving worldview, their worldview that cannot call

anything evil) and embrace God's Word, for it alone provides the necessary, rational foundation for judging right from wrong, good from evil.

Furthermore, evil is not merely a problem that is "out there." Rather, it is a problem that is "in here." It's a problem of the heart and mind; it's our problem, both individually and collectively. The problem is us. God could have chosen to wipe out evil by annihilating the entire human race, or He could have chosen to not create anything at all. But, the Bible reveals that God is longsuffering, patient, kind, merciful, loving, and full of grace. So, out of the fallen, evil, sinful human race, "out of the same lump [of clay]… God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His Power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory – even us whom He has called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles" (*Romans 9:21b-24*). Moreover, only the true God can offer a future hope, a hope that trusts that He alone has both the power and a loving heart towards us to redeem, renew, recreate, and restore. Remember His promise that in Glory "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (*Revelation 21:4*). Soli Deo Gloria, Our God reigns!

---

[1] *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Publications, 1981), p 88.
[2] http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa105.htm (last accessed on Nov. 28, 2015)
[3] Ibid.
[4] *Origins Research* 16(1/2), p. 9, 1994.
[5] Endnote 2.