

Q # 4 – If there is a God, and if He is good, then why is their evil in the world?

This is a very important Question.

If you pick up virtually any book on Philosophy, you will see that the “*Problem of Evil*” is held to be the most common reason given for disbelief in God in general and in the Christian God in particular. For example ...

“The problem of evil has always been the most powerful objection to traditional theism.”
(From *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, page 255)

Perhaps John Stuart Mill, a well-known 19th century English philosopher, summed it up best

“If God desires there to be evil in the world, then He is not good. If He does not desire there to be evil, yet evil exists, then He is not omnipotent. Thus, if evil exists God is either not loving or not all-powerful. Evil casts a shadow over God’s love and power. This is no small dilemma, and answers to it are exceedingly difficult.”

Ditto for David Hume, a Scotsman known for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism

“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?”

Such is what is called “*The Problem of Evil*”

To answer Question # 4 on the “Problem of evil”, we will break it down into two Parts

Part I: What is “evil”? How may we best define it?

Part II: Assuming a “good” God, WHY is there evil in the world and WHERE did it come from?

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Part I: What is “Evil”? How may we best define it?

To adequately define “evil”, we first have to answer two Questions ...

“Is evil a created thing that exists in and of itself or is it some kind of an action or concept that is derived from other things?”

“What is the nature of evil?”

We would assert that evil is not a created thing in and of itself and is best defined as the opposite of “the good”.

For evil to be a created thing, whether spiritual or physical, for evil to exist in and of itself, God would have had to have created it, and God, by His very nature and inner being, not only would not, but could not, have created evil. Adam, the devil, and all the fallen angels were originally created by God as good, holy, and morally upright beings

Interestingly, most philosophers do not define “evil” as a thing in and of itself, and have also defined “evil” as the opposite of “the good”. This has made its way into most of our dictionary definitions of “evil”. Let’s look at a couple of examples ...

Oxford Dictionaries – define “evil” as ...

“profoundly immoral and wicked, wrong, morally wrong, wrongful, ... more
Opposite good, virtuous ... bad, badness, wrong, wrongdoing, ... more
Opposite goodness”

Dictionary.com – defines “evil” as ...

“morally wrong or bad; immoral; wicked. *evil deeds; an evil life.*” ...
baseness, corruption, unrighteousness, iniquity, depravity, wickedness

“The wicked or immoral part of someone or something.”

Cambridge Dictionary – “Morally bad”

The Free Dictionary – “Morally bad or wrong; wicked”

Interestingly the descriptions of “evil” by secular philosophers and dictionaries virtually match the descriptions of “evil” by both Augustine and Aquinas.

Dr. R. C. Sproul writes ...

One of the most important approaches to the problem of evil is that set forth originally by Augustine and then later by Aquinas, in which they argued that evil has no independent being. Evil cannot be defined as a thing or as a substance or as some kind of being. Rather, evil is always defined as an action, an action that fails to meet a standard of goodness. In this regard, evil has been defined in terms of its being either a negation (*negatio*) of the good, or a privation (*privatio*) of the good. In both cases, the very definition of evil depends upon a prior understanding of the good. In this regard, as Augustine argued, evil is parasitic — that is, it depends upon the good for its very definition. We think of sin as something that is unrighteous, involving disobedience, immorality, and the like. All of these definitions depend upon the positive substance of the good for their very definition. Augustine argues that though Christians face the difficulty of explaining the presence of evil in the universe, the pagan has a problem that is twice as difficult. Before one can even have a problem of evil, one must first have an antecedent existence of the good. Those who complain about the problem of evil now also have the problem of defining the existence of the good. Without God there is no ultimate standard for the good.

Before moving on, we would like to respond to the objections of both Mill and Hume to the possible existence of a good, loving, omnipotent God and evil at the same time.

We would respond ...

First, that the Major Premise “If a good, loving and omnipotent God exists, there would be no evil in the world” is not a provable statement, but a mere opinion that must itself be taken (dare we say it?) on ‘faith’.

Second, that there is no inherent contradiction or logically demanded mutual exclusivity between the temporary existence of evil and the existence a good, loving and omnipotent God at the same time.

Third, concerning both the Major and Minor Premises, we would ask how Mill and Hume, or any other atheist, can, in an Epistemological sense, absent God, even know that there is such a thing as “evil”, much less authoritatively define the “good” that we can compare it against. (Note: Epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge and how we can know things.)

In short, the problem of evil does not prove the non-existence of a good, loving, omnipotent God.

Another word that many use to describe “evil” is the word “sin”. “Sin” is defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question # 14 ...

“Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”

So, again, we see both “evil” and “sin” defined as departures from “the good”.

Part II: If God is “good”, then “WHY” is there evil in the world and “WHERE” did it come from?

Though God *did not create* evil, God did *decree* that evil should exist.

Indeed, God Himself tells us that He is sovereign even over evil events ...

“So the LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I the LORD?’” (Exodus 4:11)

“If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?” (Amos 3:6)

*“I form the light and create darkness,
I make peace and create calamity;
I, the LORD, do all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7)*

*“Now see that I, even I, am He,
And there is no God besides Me;
I kill and I make alive,
I wound and I heal;
Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.” (Deuteronomy 22:39)*

We can attempt some answers as to “Why” God might have decreed that evil should exist, but that is mostly speculation. The one thing we can know for sure is that since God is

innately good, holy, and righteous in both His being and acts, He must have had a morally sufficient reason for decreeing it.

But as to “*how*” or “*where*” evil originated or came from, we have to simply say “*We don’t know.*” Both “*Where*” evil came from and “*how*” it came to be are “*mysteries*” that are among the “*secret things [that] belong to the LORD our God*” ...

*“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever; that we may do all the words of the law.”
(Deuteronomy 29:29)*

Let’s note that to say that something is a “*mystery*” is not the same as to say “*these two things are blatantly contradictory, but I’m going to believe them anyway.*” As an example from our daily life, the true nature and workings of gravity, remain a “*mystery*” to us. But even though we cannot explain the full nature and workings of gravity, it is not an abandonment of reason to say that we believe in gravity itself nonetheless. And so it is with the existence of a good, loving, and holy God and “*where*” or “*how*” evil found its way into His perfect world.

Another thing we need to remember as we consider the “mystery” of evil in a world created by a good and loving God is that it was man, not God, that caused the entrance of suffering, pain, death, and evil into the world

God created a perfect and good world for man to live in.

He created Adam in His own image as the federal head or representative of the entire future race of men that would come from him. He was their federal representative, and he was an ideal representative in every way.

But Adam freely chose to disobey God and thereby plunged all of future humanity into death and suffering and spiritual and physical ruin.

And so, it was man, not God, that brought pain, suffering, spiritual ruin, death and evil into the world.

In pondering the “mysteries” of Question # 4, we also need to keep in mind that God is much wiser than we are ...

God Himself has pointed this out to us ...

*“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9)*

We are finite beings with limited minds and understandings, and, in truth, if we could fully comprehend God and all of His works, He would no longer be God.

Of “Theodicies”

A “*theodicy*” is ...

“The justification of a deity’s justice and goodness in light of suffering and evil.”

Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, Donald McKim

“The term theodicy involves the combining of two Greek words: the word for God, theos, and the word for justification, dikaios. Hence, a theodicy is an attempt to justify God for the existence of evil (as seen, for instance, in John Milton’s Paradise Lost).”

“The Mystery of Iniquity” by R. C. Sproul

The most popular “*theodicy*” devised by man for explaining the existence of evil is that God created us and the angels with a “*free will*”, i.e., that God gave us the power of “*choice*” and thereby made evil possible.

The problem with this particular “*theodicy*” is that it does not answer either of our “Why” or “Where” questions.

It does not tell us how a perfectly holy, upright, morally correct angel, with no inclination whatsoever to sin and no outside source urging him to sin, could come to freely and willingly choose to sin.

It does not tell us how a perfectly holy, upright, morally correct man, with no inclination whatsoever to sin, could, when tempted to sin by the serpent, willingly and freely choose to sin, especially when we are told that he was not deceived ...

“And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.” (I Timothy 2:14)

So, allowing for “free will” explains nothing concerning the “why” or “where” of our questions.

To again quote R. C. Sproul ...

The simple presence of free will is not enough to explain the origin of evil, in as much as we still must ask how a good being would be inclined freely to choose evil. The inclination for the will to act in an immoral manner is already a signal of sin.

John Piper also gives us a more detailed explanation of the inadequacy of the “free will” theodicy

The sum of the matter, then, about where a sinful Satan came from is this: He was a holy angel who mysteriously came to prefer self-exaltation over God-exaltation. He fell into the delusion that ultimate self-determination was possible for a finite creature, and that it was preferable to submitting to God. This fall was part of God’s all-wise plan. It did not take him off guard. How God saw to it that this part of his plan came to pass, without himself sinning and without turning Satan into a machine, I do not know.

From cover to cover, the Bible presents God as governing Satan and his demons.” Trying to explain this mystery with so-called “free will” — that is, ultimate self-determination — is unbiblical and vacuous. It is unbiblical because the idea that any of God’s creatures has ultimate self-determination is not taught anywhere in the Bible. And it is vacuous because it does not explain anything. Simply asserting that a holy angel had the “power of choice” offers no explanation of why a perfectly holy being in God’s infinitely beautiful presence would suddenly be inclined to hate God.

We should probably take our cue from the reticence of the Bible to speak about Satan’s origin. He is there in the first pages of the Bible with no explanation. The mystery of his first sin remains just that. We surround it and guard it with biblical truth, lest unbiblical and vacuous explanations spread like a smog over the Scriptures and obscure the glory of God’s saving purposes.

[Taken from *How Did Evil Begin? Pondering the Mystery of Satan’s Fall*,

What, then, can we say about God decreeing the existence of evil?

The “Why” and “Where” answers of “Theodicies” are all inadequate.

But there are several things about God’s decreeing of the existence of evil that we can know for certain ...

1. We know for sure what the “Why” and “Where” answers are not ...

We know this because the cross of Jesus assures us that the answers are not because God doesn’t love us or care about us.

2. We know for sure that God will sovereignly work even “evil” to the good of His elect children

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

3. And we do know that evil itself will work to the increase of God’s glory ...

[We would invite you to turn to our Series on “*Pain, Suffering, Death, and the ‘WHYS?’ Thereof*”, specifically to *Paper # 3* on “*The ‘Whys?’ of Suffering – Suffering for God’s Glory*”, to see how God’s seeking to increase His own glory at the same time works to the highest good of His elect children.]

But, in the end ...

We do not need to justify God’s actions; we just need to remember that ...

God is sovereign over evil and will use it to serve His purposes. He will use it to the praise of His glory and the ultimate benefit of His people. He will also one day remove it from our presence, judge it, and fully punish it.

And, again, as stated earlier we must *always remember* that God’s infinite wisdom is much higher than our finite wisdom ...

*“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9)*

If God is that much wiser than us, we have to realize that sometimes He will do and allow things differently from the way in which we would have done them.

C. S. Lewis expresses this very well ...

“... if God is wiser than we His judgment must differ from ours on many things, and not the least on good and evil ... Beyond all doubt, His ideas of ‘goodness’ differ from ours” (The Problem of Pain, C. S. Lewis, pages 37, 38.)

And so, in answer to our Question # 4:

“If there is a God, and if He is good, then why is there evil in the world?”

... Though the “Where” and “How” of evil – “Where it came from?” and “How it came to be?” – must remain “*mysteries*” to us, as Christians, we know from Scripture that God is loving, merciful and gracious and that everything He is, does, and decrees must be compatible with those virtues. We sometimes simply need to just bow to God’s superior wisdom and maintain our faith and trust in Him and in His love for us.

Soli Deo Gloria

(To God Alone be all the Glory)