

The Problem of Evil

By August Berkshire

If a god exists who is all-powerful and all-loving, then why is there evil in the world? For the sake of this argument, let's concede that the harm that humans do is a misuse of our free will, for which a god cannot be blamed. That still leaves us with the natural evils of genetic birth defects, genetic and acquired diseases, predators, and natural disasters.

These things seem like wanton cruelty on the part of this god. Without them, we could still be left to struggle with good and evil in terms of moral dilemmas and human actions, and be judged accordingly.

Here are 16 unconvincing explanations religious people give in an attempt to reconcile the existence of natural evil with their belief in the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving god.

(1) Human ancestors are to blame for a “fallen” world.

Natural evil did not exist until long-dead ancestors, such as “Adam and Eve,” transgressed against a god.

But sinning against a god cannot, in itself, create natural evil. (For example, exactly how does human disobedience create a hurricane or a disease?) Rather, the god in question must intervene to create natural evil as a punishment, and is therefore ultimately responsible for it.

Yet it is unjust to punish future generations for something they had no control over. What did an innocent baby ever do to deserve a birth defect? What kind of justice punishes children for the sins of their long-dead ancestors?

Should we all put ourselves in prison immediately simply because each of us has, somewhere in our ancestry, a distant relative who committed murder? If not, then human justice is superior to God's justice.

Also, how does this explain why other animals suffer? Did their ancestors “sin” too?

(2) The devil did it.

God isn't really responsible for evil in the world, a devil is.

But didn't God create this devil in the first place? And isn't God supposed to be all-powerful? Can't he stop this devil?

(3) Unknown greater good.

God must commit or allow some evil to exist in order to accomplish an unknown greater good.

But doesn't that limit God's knowledge and power? Doesn't that say that God couldn't think of a better way to accomplish his goals other than by torturing innocent people?

(4) Evil is necessary for free will.

Without evil we would have no free will and we would be “robots.”

But what do birth defects, disease, and natural disasters have to do with free will? Do sick people have more free will than healthy people?

God has supposedly created a heaven where there are no diseases or disasters. Are the people in heaven robots?

(5) God is testing our faith.

Evil is God's way of testing our faith, like Job was tested in the Old Testament.

If this is true, what sense does it make to impose a "loyalty test" on an infant who dies from disease or natural disaster?

(6) Evil is needed to appreciate the good.

Without the contrast of evil we wouldn't appreciate what's good.

But couldn't a god just give us an appreciation of what's good? Why should we have to be tortured to appreciate the good?

Wouldn't the good and evil of human actions suffice to teach us this lesson in contrast?

(7) Evil is necessary for compassion.

We are born as self-centered people and evil is necessary for us to learn compassion.

But if a god wanted us to be compassionate, why didn't he just make us that way? Why this sadistic scheme of torturing innocent babies to instill compassion in their parents? What about suffering and death that occurs where there are no witnesses?

(8) Suffering builds character.

Humans are imperfect/fallen/sinful beings and suffering helps build character.

While building character may sometimes require effort – such as helping others, studying, and sportsmanship – none of these things tend to make us suffer.

And what kind of character is a baby supposed to be developing, who is born with a birth defect so severe that she will only live a few days?

(9) Evil is really God's love.

What we perceive as "evil" is really an example of "God's love."

However, this is a definition of love that we cannot comprehend because it is exactly the opposite of what we define love to be. Therefore, we can't know that "God's love" is really love – we have to take someone's unconvincing word for it.

If disease is an example of God's love, shouldn't we all try to get as sick as possible? Are doctors violating "God's will" when they try to cure disease?

(10) Evil brings us closer to God.

Evil is justified because suffering makes us turn to God for comfort.

But doesn't that limit God's knowledge and power? Couldn't he think of a better way to entice us without torturing us first? How much gratitude, for example, should we show to a doctor for curing us from a disease he inflicted upon us in the first place?

(11) Evil doesn't last very long.

Any misery that occurs to us on Earth is brief compared to an eternity in a wonderful heaven.

Any amount of evil is still evil and is contrary to the definition of "all-loving."

(12) The Creator is always justified.

God is morally justified in tormenting people because he created them.

But this confuses the power to torture someone with the right to torture someone.

Do the parents who create a child have a right to torture that child? Does might make right?

(13) Natural evil is necessary as a warning of hell.

Humans need natural evil to warn them against “sinning” that will lead to even worse suffering in an afterlife.

Don't human-caused evils and accidents cause sufficient suffering to act as a warning?

(14) Without evil, life would be boring.

Humans like a sense of adventure and life wouldn't be as interesting without the challenge of evil.

There is a difference between a welcome challenge and an unwelcome challenge.

People who enjoy a sense of adventure are free to choose which risks they wish to take. If a reporter deliberately approaches a hurricane, he has only himself or herself to blame for any negative consequences. But what about the people in the path of the hurricane who don't wish to experience it?

(15) Evil is necessary to prove God's existence.

The existence of evil proves the existence of God because without a God-given sense of good and bad we would not be able to identify some things as evil in the first place.

But can't an all-powerful and all-loving god come up with a better way to prove his existence other than by torturing us? Why not just reveal himself?

Don't we define good and bad, regarding natural evil, simply by what is demonstrably harmful to us? Why would this lead to god belief?

(16) God had to create Earth this way.

Natural disasters and diseases are an unfortunate necessity. A planet without natural disasters and diseases could not operate in a way that would support human life.

But doesn't that limit God's knowledge and power? Since God was creating humans from scratch, couldn't he create us so that we could survive on a planet that lacked natural evil?

Conclusion

None of these explanations is sufficient to justify the existence of natural evil. Hospitals are monuments to God's incompetence, indifference, or cruelty.

Additional comments

- If you had the knowledge and power of a god, would you have created birth defects, disease, and natural disasters? If not, then you are nicer than the god you believe in. This god should be praying to you for moral advice, rather than the other way around.
- Would you take a syringe full of malaria and inject it into someone you love? Yet that's exactly what God does to people he claims to love, using a mosquito as a syringe.
- We humans spend a lot of time mopping up after God's mistakes. Some say that God works through us. But the reason we have to do “the Lord's work” is because “the Lord” isn't doing it himself. And if we're doing the work, shouldn't we take the credit?

• Yes, many religious people do kind acts of charity. But why? Too often the answer seems to fall into one of three categories, which turn out not to be altruistic at all:

1) To use the recipient of aid as a pawn to bribe the helper's way into heaven or avoid hell (or to achieve a higher reincarnation).

2) To use kindness to convert more people to the helper's religion, because religions cannot be sustained by evidence and thus need as many like-minded people as possible to prop them up and quash self-doubt.

3) To attempt to maintain the credibility of their religion by covering up the embarrassingly poor job done by their god, by claiming they are agents of God.

For those religious people who are kind for the sake of kindness, without reference to a god, that's exactly what secular humanism is.

• Most religious people claim that a god cannot be blamed for the evil that humans commit. Even so, if a person believes the Bible is true, then it begs the question as to why the Biblical god rescued the Jews from Pharaoh but failed to rescue the Jews from Hitler.

Bible Quotes

"I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." (Isaiah 45:7)

"Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" (Lamentations 3:38)

"When disaster comes to a city, has the Lord not caused it?" (Amos 3:6)

Qur'an Quote

"Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak [Allah] from the evil of that which He created..." (Surah 113:1-2)

Atheist Quote

"I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for each other." (actress Katharine Hepburn, interview in the *Ladies' Home Journal* magazine, October 1991, p. 215.)