



THE NATURE OF EVIL

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December 24, 2009

The most powerful argument atheists have to wield against the existence of God is the occurrence of evil in the world. Scottish philosopher and atheist David Hume suggested that a supernatural being which is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent could not exist since neither man nor animal is happy while on this earth. Further, Hume echoes the argument of Greek philosopher Epicurus by asking, “Is he (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?” (43). It is the contention of these two men, and many who have followed since, that the statements “God exists” and “evil exists” are logically inconsistent thus proving that God does not exist. If it can be shown (as I sincerely believe that it can) that these two statements are not logically inconsistent, then, the atheistic argument will have been defeated.

Classes of Evil

It is common for theologians and philosophers to refer to evil as being synonymous with that which causes human suffering. It is important to distinguish between natural or physical evil and moral evil. Natural evil chiefly refers to suffering and pain that mankind experiences due to physical calamities (tornadoes, earthquakes, famine, etc.) or diseases such as cancer. Moral evil is understood to be the result of the misconduct (sin) of mankind.

While the Bible teaches in numerous passages (Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 5:10) that there will be occasions that humans suffer during their lives on this earth, it also plainly teaches that sin is the only intrinsic evil (1 John 3:4; Romans 3:29; 4:15). Natural disasters and human suffering are not evil in and of themselves. In his book *Have Atheists Proved there Is No God?*, Thomas B. Warren contends:

Neither pain nor suffering is intrinsically evil. Nothing that *merely* happens apart from some connection with a *will* can have moral predicates. Before the question, “Is pain an intrinsic evil?” can be answered properly, two further questions must be asked: “To whose *will* are you attributing it?” and “Is it in harmony with God’s will?” (that is, does it contradict sonship or brotherhood, does it affect fellowship with God? Does it violate his will?). To say that a state, thought, or action is intrinsically evil is to say that some *will* brought it about and that it is out of harmony with God’s will, that is, it is unfilial and unfraternal—in short, that it contradicts God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures. (40)

Though not intrinsically evil, natural disasters and suffering may be viewed as the instrumental result of sin. Referring to the fall of man recorded in Genesis 3:1-19 the apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). [All scripture references are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] It is to be understood that, ultimately, humans endure suffering because of involvement in sin. At one time there was not sickness or disease to be experienced on this earth. But as Wayne Jackson states, “no longer having access to the tree of life, Adam and Eve became prey to weakness, disease, and death; and through them, we are likewise heir to such misfortunes” (5).

The Best of All Possible Worlds

German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz is known for postulating that since God is infinite in knowledge and power, He could have created an infinite number of universes. Since the present universe is the one He chose to create, in spite of the evil and suffering that exists, it must be the absolute best of all possible worlds (Koestenbaum 132).

One characteristic of an ideal world would be for its inhabitants to have absolute free will, the ability to make any and all moral choices. The Bible plainly teaches that mankind has been granted freedom along with the opportunity to choose obedience to the Heavenly Father (Galatians 3:26-4:6; Matthew 11:28-30). Next, an ideal world would be orderly and adhere to natural laws. The same axe blade that is used to chop wood can be used to destroy human life. One cannot expect intercession each time an instrument is used in an instrumentally evil manner. The result would be chaos. In like manner one cannot expect the creator of this world to act in an irrational way. God cannot make a “married bachelor” or a “round square” just as he cannot make a human with free moral agency choose good actions over bad ones. To do so would be to violate His very nature as well as the laws of the universe. Another characteristic of the ideal world would be one that contained, as phrased by John Hick, an “epistemic distance” between God and man. Meaning that God must be hidden to the extent that man is not coerced or forced to perceive the reality of the creator. Hick contends that God “must be knowable, but only by a mode of knowledge that involves a free personal response on man’s part” (317).

Warren summarized why our present world is ideal when he wrote:

It seems that when we arrive at the description of a world in which man could best live as a free and responsible person, that description fits the world we presently live in: it is one which *provides* man’s basic needs, it is *teleological* (created by God for the purpose of being a “vale of soul-making” for man); it is *law-abiding* (not chaotic and arbitrary), which it must be if it is to provide an environment for a rational, moral response by man (thus allowing the *possibility* of sin, pain, and suffering); it is *challenging* (allowing man to choose *suffering* over sin); and it is one which allows man to *learn* the things which he needs most to learn (including the possibility that man can learn the will of God). (*Atheists* 54)

The Moral Argument

When undertaking the study of the nature of evil, one should note that the very idea of evil implies the existence of God. No law can be violated if there is no objective standard with which to appeal, having each individual to be his or her own standard. Passages such as Romans 1:19, 20 and 2:14, 15 indicate that mankind is instilled with a sense of moral “oughtness” which must be the work of a supernatural creator. Mac Deaver has pointed out that:

Human nature if not in the image of God would not make possible a knowledge of a moral distinction between a good action and a bad one because qualitatively there would be no difference. Without God as explanation, conscience is reduced to the level of chemical properties, and the guidance of the conscience would be a chemical guidance—not a moral one. (86)

The apostle Paul referred to the moral oughtness that is instilled in man as he debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. He said, “He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).

The moral argument is so strong that it has led such famous thinkers as Immanuel Kant, who highly criticized the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, to conclude that the idea of a supreme being cannot be realized by man himself. Kant believed that “it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God” (Stumpf 322).

Warren constructed one syllogism for this argument as follows:

1. If the moral conduct of a person, society, or other specified group can come under genuine criticism, then there must be some absolute, objective standard which exists (i.e. the nature of God).
2. The moral conduct of a person, society, or other specified group can come under genuine criticism (i.e. Nazi Germany).
3. Therefore, there must be some absolute, objective standard which exists (i.e. the nature of God). (*Flew* 172-73)

Conclusion

The law of rationality insists that one can only draw such conclusions as are warranted by the evidence. Indeed, the word of God demands that each one of us be a logical and rational thinker (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The material put forth has shown that the statements “God exists” and “evil exists” are not logically inconsistent. Thus one can know that the omnibenevolent and omnipotent God of the Bible exists. How awesome to proclaim, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork, day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge” (Psalm 19:1-2).

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