



God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views (SPEC)

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Evil and the Challenge to Faith

Evil abounds. Regardless of when or where we look – in the feudal systems of the Middle Ages or the cyber world of the twenty-first century, in the posh suburbs of a major city or the poor slums found across the globe, in the practice of organized crime or the peccancy in organized religion – in all times and in all places we find pain, we find suffering, we find evil. Evil is no less present, no less pernicious, and no less perplexing in the modern world than it has ever been. This poses a tenacious problem for those who believe in a God who is perfectly good and loving, all-powerful, and infinitely smart. For surely a God who is good and loving would not want there to be widespread pain and suffering in the world. And surely a God who is omniscient and omnipotent could ensure that no such world would exist. But such a world does exist. Our world.

In a world like ours, the adherents of traditional theism face the burden of attempting to offer a reasoned response to this problem of evil. At least the editors and contributors of this book believe that theists face such a burden, and that is why we have crafted it. By “traditional theism” we are referring to the conventional view of God historically held within the Judeo-Christian faith. On this view God is generally understood to be personal (or at least not less than a person: one who possesses mind and will, has goals and plans and purposes, and so on), ultimate reality (the source and ground of all things), distinct from the world yet actively involved in the world (creator and sustainer), and worthy of worship (wholly good, having inherent moral perfection, and excelling in power). This theistic concept of God includes a cluster of properties, and the ones most relevant to our discussion of evil are omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience. It is important to note that there are intramural debates within Christian theism about the meanings of these attributes. Some of these debates are reflected in the contributions to this volume. Yet all of the contributors affirm the grand wisdom, knowledge, goodness, and power of the God of historic Christianity.

We (the editors) have chosen five leading Christian thinkers who embrace five different perspectives to present in clear and accessible prose what they take to be the best way to respond to what is called “the problem of evil.” Before exploring their responses to the matter, it will be helpful to cover some of the relevant background material and major terms and concepts involved in the contemporary discussion on the subject.

To begin, what does the term *evil* connote? *Evil* is not an easy term to define in a precise and comprehensive manner. It is used in such diverse ways that one might wonder whether there truly is a singular meaning that captures each and every example of its usage. One might say, for example, that Joseph Stalin was an evil man, that the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia was an evil event, that an ISIS prison is an evil place, and that evolution in the animal kingdom (“nature red in tooth and claw,” to quote the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson) is

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“It is always enlightening to listen to a conversation among scholars who care deeply about a topic, take strikingly different positions, and engage each other in considerate and substantive ways. That’s just what God and the Problem of Evil provides: a stimulating conversation. Well-known proponents of five distinct approaches to the most vexing of philosophical and theological topics – Why is there suffering in God’s world? – summarize their positions in clear, accessible ways. Then each shows just how his view compares to the others. The positions presented cover a broad spectrum, yet each addresses with urgency both the intellectual and personal challenges that evil presents. The book makes a valuable contribution to current considerations of the topic.”

– **Richard Rice**, Loma Linda University, author of *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*

an evil process. But what is an accurate meaning of the term *evil* that covers each of these examples and the countless others that could be included? Lexicons and dictionaries offer little help in this way by telling us, for example, that *evil* is “the opposite of good” or “that which is morally reprehensible.” Here, as with many other instances, the standard dictionary definition of the term falls short of capturing the depth, complexities, and variegations of the way the term is actually used. (A similar problem exists with the word *good*, for one might have a good pet, a good dinner, a good relationship, a good job, and a good God.)

While a useful, specific definition of the term *evil* might elude us, we can still have a sense of what we are talking about when we use it in various contexts. General descriptions such as those mentioned above can prove helpful. David Hume provides a few more: “Were a stranger to drop on a sudden into this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills [that is, its evils], a hospital full of disease, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewn with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence.” The list of evils is endless, and it includes such broad notions as pain (physical states in which one wishes his or her circumstances were otherwise), suffering (mental states in which one wishes his or her circumstances were otherwise), and injustice (unfairness, the violation of the rights of others, and uncorrected abuse, neglect, or malfeasance).

As the phrase is used in the literature, “the problem of evil” has taken many forms. Consequently, it is probably more accurate to speak of *problems of evil*, as there are various difficulties we are confronted with given evil’s reality. Nevertheless, what is generally taken to be the heart of the problem can be put simply in standard logical form as follows:

If God exists, then evil should not exist.
Evil does exist.
Therefore, God does not exist.

The problem is that there seems to be an inconsistency between God’s nature and the reality of evil. As ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC) put it: “Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?”

– *Adapted from the introduction*