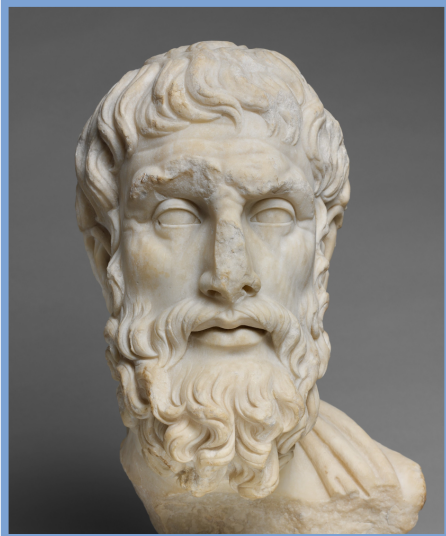


Problem of Evil

1. What is the problem of evil?

The problem of evil is the stumbling block to Christian faith created by the existence of a force that's opposed to good alongside God. The presence of an immoral power in the universe that causes pain and suffering undermines belief in the existence of a deity that is both benevolent (i.e. all-loving) and omnipotent (i.e. all-powerful) because it is not immediately apparent to many people that belief in such a deity is possible in the face of evil. Indeed, if God is benevolent and omnipotent, surely he would remove evil, pain and suffering from the world. Every time human beings confront evil, they are challenged with the seemingly insuperable question: why would God allow this?



Epicurus

Natural evil and moral evil: instances of evil are typically assigned to one of two categories: natural evil, which is the kind of pain and suffering that human beings can do little about because it is caused by the natural world (e.g. by earthquakes). And moral evil, which is under human control because it is a product of bad behaviour (crimes like murder and theft fall into this category). This distinction is essential because even if the existence of moral evil can be blamed on people's lousy decision-making, it is hard to convincingly argue that human beings are in any way responsible for natural evil.

Inconsistent triad: regardless of type, the problem of evil is best expressed by the inconsistent triad, which consists of the three following claims: (1) evil exists, (2) God is benevolent, and (3) God is omnipotent. The triad is inconsistent because at least one of the claims must be false. As Epicurus (341-270 BCE) put it, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then his is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" In short, if God is able and willing to stop evil, why does it exist?

2. How does the problem of evil work?

Soul-deciding defence: Christians respond to the problem of evil in different ways. One of the most famous is using the soul-deciding defence. This defence maintains that people are individually responsible for deciding what happens to their souls. Human beings have free will and can use it to make right decisions and do good or make wrong decisions and do evil. Whilst free will provides people with the ability to think for themselves and act independently, actions have consequences: human souls either ascend to heaven or descend to hell. Although this defence is very popular, especially among Catholic Christians, it has one major problem: it only really accounts for the existence of moral evil.

Soul-making defence: other Christians claim that an all-loving and all-powerful deity allows evil because it is only through pain and suffering that human souls can be developed and perfected. The poster boy for this defence is a biblical figure named Job, who suffered a series of extreme misfortunes inflicted by Satan, who bet God that Job's sufferings would inspire him to abandon his faith. Despite the fact that Job suffered horrendous mental and physical pain as a result of this wager, according to the Bible, he emerged from the ordeal better than before. Similarly, Psalm 119 extols the virtues of being humbled by God for its beneficial consequence: becoming a better person. The principal problem with this defence is that not everyone is as resilient as Job. Some people are broken by the pain and suffering they endure, and others die as a consequence of evil; it is difficult to see how the souls of these individuals grow and develop thanks to the misfortunes they are subjected to.

Evil

The opposite of good; a force or power that is immoral or otherwise causes pain and suffering.

Free Will

The ability to make decisions for oneself and act upon them without constraint or obstruction.

Original Sin

The Christian doctrine that all human beings are inherently sinful because of Adam and Eve's first sin.

3. **Why** is the problem of evil important?

How people respond to the problem of evil has a significant effect on whether they subscribe to atheism, agnosticism or theism. Christians who accept the soul-deciding defence maintain their faith by insisting that the God-given gift of free will gives rise to evil as an unavoidable byproduct. Christians who accept the soul-making defence, like Billy Graham (1918-2018), maintain their faith by insisting that good can come from pain and suffering, so "even if we may not always understand why God allows certain things to happen to us," God is capable of bringing good out of it and "triumph out of suffering". However, for some people, the problem presented by the existence of evil is just too much. So atheists like Stephen Fry (b. 1957) can ask why we should "respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who create[d] a world... so full of injustice and pain". More than any other evidence available to refute the existence of God, the existence of evil and the experience of pain and suffering in this world appears most at odds with the claim that an all-loving and all-powerful deity is running the show.



Stephen Fry

George Thinks

The key thing to remember about the problem of evil is that it's more of a problem for Christians than it is for atheists or agnostics because it casts doubt over the existence of God, and it casts doubt over the existence of God because he's supposed to be both all-loving and all-powerful. There are, of course, some defences against this doubt. The two most famous are the soul-deciding and soul-making defences, both of which rely on us conceding that there are some circumstances in which an all-loving and all-powerful God might accept the existence of evil; in other words, there might be some situations in which pain and suffering are necessary despite God's benevolent and omnipotent nature. As it happens, whilst I'm not an atheist, I don't accept these defences because an all-powerful God should be able to create a universe in which free will or the development of our souls is possible without the existence of evil. This said, of the two most famous defences to the problem of evil, I find the second one (i.e. the soul-making defence) more persuasive. Sure, I don't enjoy the experience of pain and suffering; however, I think that some of the sufferings I have experienced have made me more compassionate and forgiving. But the unavoidable problem is that I know that some people's sufferings are unbearable, and if I were to experience them, I'm not sure I'd necessarily be developed by them.

