THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

And The Limits of Logic in Man's Comprehension of God

paper by

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OUTLINE

The Problem of Evil

The 18th-century skeptic David Hume stated the problem of evil thus: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume [part 10], 198)

The Bible declares that God is absolutely and only good: "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." (1Jn 1.5) The Bible also states unequivocally that God is the Creator and Sustainer of everything — He is not just very-powerful, but indeed *all*-powerful:

> For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Co 1.16–17)

Nevertheless, evil does exist. Where did it originate? This is the dilemma commonly referred to as the *problem of evil* — a problem that not only philosophers and theologians wrestle with. It is a problem that troubles the thoughts of business professionals, homemakers, and even children who face real life sorrows and ask, "Why?" The problem of the origin of evil is a deeply felt dilemma for the Christian faith.

As Alvin Plantinga wisely observed, when a person is facing the pain of real-life evils and asks, "Why?" he needs pastoral care not an intellectual treatise. (Plantinga, 63–64) This paper is not being written to resolve the *felt* question "Why?" The Bible does give comfort and understanding for those suffering from the reality of evil; I would urge such individuals to look to a pastor of the Word, not a theological treatise, for help.

Nevertheless, some, like David Hume quoted above, insist that the problem of evil exposes an irresolvable flaw in Christian theology. It is the purpose of this paper to address this aspect of the problem: whether the existence of evil does, indeed, expose a necessary logical flaw in Christian doctrine.

The problem of evil is, ultimately, a *logical* problem. It is often expressed by the following three premises, the third of which seemingly contradicts the first two:

1. GOD IS ALL-GOOD.
2. GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL.
3. EVIL EXISTS. (Bahnsen, 171)

It is the thesis of this paper that these premises do not necessarily pose a logical contradiction. The perceived contradiction in these three tenets of the Christian faith may be (and it is my assertion that it is) a consequence of limitations within the current understanding of logic.

Traditional Answers

Before addressing the limitations of logic, it will serve us well to give brief attention to some common attempts to answer the problem of evil. Two common answers, used by laymen and theologians alike, are what we will call the *free will theodicy* and the *ultimate glory theodicy* (*theodicy* being the technical term for any attempt to justify God's reason for evil.)

According to the *free will theodicy,* God is absolutely good and omnipotent *by nature;* however, God voluntarily ceded just enough control over His creation to grant mankind "free will." A popular example of a free will theodicy is the *Openness of God* teaching. This new doctrine holds that, "although God has the power to determine future events…, out of love for his free creatures he chooses not to [exercise it]." (Davis, 22) God did not create evil; He created mankind with the freedom to do good or evil and voluntarily surrendered His power over man's choices. Evil therefore exists because of mankind's (and the devil's) free choices which God was morally obliged to permit. A free will theodicy solves the logical problem of evil thus:

1. GOD IS ALL-GOOD.
2. GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL.
3. GOD, IN HIS GOODNESS, HAS LIMITED HIS USE OF POWER.
4. EVIL EXISTS BY THE PERMISSION OF GOD'S SELF-LIMITATION.

There are several serious problems with this theodicy; in particular the Bible does not teach any self-imposed limitations in God's exercise of His power. "Our God is in the heavens," writes the Psalmist, "He does whatever He pleases." (Ps 115.3) Even the heart of man, that area to which the

free will theodicy cedes power to man to choose good or evil for himself, is not outside of God's control: "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." (Pr 21.1; see also Ro 9.18.) God has not limited His power; He retains complete sovereignty over His creation. The problem of evil cannot be explained by a voluntary lapse in God's omnipotence. (See also G. Clark, 199–206; Calvin, II.2.)

Gordon Clark is among those who reject any form of free will theodicy. Clark asserts the absolute sovereignty of God over every event within His creation, even making a declaration so bold as the following: "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do so." (G. Clark, 221) Most theologians would not speak as bluntly as Clark; nevertheless, many share this alternative position that God *is* ultimately the cause of evil, *but* He is justified because evil is His tool for a greater, moral good. (Clark does make a careful distinction between God as the ultimate *cause* of sin and His not being the *author* of sin. [G. Clark, 238])

Clark explains the tragic example quoted above by pointing to the cross. There, ruthless men drove nails through the hands and feet of the incarnate Son of God. The crucifixion of Christ was the ultimate work of evil in human history, yet Scripture plainly asserts that this deed was ordained by God for the sake of His glory and the good of His people. (G. Clark, 221; See Ac 2.23.)

According to what we are calling the *ultimate glory theodicy,* God is both absolutely good and omnipotent (without limiting any of His power at all). Evil exists, not due to a lapse in God's control, but as a Divine instrument for a great moral end. Greg Bahnsen, giving a similar argument as Clark, amends the logical statement of the problem of evil thus:

1. God is all-good.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. Evil exists....
4. God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists. (Bahnsen, 171–72.)

This ultimate glory theodicy is, in essence, a theological "end justifies the means" defense for God's use of evil. While an ultimate glory theodicy is more satisfying for Christians of the

reformed faith than a free will theodicy, there are still significant problems with this approach. In particular, this theodicy redefines God's goodness as simply *legal* goodness rather than *legal and moral* goodness.

According to Clark, evil is only evil when there is legal culpability, and God is not accountable to anyone. Man is culpable for sin because man must answer to God's Law; but, "God's causing a man to sin is not sin" because "God is 'Ex-lex [ie: without law]'." (G. Clark, 239–240) In other words, to cite Clark's example of the lying spirit in 2 Chronicles 18.20–21, God can send a lying spirit yet not be culpable for the resulting lies because there is no commandment restricting God's use of such deception. Only *man* is restricted from deception because of divine law. (G. Clark, 240)

While these assertions do reflect important features of Biblical truth, they do not completely explain the nature of evil. Evil is not simply a matter of *legality*. Evil is the violation of *God's very nature,* (1Jn 4.6–8.) and the standard of morality is *God's own moral likeness:* "I am the LORD your God … be holy, for I am holy." (Le 11.44; see Ge 1.26.) Indeed, God is not subject to any law; nevertheless, regardless of culpability, God will not do what He has called evil because it is against His own nature. (Ge 18.25.) (Concerning the passage about the lying spirit cited by Clark above, we ought no more consider that spirit a representative of God than Satan who was similarly authorized to afflict Job. [2Ch 18.18–22; Job 1–2]) To simply define God's goodness as non-culpability is to deny the Biblical truth that evil is detestable to the very *nature* of God. It is not just a matter of legality.

The problem of evil is not really resolved by explaining why God can cause evil and not be culpable for it. The problem persists as long as we recognize: the holiness of God, His holiness as the source of all His actions, and His actions as the source of everything that exists. How can evil exist in a universe that was designed and created in every detail by a holy God? This *is* a logical contradiction, and short of redefining God's power (as the free will theodicy does) or His goodness (as ultimate glory theodicy does), no amount of explanation can resolve the tension. But is the cause of this contradiction really in the doctrine, or is there a flaw in our

understanding of logic itself? I am persuaded that the problem of evil exposes limitations in logic, not a flaw in Christian doctrine.

The Limits of Logic

Logic, like math and other sciences, is a system of rules developed by observation. Although the basic principles of logic and math have been well constructed and provide a dependable basis for reasoning, neither are static systems. New areas of discovery often require the development of new systems of math or logic.

For example, Sir Isaac Newton's study of planetary motion in the 1600's immersed him in an area of scientific observation for which existing mathematics was not adequate. Algebra, geometry, and other mathematical disciplines permitted Newton to plot the positions of the planets and to study their relationships, but he encountered problems in analyzing planetary *motion* that contemporary forms of math could not explain. In order to understand the forces behind the changing motion of the planets, Newton had to invent a new field of mathematics called *differential calculus.* Since the time of Newton, further anomalies which are unexplainable within his system have required the continuing development of mathematical (and other) sciences.

The same kind of development as characterizes mathematics is also present in the history of logic. Most scholars look to Aristotle's *Organon* as the definitive work on syllogisms. However, logic did not begin and end with Aristotle (384–322 b.c.) So wrote John Locke: "God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational." (In Bahnsen, 133) Human understanding of logic has continued to develop over the centuries. In 1620, Francis Bacon published *Novum Organum* and therein proposed inductive reasoning as an addition to Aristotle's syllogisms. Other names like John Stuart Mill, George Boole, and Bertrand Russell continue the list of those who have, even in recent decades, stretched and developed mankind's understanding and use of logic. (See Bahnsen, 133–134.)

This is a crucial point to emphasize: true scientific and philosophical disciplines are not devised by men, they are observed and understood. Only to the extent that we understand math or logic are we able to use these disciplines reliably. The basic principles of logic have been distilled over centuries of use. Logical paradigms have proven effective and reliable within the realm of human reason. But Scripture asserts that God's reasoning is supremely beyond human reasoning. His logic is not different from human logic but is far more profound: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are … My thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Is 55.9)

An anomaly that does not fit existing systems of logic may indicate one of two things: the invalidity of what is being observed, or that the thing being observed is beyond the scope of our present understanding of pure reason. In the same way that science, pressing man's understanding deeper and deeper into space, constantly demands new forms of science to explain what the old paradigms could not, so peering into the deep thoughts of God, we ought to *expect* quandaries that expose the limitations of present, logical paradigms.

The mysterious union of Christ's divine and human natures, (Jn 1.14) the sovereignty of God and responsibility of man, (Ro 9.18–19) the basis of election, (Ep 1.11) the nature of the Trinity, (1Pe 1.2) and the problem of evil (Is 45.7) are a few examples of Biblical doctrines beyond the ability of present logical paradigms to explain. Nevertheless, these doctrines are not brushed over in Scripture as though they are inconsistencies of which to be ashamed; rather they are exalted as demonstrations of the vast gulf between human understanding and God's wisdom. After discussing one such difficulty at length (the doctrine of divine election), Paul concludes:

> Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Ro 11.33–36)

The profound difficulty of comprehending how evil serves the purposes of a holy God without being authored nor owned by Him does not necessarily reveal a logical contradiction. Since we are dealing in this problem with a metaphysical question beyond the horizons of observable

rationale (and are potentially glimpsing into the divine), it must be granted that this apparent anomaly might result from a limitation in our understanding of pure logic.

Is this the case? By what authority can we test the purity of our logical constructs? When we press the problem of evil to this point, we are dealing with the presuppositions which undergird our use of logic, and it is at this point that the whole outcome of the question is determined. Frankly, as Kelly James Clark has observed, "Rational people rationally disagree [because] what people start with determines what people will end up with. What people reason *from* determines the kinds of inferences that it is rationally permissible for them to accept." (K. Clark, 283) We can accept our own, limited understanding of logic as the final authority for reasoning; or we can submit to the revelation of God (who created all things in perfect logic [Pr 8]) as the basis for guiding our logic, thereby making His Word the final authority for reasoning.

In considering the problem of evil, the nineteenth-century theologian, Joseph Ballamy, warned,

> Is it not pride, my brother, unsufferable pride … to get up into the judgment-seat, call Almighty God to our bar, examine his conduct, and then boldly pronounce it bad … all because we cannot see the reasons of his conduct, although we know at the same time, that our views are so contracted, that we are no proper judges…? (Bellamy, 153)

We know that our human understanding of logic (as math and other disciplines) is limited. Therefore, before jumping to conclusions about the claims of Almighty God, it is only a matter of honesty (and humility) to consider carefully His claims concerning the existence of evil.

Biblical Teaching on Evil

If one were to adopt the presupposition that God authored the Bible and all Its claims are true, what does the Bible teach about the problem of evil?

Perhaps the first consideration we must glean from the Bible is that evil is a temporary problem. The Bible opens with the account of God's creating the universe, and there we learn that everything was created *without evil*. "God saw all that He had made, and behold, *it was very good.…"* (Ge 1.31) At the other end of the Book, the Bible concludes with the promise of a renewed

creation in which all evil is wiped away: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.… And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'…" (Re 21.1–5) Evil is a Biblical reality, but it is a temporary reality: there was no evil in the original creation as God made it, and there will be no evil in the new creation when God restores it. (See Hughes, 116–125.)

A second lesson we learn from Scripture about evil is that it does not exist within God. "God will not act wickedly," rather "The LORD is righteous in all His ways." He "cannot lie" and "in Him there is no sin." (Jb 34.12; Ps 145.17; Ti 1.2; 1Jn 3.5) Sin and wickedness are utterly foreign to the nature and being of God: He is completely pure and holy.

A third lesson we learn from Scripture concerning evil is that its origin is with men and ultimately with the rebellion of Satan. Satan is called "a murderer from the beginning,… there is no truth in him…, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (Jn 8.44) The disobedience of Adam, who obeyed the devil's lie in the Garden of Eden and ate the forbidden fruit, marks the source of sin's entry into the world (and into the nature of all men): "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." (Ro 5.12)

A fourth lesson which Scripture teaches us about evil is that, although God is not the author of sin, nevertheless He is Lord even over the operation of evil. (See WCF, 5.2–4.) In 2 Chronicles 18.18–22, 1 Samuel 16.14, and Job 1.6 we learn that Satan and his hosts act under God's direction. The devil is God's adversary, yet he is himself a creation of God subject to Him. (Is 14.12) The hosts of evil operate under God's authority; nevertheless,

> no one [can] say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. (Ja 1.13–14)

God is not the cause of sin. On the contrary, "the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning." (1Jn 3.8) Herein — at this point in the Bible's teaching — we find the reason why the origin of evil poses a logical problem for mankind.

The Scriptures teach that the source of evil lies with the devil and his rebellion against the Creator. How the devil fell from being a pure creation of the holy God to become "the father of lies" and the tempter of men is a mystery God has not chosen to reveal to us with sufficient detail to satisfy our curiosity about the origin of evil. (See Is 14.) That event, and the moral activity which took place there, are so beyond examination that, like the work of original creation, we can take God's word for what happened, but we cannot observe it for ourselves. Lacking any human experience analogous to the fall of Satan wherein evil originated, we have no means to adapt the rules of logic to account for the rationality of what there occurred. John Calvin writes,

> Some persons grumble that Scripture does not in numerous passages set forth systematically and clearly that fall of the devils, its cause, manner, time, and character. But because this has nothing to do with us … it did not befit the Holy Spirit to feed our curiosity with empty histories to no effect.… Let us be content with this brief summary of the nature of devils: they were when first created angels of God, but by degeneration they ruined themselves, and became the instruments of ruin for others. (Calvin, 1.14.16; see 2Pe 2.4, Jd 6.)

Scripture does not reveal the details about the origin of sin, but instead forces us to face the question: will we trust God's word and accept His revelation concerning the problem of evil; or will we insist on satisfying our own curiosity and thereby refuse to lean upon God's word? This is a very crucial question, not only for coming to terms with the problem of evil, but for something far more profound: partaking in the *solution* for evil.

The fifth and by far most important lesson which Scripture teaches us about evil is the need for a solution, and the provision which God has made for that solution. Greg Bahnsen rightly observes,

> The problem of evil comes down to the question of whether a person should have faith in God and His word or rather place faith in his own human thinking and values. It finally becomes a question of ultimate authority within a person's life…: should we have faith in God's word…, or should we evaluate God and His word on the basis of our own ultimate intellectual and moral authority? (Bahnsen, 173–174; See Wenham, 87–88)

As we have already indicated, God's claims are not illogical. The vast content of Biblical doctrines are demonstrably logical, and in those few places where doctrine touches on the metaphysical questions of life, we ought to expect the limitations of current logic to become apparent. Instead of causing trouble for the Christian faith, it is at these points that the ultimate claim of Scripture

is pressed: requiring all men, wise and simple, to humbly submit to the authority of God's Word. The Prophet Isaiah warned that it is only by coming to God on His terms, and submitting one's reasoning to His instruction, that a person can find the *solution* for sin: "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow'." (Is 1.18; see 1Co 1.19–21.)

Finding the solution for sin (not speculating over its origin) is the message Scripture sets before us. When that final day comes and God renews the creation in righteousness, Scripture says that He will raise to new life those who have lived in righteousness, but He will cast into eternal punishment all those who have participated in the works of evil.

> Behold, the tabernacle of God [will be] among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people.… But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Re 21.3–8)

The most urgent question of evil, therefore is how to be cleansed of one's sins in order to be numbered among the righteous at the final judgment. Such a salvation is only possible through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ:

> If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away, behold, new things have come.… Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2Co 5.17–20)

Ultimately, the problem of evil is not about understanding how it came to exist, but how evil can be removed. The greatest problem for evildoers is the divine wrath of God. All sinners will face divine justice unless they have received forgiveness by placing faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ, alone, is salvation made possible.

Do not let the problem of evil hinder you from embracing the solution for sin:

> "We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2Co 5.20)

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