

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil has plagued mankind for millennia. The problem takes many forms. It may be a purely intellectual philosophical question about the compatibility of evil with the existence of God. It may be a pious exploration of God's purposes in the world. Most often it is a heart wrenching cry in the midst of calamity, "Why is this happening? How could God allow this?" These questions have baffled thinkers almost from the beginning of recorded history. It would be presumption to claim an airtight solution to evil. But surely Christian theology has something to offer in this quest. A theology of the problem of evil will survey the problem itself and some of the solutions offered in order to mark off some avenues of inquiry as being problematic. One such solution that will merit extended treatment will be the free-will explanation of evil. Finally, evil will be examined in light of the whole of revelation, and in this light a tentative solution will be offered that seeks to take into account the whole of Biblical revelation and Christian theology.

What then exactly is the problem of evil? A definition of evil usually takes into account at least three facets of evil. One is evil manifested in objective terms, that is harm, misfortune or destruction. Evil is also experienced subjectively as suffering, pain, anguish and grief. Underlying both of these is the moral aspect of evil- evil is morally wrong, badness and wickedness.¹ Cornelius Plantinga defines evil as "any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (e.g., by disease), morally, spiritually, or otherwise."² The moral aspect of evil is difficult to define without reference to a moral standard. The Scriptures always define moral evil with respect to the character or command of God. Sin has been defined as "any act- any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed- or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame."³

However, the definition of evil is not the problem. Even if one is unable to give a precise definition of evil, it is known from experience. The fact of evil is a universal experience. Everyone endures evil and suffering in some form. Even those- such as the mind sciences- who deny the objective reality of evil, must address and explain away the experience. But the fact of evil is not the problem. The problem lies in asking the reason

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition, p. 471.

² Plantinga, C., p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

for evil. And not the reason considered abstractly, but the reason for the existence of evil in a universe created by a wise, all-knowing, all-powerful, completely good God.

In assuming the Christian worldview regarding the creation of the universe, evil is seen to be an extreme anomaly, a drastic contrast to the character of the creator. Two related questions arise: ‘Why then does evil exist?’ and ‘Where did it come from?’ The problem of evil, then, is “Can we account for the origin and reason for evil which is compatible with the creation and providence of the God of the Scriptures?”

The Biblical account of creation is not helpful in this respect in that it does not address these concerns. Some may be tempted to find an answer in Genesis 1:2-3 where the universe is ‘formless and void’ and ‘darkness was over the face of the deep (chaos). But this only pushes the problem back further; Where did the chaos come from if not created by God? And when God finishes creation, He looks at all that He has created and declares it very good (Gen. 1:31). “For everything God created is good.”⁴ Genesis also records that God prohibited eating from the tree, but gives no reason why God created the tree or forbade its fruit. Likewise, the account of the fall tells of the first sin, but gives no explanation for the serpent or for the pair’s decision to sin.

The question still remains of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of evil. Both of these questions are in relation to God. How did evil come into existence? Was this with God’s approval or without? If it was with His approval, isn’t he implicated in its evil? If it was without his approval, does this mean that God was unable to stop evil? If so, wouldn’t that make evil stronger than God and God less than the sovereign God of Scripture? And the question of why is also multifaceted. Why did God permit evil (if this were indeed the case)? Does it serve a purpose for God? Could not this purpose be realized without evil? Also, why is evil so bad? Can we not imagine a milder sort of foil for God’s grace? The common cold may be necessary, but was Hitler? Finally, the pervasiveness of evil calls for explanation. Why is there so much evil? Is all of this evil really necessary? Seen in this light, the existence of evil seems to call into question God’s wisdom and goodness in allowing evil or His ability to stop evil. This is the problem of evil.

For this reason, many atheists use the problem of evil as a tool to deny the existence of God. The atheist argument was given classical expression by David Hume,

⁴ I Tim. 4:4.

“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?”⁵

Plantinga puts this problem in the form of three propositions: 1. God is omnipotent (in discussing the problem of evil, God’s omniscience is typically included either explicitly or implicitly in His omnipotence), 2. God is wholly good. 3. Evil exists.⁶ The atheist sees these three propositions as being contradictory.

Alvin Plantinga attempts to show that these propositions are not formally contradictory. A prior step in answering the atheist challenge may be to ask whether the atheist can properly use evil as an argument to deny that upon which evil relies for definition. In other words, how can an atheist truly speak of evil in terms of value without reference to God? The only consistent form of atheism, then is complete nihilism. The inability of most atheists to live as consistent nihilists weakens their position. Of course, this doesn’t prove that the theist is consistent or even come close to answering the problem of evil. Rather it disavows the atheist of the right to use the problem of evil.

Hume’s three-part formula does provide a convenient framework from which to discuss the attempts to answer the problem of evil. Most theodicies attempt to find a solution by compromising at one of the three points. Either they somehow attempt to diminish God’s omnipotence, or they attempt to diminish God’s goodness, or they attempt to diminish the evilness of evil. “The great difficulty lies in holding all three together. Because they stumbled at that point, the Christian thinkers of the three groups...have obscured, rejected even, one or another of them.”⁷

One group of solutions denies or diminishes God’s ability to stop or to have stopped evil. In other words, this view denies or diminishes God’s sovereign control over creation. The most famous expression of this view is Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. When confronted with tragedy, Kushner decided (somewhat understandably given his circumstances) that God was unable to stop evil because the alternative- that God was not good- was unacceptable.⁸

⁵ Quoted in Stackhouse, p. 11.

⁶ Plantinga, A., p. 13.

⁷ Blocher, p. 100.

⁸ Carson, p. 29.

One form of this argument is that of Dualism. Dualism presupposes a force external to God that is responsible for evil. In some cases this force is equal to God in power and opposite in intention. In all cases of Dualism, this opposite force is equal to God in past eternity because if it were a created entity, it would not answer the problem of evil and would not be true dualism. In every case of Dualism, the opposite of God somehow frustrates God's purposes. This force is the cause of evil and both the force and its evil works somehow fall outside the sovereignty of God. The Dualist solves the problem of evil by supposing an evil entity that God is unable to stop or control. Dualism is often mixed with optimism that somehow God will triumph in the end.⁹ Sometimes this is given an evolutionary framework- evil is the immaturity that progress is overcoming.¹⁰ However it is unclear how it is hoped that God will win in the future when He is unable to win in the present.

There are also aspects of this approach in the so-called 'free-will defense'. The free-will defense seeks to protect God from implication in evil by positing the origin of evil in the very nature of free choice. Where a possibility to do good exists, the possibility to do evil also exists.

"Their strategy consists of clearing God of any suspicion of complicity with evil by isolating the point of origin of evil, that is to say, freedom, by designating it as absolutely the first cause of all the horrifying disorder, and by portraying God as having nothing whatever to do with the event from any point of view and in any respect."¹¹

Part of Plantinga's argument is to question whether God could have created a world where humans are free to do good and yet never to do evil.¹² He claims to limit God's ability no more than to say that God is unable to do the logically impossible, like make a square circle.¹³ Plantinga's argument will later be examined more closely.

Another form of the free-will defense is to stress human freedom as inherently limiting God's ability to control the universe, especially the decisions of free beings and their consequences. This view "resolves the problem thus raised by treating a mutable

⁹ Blocher, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹² Plantinga, A., p. 17,45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

freedom as the cause of evil.”¹⁴ This argument takes many forms, from God’s self limiting of many Arminians to the more radical stances of process and open theologies where God is inherently limited by the nature of the universe and His own nature. This form of the free-will defense will also be examined more fully.

Another approach to solving the problem of evil involves the denial or diminishing of God’s inherent goodness and purity. At heart, this view is pessimistic. Somehow evil is intrinsic to the foundation of reality. Often this is the tactic of those who are hostile to Christianity who choose to evil as a tool to cast doubt on the character of God. This is also the temptation of those in the midst of suffering. “If God really cared, He wouldn’t allow this.” Job was counseled to “curse God and die.”¹⁵ C. S. Lewis admits being tempted to conclude: “So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”¹⁶

There is another form of this position- expressed in theological, not just emotional terms-that taken by those Blocher terms ‘dialectical-theologians’.¹⁷ This is a minority position within Christian theology. Again, within this group are varied approaches. But in all, the seed of evil is inherent in God himself. This position differs from Dualism in that evil or its cause is not outside of God, but somehow contained within or necessitated by God Himself.

Some see opposite influences within God creating a dialectical tension. Some see the suffering of the cross as a very part of God’s nature and therefore the evil that the cross presupposes as somehow bound up with God. Others see evil as a necessity of God’s existence- because God is, and God is good, there must be evil as a foil for God. In the same way, others see evil as ‘non-being’ as the polar opposite, logically necessary from God’s existence.

In all these approaches, God is less than wholly good. “The dialectical theologian, also launches an attack...on the total and absolute goodness of God and of his work, as well as on the assertion of the wickedness of evil.”¹⁸ This view certainly goes against the Scriptural testimony of the absolute goodness and purity of God. It is

¹⁴ Greer, p. 474.

¹⁵ Job 2:9.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stackhouse, p. 5.

¹⁷ Blocher, ch. 3.

certainly true that there are other conceptions of God besides the Christian view. But this view, like the Dualist view really gives no reason to expect that evil will not ultimately prevail. While this is possible, few if any people actually live according to this view. Hope is too strong. In any case, the problem of evil is solved by succumbing to evil. Surely the cure is worse than the disease.

The most common of the three overall approaches, at least from a Christian point of view, is to deny or diminish the evilness of evil. This optimistic approach sees reality as a whole, of which evil is seen as a minority. "Evil as a phenomenon or as an event is included in universal order and contributes to it in its own way."¹⁹ Therefore evil serves a purpose of the whole, which is good. If reality is seen as a painting, evil is the dark hues that contribute to the larger picture.

This approach also takes many forms. A view going back to Augustine and Aquinas sees evil merely as the absence or privation of good.²⁰ Evil is inherent in finitude. Finite and imperfect (though innocent) creatures could not help but fall short of God. However, this solution raises many questions of its own. If evil is a mere absence- a mere negation- where does it get its positive malignity? And this view does not finally explain evil. It does not explain where this privation came from or why God allowed it to happen.

Another view associated with Leibniz is to start with the goodness and omnipotence of God and then conclude that if this is the world created by God, then it is the 'best of all possible worlds.' In a world created by God, there is 'sufficient reason' for everything that happens.²¹

This is similar to other approaches that see evil as somehow being a necessary means to a greater end. These views take the slogan '*felix culpa*' - happy fault. In this view the results of evil are ultimately worth the price of evil. Some say that knowledge of evil is necessary to truly know good. However, this view falters because it seems to imply that God doesn't have true knowledge of the good without the existence of evil.²²

Others see evil as the arena in which 'soul-making' can take place. Evil provides

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

opportunity to exercise patience, self-control and other virtues which would not be possible had not evil existed. If these obstacles are necessary for 'soul making', it may be asked if they are also necessary in heaven.²³

Finally, others see evil in light of the cross and the eternal life that the cross purchased. The blessing of eternal life and the moral awareness brought about by the cross are said to give sufficient reason for allowing evil. "The sin of Adam was permitted for the sake of the redemptive Incarnation...Sin,-evil,-is the ransom of glory."²⁴ Jonathan Edwards was a notable proponent of this view. According to Edwards, "the sin, in general, of the saints is for their good...[it] will issue in a high advancement of their eternal happiness...beyond what they would have had, if they never had been fallen creatures."²⁵

Edwards gives three reasons why this is so. First, if Adam had not sinned, he would have obtained eternal blessedness, but only the blessedness commensurate with being earned by mortal humanity. But because of the fall and the cross, humanity will experience an eternal blessedness commensurate with being earned by God himself. "The happiness he wins for us is that appropriate to him."²⁶ Secondly, true happiness includes a full revelation of God. Part of this necessary revelation is "God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice and holiness...But this could not be except sin and punishment were decreed."²⁷ Thirdly, according to Edwards, because our exaltation will be so high, it must take place through our humiliation so as to prevent our self-deification.²⁸

There are two very real dangers of this approach. First, it is in danger of minimizing the evil of evil. Second, it is in danger of making God the 'author of sin'.²⁹ To say that evil is the '*felix culpa*' is to imply that somehow evil itself is 'blessed'. This seems to be a contradiction to the definition of evil. This flies in the face of actual

²² Carson, p. 35.

²³ Blocher, p. 55.

²⁴ Blocher, p. 30.

²⁵ Quoted in Jenson, p. 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Bray, p. 90.

experience. It doesn't take seriously the complete horror of evil and the scandalous opposition of all evil to God.

Regarding this approach, Blocher's criticism should be taken seriously.

"...it is one thing to say that God is capable of bringing forth good from it once it is there; it is quite another to conclude that God permitted it *with a view to* that good...Never does Scripture take that step across what is a qualitative chasm. No Biblical text, interpreted strictly, states that God changes evil into good...If sin is really...'the ransom of glory', can one exonerate God from a share in the guilt?"³⁰

It seems that all three approaches have serious flaws. Neither diminishing God's sovereign power, nor diminishing His absolute goodness, nor diminishing the evilness of evil seem to provide a way out of the problem. Two final solutions attempt to forge a fourth way that is similar to the third approach. These approaches try to hold to the absolute evilness of evil, but deny that evil is ultimate. Evil is real, but evil is not final.

The first view in this category is the free-will defense. There are two species of this defense that are worth noting: that of Alvin Plantinga, who focuses on the free-will defense as a possible solution to the atheist challenge; and those who focus on autonomous human freedom as a given, which then limits God's control over events.

Both of these categories are considered here because their proponents usually consider this defense to be a subset of the 'greater-good defense'. That is, these views usually concede that God could have made a world without the possibility of evil, but such a world would not contain free beings that are capable of loving God. That is, given this limitation, God thought the possibility of free creatures freely loving Him was greater than the risk of evil entering the world. Plantinga early on has recourse to this argument. And this argument is the starting point for the other proponents of the free-will defense.

Therefore, the free-will defense operates with these three fundamental assumptions. First, evil is a possibility inherent in freedom. Second, a free choice cannot be determined in advance, not even by God. And third, because freedom is of very high or the highest value, "it was good for God to 'take the risk'."³¹ Love is not possible without freedom and therefore God had to allow freedom if He wished to be loved.

Plantinga, it must be said, is not trying to answer the problem of evil. Rather he is attempting to answer the atheist's challenge to theism based on the problem of evil. He

³⁰ Blocher, p. 33, italics original.

³¹ Blocher, p. 37.

argues that it is not enough for the atheologian to show that the theist doesn't know why a good and powerful God would allow evil. The atheologian must prove that it is impossible or highly unlikely that a good and powerful God would allow evil. The atheologian must prove that the problem of evil proves to be a logical contradiction.³² In this framework, Plantinga attempts to show that it is possible for a good and powerful God to allow evil, even if the theist has no idea why. Therefore, it would not be proper to criticize Plantinga for not attaining a goal loftier than the one he set out to accomplish. But it may be helpful to ask if Plantinga has anything to add to our investigation of the problem of evil.

Plantinga begins by noting that for the atheologian to make his case, he must make explicit some implicit propositions, notably- "A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can." And "There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do."³³ The second proposition is qualified by the limits of logic. God cannot do what is logically impossible. But the first proposition is qualified by recourse to the greater-good argument. Assuming that there is a sort of happiness that is only possible with a minor inconvenience, then how could a good being have the happiness without the inconvenience?³⁴ Then he uses this opening to show the consistency of a good and powerful God creating a world containing evil if He has good reason for doing so.³⁵ At this point, the reader is reminded that Plantinga does not intend to give such a reason, but only to show that the problem of evil is not logically inconsistent.³⁶

This leads next into the focus on freedom and causality that is at the heart of the free will defense. Plantinga claims to offer a kind of good that God creates, which is wholly good, which contain no evil whatsoever, but which God cannot "bring about without permitting evil."³⁷ This is founded on the proposition that an action cannot be determined by God and at the same time be a free action. In order "to create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He

³² Plantinga, A., p. 11.

³³ Plantinga, A., p. 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so."³⁸

At this point, Plantinga acknowledges a possible objection: that God could make beings who were free and yet always did what was right, but the fact that He didn't is inconsistent either with His goodness or His omnipotence.³⁹ Plantinga denies this invalidates the free-will defense because the decisions of free beings under a certain set of circumstances cannot both be and not be a certain way. Therefore, some 'possible worlds' are excluded by logical necessity.⁴⁰ Then his idea of 'transworld depravity' is used to show that all possible worlds contain moral evil if they contain moral good.⁴¹ Therefore, Plantinga concludes that the problem of evil is not contradictory because the idea of God's omnipotence is not logically contradictory with the proposition "It was not within God's power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil."⁴²

Plantinga may very well have proven a logically possible loophole to the problem of evil. But it may be asked if his solution is helpful in constructing a Christian theology on the problem of evil. More to the point, it may be asked if he is right. Is Plantinga's possible answer to the problem of evil the actual answer to evil in the real world?

It may be helpful to notice that point on which Plantinga's argument stands or falls is the assertion that a determined action is by definition not a free action. His idea of 'transworld depravity' is basically an absolutizing of this principle of incompatibilism. Thus, when confronted with a choice between admitting a limit to human freedom and admitting a limit to the omnipotence of God, Plantinga opted to limit omnipotence. In this case, the problem of evil is confronted with the age-old question of the relation between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of humanity. This will also be the case with the other branches of the free-will defense.

There is a definite spectrum of belief among those who hold to the free-will defense. John Wesley, who is known for his Arminianism in salvation, comes very near to forgetting free-will altogether in describing the greater-good that comes from evil in

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

terms of the cross and salvation. But Wesley does resort to free-will for an explanation when discussing the idea of God's allowing evil.⁴³ C. S. Lewis explains free will by answering, "Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love of goodness or joy worth having."⁴⁴

Lewis and Wesley and many others may be classified as free will theist in terms of the problem of evil. This view believes that God values human freedom and created the world with genuinely free persons. Evil is a direct result of this freedom, without any guilt being attributed to God.⁴⁵ God knew of the possibility for evil, but chose not to stop it. God remains able to intervene in the world, but chooses not to override freedom.⁴⁶ The free will theists basically hold as actually describing reality, Plantinga's hypothetical free-will defense of theism. On this view, God's power to stop evil was available, but was self-limited.

Other, views go even farther. Open theism holds to the account of free will given above, but adds other aspects to their understanding of freedom. The difference between free will and open theism has to do with the relationship between foreknowledge and freedom.⁴⁷ For the Open theist, it is logically incompatible to think that a free act can be truly foreknown. If it is foreknown, it is not truly free. The Open theist concludes that divine foreknowledge does not really exist. They claim to uphold divine omniscience, but define the future as non-existent, and therefore unknowable.⁴⁸

Open theism, then in many significant ways differ from the traditional understanding of God. The primary characteristic of God is not sovereignty or holiness, but is love.⁴⁹ God is thought of as being 'kenotic', 'self-emptying' and 'non-interventionist'.⁵⁰ God's sovereignty is defined not in terms of control over the universe, but in terms of His freedom to exist and to create the world.

"Since freedom has been created, reality is open, not closed. God's relationship to the world is dynamic, not static...God is sovereign...in the sense of having the

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴³ Walls, pp. 537 ff.

⁴⁴ Lewis, p. 158.

⁴⁵ Hasker, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Griffin, p. 16, cf. Boyd p. 46.

⁴⁷ Gray, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Boyd, p. 42

⁴⁹ Hasker, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Rice, p. 188.

power to exist in himself and the power to call forth the universe out of nothing by his word.”⁵¹

Open theism is inconsistent in its description of God’s relation to the world. In his essay, Boyd spends considerable time promoting the ‘classical position’ and then gives equal time to the view that seems to contradict the Scriptures he previously defended.⁵² Pinnock insists on God’s nonintervention because of the value He places on the freedom of individuals and he insists on the unknowability of the future, but then insists that God can actually bring His will to pass. “He can do it because of his ability to anticipate the obstructions the creatures can throw in his way and respond to each new challenge in an effective manner.”⁵³ Likewise, Boyd insists that “God has not given away more power to creatures than he can handle”⁵⁴ but “...God must allow free agents to exercise their freedom once he has given it, for to revoke freedom because it is being misused would mean that it was never genuinely given in the first place.”⁵⁵

The implications of the Open view for the problem of evil are obvious. “Sin was not only not foreknown, its occurrence in the garden was, to God, ‘implausible’.”⁵⁶ Of course, on this view it is difficult to understand how Christ could be the lamb ‘destined before the foundation of the world (I Pet. 1:20). The problem of evil is solved at the cost of denial of God’s omnipotence. The power of God in the free will theism view was limited, although self-limited (although self-limitation is still limitation). But in the Open theism view, the limitation is real and part of the inherent nature of God and His creation. “At the end of day, God is exonerated, but mystery is destroyed and so is God’s ability to help.”⁵⁷

Process Theology goes even further than Open Theism. Process theology uses the problem of evil to reject the omnipotence of God.⁵⁸ For Process theology, God is not in complete control of anything and therefore He is off the hook as far as evil is

⁵¹ Pinnock, pp. 144-5.

⁵² Boyd, pp. 14-37.

⁵³ Pinnock, p. 146.

⁵⁴ Boyd, p. 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁶ Ware, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Carson, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Rice, pp. 186-7.

concerned.⁵⁹ Freedom is not a decision or concession of God, but is a necessary part of creation.⁶⁰ “God decides the general features of reality...but the actual course the universe takes always depends on the decisions of others.”⁶¹ The difference between Open and Process theology as it applies to the problem of evil is one of degree. Open theism admits God’s control in the world, however limited, but Process theology denies God’s unchecked control in all events. In this respect, Process theology has an important insight in correction of other free will views:

If God created this world out of absolutely nothing, then, the beings of this world are *absolutely* dependent upon God. Any power they have is not at all inherent, but is totally a gift of God, and as such can be overridden at any time.”⁶²

Ironically, this argument is used not to uphold God’s sovereign control, but to reject *ex nihilo* creation.

Throughout the spectrum of free will defense, from Plantinga to Process theology, the common factor is upholding the freedom of humans at the expense of the omnipotence of God. In some cases, the denial of omnipotence is more explicit than in others. But all of these views, for this reason, should not be classified as a subset of the greater-good defense, but should be classified as a subset of the approach that solves the problem of evil by denying that God is powerful enough to stop evil.

The free will views can be criticized in a number of areas. The first is that this view misunderstands the nature of God’s providence and therefore the nature of God.⁶³ The free will defense is based on the proposition that an action cannot be determined by God and at the same time be a free action. But is this a necessary and true proposition? Is the inability of God to create a free being only able to do good the same as God’s inability to create a square circle? “No-one had demonstrated that. Besides, it is significant that the terms used are those of withdrawal and self-limitation, whereas these words do not come to mind when confronted by the absurdity of square circles.”⁶⁴

The problem seems to stem from treating propositions about God in the same way as propositions about humans. “Such a naïve extrapolation of rules that are doubtless

⁵⁹ Blocher, p. 41.

⁶⁰ Hasker, pp. 42-3.

⁶¹ Rice, p. 187.

⁶² Griffin, quoted in Rice, p. 186.

⁶³ Carson, p. 218.

valid for human conduct is in point of fact the very thing that *needs to be demonstrated*.”⁶⁵ Surely there is at least some difference. To treat God’s relation to creation as one person’s relation to one another “derives from the most basic feature of the autonomous free-will defense, namely anthropomorphism...*God’s action is imagined in terms of such a model!* What is meant by ‘God’ is completely forgotten.”⁶⁶

When we look to the Scriptures, there is nothing to suggest that because people have free choices, God is somehow limited in power or knowledge.⁶⁷ Rather, Scripture insists on the absolute sovereignty of God in all respects.⁶⁸ Scripture includes all of life under God’s sovereign control, including human decisions. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” (Prov. 21:11). “Holy Scripture also includes the decisions of free beings under divine sovereignty. In point of fact, if such realities were excepted, what would remain of human history for God to govern?”⁶⁹ It is difficult to explain how God could control the general outline of history but not the details. Many individual decisions of apparent insignificance have consequences that change the course of the universe. If God does not control these, He no longer controls much of anything.⁷⁰ God’s absolute sovereignty is a necessary corollary of monotheism. “God is not truly called almighty if he cannot do whatsoever he please, or if the power of his almighty will is hindered by the will of any creature whatsoever.”⁷¹

Not only does Scripture affirm God’s sovereignty, but it also affirms the reality and responsibility of human decisions and actions. God’s sovereignty does not take away the reality of ‘secondary causes’. As the Westminster Confession says, “...nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”⁷² In the Bible, these two truths are held in tension, but neither is denied.

⁶⁴ Blocher, p. 60.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100, italics original.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60, italics original.

⁶⁷ Carson, p. 204, cf. Blocher, p. 61.

⁶⁸ E.g. Eph 1:11, many more could be added, but this verse is so conclusive as to dispel doubt.

⁶⁹ Blocher, p. 93.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 96.

⁷² Chapter 3.1.

It may be objected that this is a logical contradiction, but one must ask if this is indeed the case. Rather, to insist that God cannot work this way is to commit category confusion and to misunderstand the nature of God. For instance, Open and Process theology misunderstand the nature of God when they understand Him in the categories of time and space in the same way that humans are in time and space.⁷³ As humans, we are ignorant of how God experiences time.⁷⁴ God simply is not like us.

“When I say that God is personal, I must also say that he is transcendent- above space and time, and ultimately sovereign...I dare not forget that he cannot be personal in exactly the same way that finite human beings are personal.⁷⁵

The Biblical data forces us to adopt a form of compatibilism.⁷⁶ In other words, we must affirm that God is truly sovereign over all and at the same time, humans are responsible agents. These two truths must be held in tension in such a way as to avoid making humans less than personal and to avoid making God absolutely contingent.⁷⁷ In keeping these two in tension, theologians have sometimes had recourse to distinctions between God’s revealed will and His secret will- allowing for God’s secret plan and moving.⁷⁸ How this happens remains beyond the scope of human knowledge.

“Transparently, how he does this is related to who he is, to his ‘domain’ outside or above space and time, to the nature of his sovereignty and his choices as a person; but I still do not see *how* he does it.⁷⁹

Not only is the free will defense a misunderstanding of providence, but it is also a misunderstanding of the nature of the will and the nature of freedom. Three questions must be asked of the free will defense. First, what is the nature of the will? Second, what is the nature of freedom? Third, is the absence of any constraint necessary to freedom? And fourth, is absolute freedom to contrary necessary for love and responsibility?

The free will defense treats the will as a separate entity- that by which I make choices. Jonathan Edwards however defines the word by its ordinary usage- the act of

⁷³ Carson, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁷⁶ Feinberg, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Carson, p. 201.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, I 17. 6, cf. Bray, p. 209.

⁷⁹ Carson, p. 217, italics original.

making a choice.⁸⁰ The will is not something that stands behind a choice. What then determines whether one choice is made or another? The motives for a choice come from a variety of arenas, both internal and external. The choice is made for whichever option displays the “greatest apparent good.”⁸¹ If this is the way that choices are made, how can it be insisted that the will must remain free from constraint?

In the same way, proponents of free will define freedom as the absence of constraint of the will. But Edwards defines freedom in the more commonplace way as the lack of hindrance to carry out one’s decisions.⁸² “Freedom in general cannot be defined except negatively, it is an absence of interferences.”⁸³ If the will is to remain free from constraint or inclination before it makes a choice, what has come of our commonsense experience of making choices based on motives, criteria, and reasons set before us? Likewise, the act of choice is the inclining of the will to one option or another. If the will is in no way inclined until it makes a choice, there is no choice except that which is completely arbitrary. Surely the proponents of free will mean more than that.

By the common experience of choosing based on motivations, it is also evident that a complete absence of outside constraint is not necessary for freedom. If I choose to eat a piece of food based on my internal hunger as well as the pleasing sight and smell of the food, is my choice any less free? Likewise, in this light love is compatible with outside constraint. By definition love is at least partly based on the loveliness of the beloved. A love disinterested in this way would be a contradiction.

It must be admitted that proponents of the free will defense usually don’t object to constraint in terms of motivations. But then it must be rejoined, what exactly do they object to? Do they object to constraint in terms of forcing one to do something one does not wish to do? Is this the manner in which they conceive of God exercising sovereign control? If so, their view of God is anthropomorphic to the highest degree. Rather, it is ‘behind the scenes’ at the level of motivations and causes that God exercises his sovereign control. If this is so, how can the proponent of free will object without also

⁸⁰ Edwards, pp. 198-9.

⁸¹ Jenson, pp. 157-8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁸³ Farrar, p. 109.

considering all decisions not to be free? “Freedom is really conceivable only in personal terms, and it is at that level that both free will and predestination operate.”⁸⁴

But the free will defense seems intent on going one step further. This view insists on the “absolute power to contrary”.⁸⁵ For moral accountability, humans must be absolutely free from divine constraint. “Any actual world will, by metaphysical necessity, be composed of beings with some power of self-determination, even vis-à-vis God, so that it is logically impossible for God unilaterally to prevent all evil.”⁸⁶ “At such points God is *absolutely* contingent: in other words, he is not in control, but is merely responding to the situation.”⁸⁷

This indeed is the conclusion of the free will defense, but two problems must be noted at this point. First, if absolute power to contrary is necessary to free will, will such free will exist in Heaven? How can God keep us from sinning there without compromising this capacity?⁸⁸ The second problem is that it goes against the teaching of Scripture. Sadly, this is not a problem for some proponents of the free will defense. “[Hick] is so committed to this concept of liberty that he consciously opposes Holy Scripture.”⁸⁹

Another criticism of the free will defense is that it does not satisfy the requirements of a ‘greater good’. “Predestination has frequently been attacked on the ground that it is supposed to be a denial of free will, although its defenders point out that in fact it is the very opposite.”⁹⁰ According to the free will defense, God’s aim in allowing freedom was people who would freely love and serve Him. But that is precisely what the fall did not produce. Not only that, but the fall forever negated the possibility both of love and of freedom excepting the sovereign intervention of God. If this were truly the case, it would have to be admitted that God was not very bright. This in fact is what some Open Theists conclude.⁹¹ This view appeals to the idea of independence and

⁸⁴ Bray, p. 91.

⁸⁵ Carson, p. 219.

⁸⁶ Griffin quoted in Blocher, p. 42.

⁸⁷ Carson, p. 39, italics original.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁸⁹ Blocher, p. 51.

⁹⁰ Bray, p. 91.

⁹¹ Ware, p. 5.

strict autonomy so congenital to the modern spirit.⁹² This, it may be noted, is the very temptation that gave rise to the problem of evil so long ago in the garden.

The Biblical picture is different. Freedom cannot be seen without reference to the fall.⁹³ In John 8:34-6, Jesus said "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Freedom also cannot be understood without reference to God. Biblical freedom is "freedom to obey God without restraint or reserve. It is not absolute power to contrary; it is wanting to please God at every moment."⁹⁴ Freedom is being a slave to righteousness (Rom 6:18).

A criticism more to the point of the problem of evil is that the free will defense does not work. The question is raised, 'Why did God allow evil?' The free will defense responds, 'God created free beings with the possibility of making bad choices.' But then the question must be asked, 'Why did God create these beings?' The free will defense does not solve the problem, it just pushes it back a step. God may be exonerated of direct blame, but He still bears indirect blame for evil.⁹⁵ The free will defense still leaves us with the options that God is either immoral or impotent.⁹⁶ It does not explain the existence of the serpent or the tree. It doesn't explain the existence of natural disasters. "To point to freedom as the area where guilt lies is correct; but to imagine that evil is thereby *explained* is to fall into confusion."⁹⁷

Finally, the cost of the free will defense is just too high. It is too high in that 'freedom' does not seem to be worth the price of all the suffering that it has caused (especially since freedom was forfeited). The cost is too high in that God is not exonerated from the guilt of evil by removing Him one step. The cost is too high in that it doesn't really explain anything. The cost is especially too high in the frequent denial of God's sovereign power, and in the occasional diminishing of God's other attributes. "The resulting god is incapable of helping us."⁹⁸ The cost is also too high in that it

⁹² Blocher, p. 36.

⁹³ Carson, p. 214.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁹⁵ Blocher, pp. 39-40.

⁹⁶ Bray, p. 90.

⁹⁷ Blocher, p. 59, italics original.

⁹⁸ Carson, p. 31.

contradicts Scripture on key points. Therefore, the free will defense must be rejected as an inadequate solution to the problem of evil.

Nowhere does Scripture suggest that human choice is independent, that it has sprung from ‘absolute spontaneity’ (cf. Pr. 21:1), nor that such independence is the condition of responsibility (cf. Rom. 1:18-2:16). Nowhere does Scripture explain the emergence of evil by its presence as a potential factor within freedom in the beginning. Nowhere does it teach that the possibility of evil was the inescapable ransom required by creation in order for humanity to enjoy freedom. Nowhere is there any hint of a ‘risk’ taken by God.”⁹⁹

At this point, all the solutions examined so far have been found wanting. It may be expedient to conclude that the problem is wrapped in mystery beyond knowing. There may yet be recourse to mystery, but all avenues must first be explored. It may be that “there are no final answers, but surely some answers are better than others. So we seek the best answers we can find.”¹⁰⁰ It may be helpful at this point to notice that all of the solutions thus far examined have made no reference to the cross of Christ or the larger scope of salvation history.¹⁰¹

In this context, it must be affirmed that God is purely good, that God is entirely omnipotent, and that evil is utterly evil. None of these propositions are or can be denied in the context of Biblical revelation. Neither divine sovereignty nor human responsibility can be denied. Compatibilism is the only option available that is faithful to the Scriptures.¹⁰²

Above all, it can not be allowed that God is the ‘author of sin’. “God shows no compliance whatsoever with evil.”¹⁰³ “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?”¹⁰⁴ It is allowed that God, being sovereign allows evil, but the Bible never says that God stands behind evil in the same way that He stands behind good. “God stands behind good and evil asymmetrically.”¹⁰⁵ It is also part of the Biblical data that different kinds of evil are distinguished. Natural evil is not the same as moral evil. Physical suffering is not the

⁹⁹ Blocher, p. 62.

¹⁰⁰ Veith quoted in Carson, p. 200.

¹⁰¹ Carson, p. 36.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 212-3.

¹⁰³ Blocher, p. 59.

¹⁰⁴ Hab. 1:13.

¹⁰⁵ Carson, p. 224.

same as spiritual suffering. “If your eye causes you to sin...” (Mk. 9:47). In many cases, we find people rejoicing, not because of their suffering, but in spite of their suffering because, “Christianly regarded, sin, and sin only, is destruction.”¹⁰⁶

When we attempt to keep all the data of the Bible in tension, we are forced to some uncomfortable conclusions. Sin and evil were allowed by God. “Here is a mystery which the Bible reveals but does not explain.”¹⁰⁷ God’s plan somehow allows for the existence of evil in a way that God is not guilty. But how is that possible?

At this point it is a temptation to fudge the Biblical material to make the conclusion more comfortable. It is a temptation to domesticate God “in the name of a preconceived idea of his moral perfection, then we are treating the mystery of God astonishingly lightly.”¹⁰⁸ By being protective of God, we are rather building a god who is less than God- a being who is less than sovereign or less than personal.

Rather, we should take our cue from the Bible. We should notice the unblushing way that the Bible acknowledges God somehow standing behind evil. Saul was tormented by an evil Spirit from the Lord (I Sam. 16:14). And Job accepted both good and trouble as from God (Job 2:10). The Bible characters don’t seem to ask the problem of evil in the same way. In some sense, the question is discouraged, “who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (Rom 9:20). “The attitude of believers in both Old and New Testaments is to feel themselves as dust and ashes before him, to bow beneath his mighty arm and to adore him whose ways are inscrutable.”¹⁰⁹ “God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things.”¹¹⁰

Part of the reason for this response is that they seem to have had a different perspective. They seem to be more aware of the larger scope of salvation history. They saw clearly that we are not yet at the endpoint of history. The eschaton has not arrived. The current state of the world is not the final state. There are two foci in the Scripture that can help us to bring our theology more in line with the Biblical revelation.

¹⁰⁶ Blocher, p. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Bray, p. 91.

¹⁰⁸ Blocher, p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Luther, p. 209.

The first focus is the final consummation, when “the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...No longer will there be any curse.”¹¹¹ A Christian theology of the problem of evil must take into account that evil is not eternal. Evil is not ultimate. There will soon come a time when evil will be no more.

The second focus is the cross. The cross first of all puts the problem in its starkest form. The cross is evil, pain and absurdity shown in its most blatant expression. But at the same time the evil of the cross was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). God used the evil of the cross to achieve His purpose of defeating evil. The cross also shows the wonderful and horrible mystery that God doesn’t stand aloof of evil, but bears the weight and sting of sin in His own body. Even if we don’t understand the cause of evil, in the cross we have the cure.¹¹²

In light of the larger Biblical context, it seems best to tentatively offer a form of the greater-good defense as the solution to the problem of evil. This must be safeguarded by a few stipulations. First, in no way can it be allowed that God is implicated as the ‘author of sin.’ Second, in calling on a greater good, we don’t pretend to know what that good is. We see as through a glass darkly and foreknow only through promise. This answer does not explain away the mystery of evil, but rather looks to the mysterious one as being faithful and worthy of our trust.

The Scriptures give us warrant for thinking that this is the way God works. Jesus was asked why a certain man was born blind and he replied, “this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” (Jn. 9:2). God spoke of Pharaoh, “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” (Rom. 9:17). “God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.” (Rom 11:32).

God also displays a track record of overcoming evil for good. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving

¹¹¹ Rev. 21:3-4, 22:3.

¹¹² Bray, p. 92.

of many lives.” (Gen. 50:20). “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28). “God writes straight on crooked lines.”¹¹³ Jesus himself walked this same path as our forerunner and example. “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb. 12:2-3).

The promises of the Bible encourage us also to find the solution in this direction. “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Rom. 8:18). “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

In *The End For Which God Created the World*, Jonathan Edwards concurs with this conclusion. The main thrust of this work is that God’s reason for creating the universe (including the existence of evil) was His own glory. But part of that glory is our “eternal and ever increasing joy in him.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, it is both for our greater-good and somehow inexplicably also for God’s.

In settling on what seems to be the best (Biblical) solution, it must be admitted that it doesn’t really solve the problem of evil. Much is left to mystery. Much is left unexplained. Christian theology must follow the question as far as possible. But in this case, it may be appropriate to follow Stackhouse in disavowing the question altogether.¹¹⁵ The appropriate question (which he poses) is whether or not God can be trusted. Is there sufficient reason to bank on God’s promise that the eschaton will make all wrongs to right? This question is in line with the Scriptures constant challenge to trust in the living God in all situations and to “Cast your cares on Him.” (I Pet. 5:7).

Finally, this solution resembles the solution to the extended treatment of the problem of evil given in the Bible, namely the book of Job. Job was never given an explanation for his suffering. Rather he was shown that God is God and Job is not. In the same way, we don’t know enough to make a correct judgement about the problem of evil. Rather, we may bow in humble trust that God is well able to order the universe in a

¹¹³ Blocher, p. 32.

¹¹⁴ Piper, p. 34.

¹¹⁵ Stackhouse, p. 3, 90.

way that is consistent with His overwhelming goodness and His awesome power without having to downplay the horribleness of evil. Like Job, we may say, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” (Job 13:15).

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