

The Existence of God and the problem of suffering

Intro: Today we are addressing one of the most formidable arguments against God's existence—the problem of evil and suffering in the world. This week I did some reading on a web site called “Free Thinkers”, noting the various arguments against God's existence. This is without a doubt one of the most often made arguments.

The argument is often stated in the words of Epicurus but here the argument in its modern form:

“The modern version of the Argument from Evil can be stated as follows: If the theists' version of god exists, then he is by definition a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. Since this god is benevolent, he would want to eliminate all evil and human suffering that is not necessary for some higher moral purpose; and since this god is omnipotent, he should be easily able to do so. But unnecessary evil and human suffering do exist. Therefore, the theists' version of god does not exist.”

This morning we considered several points. Now let's add to them these ideas:

The argument from evil fails to acknowledge that there are self-imposed limits to God's power.

Epicurus and modern unbelievers misunderstand an important aspect of God's power and purpose. God created mankind with freedom.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17)

Giving His creatures freedom by nature allows the possibility that that freedom might be misused, and thus evil and suffering come into the world as a consequence.

Even God's power is limited, i.e. He cannot do what is illogical or contradictory—He cannot give man freedom of will and control that freedom at the same time so as to prevent evil!

Only by giving man freedom could important values such as love exist; because love involves choice! But with the power of choice came also the potential for wrong choices and for the suffering.

Every time you use force to prevent evil, you take away freedom. To prevent all evil, you must prevent all freedom and reduce people to puppets, which means they would then lack the ability to freely choose love” (Kreeft).

Here's a challenge: See if you can create a world better than the one God created. Ask yourself: If you were God, how would you have designed the world differently? As you remove suffering or evil and tinker with people's free will, think through the consequences that would result. How would people form character in your utopia? Would they be motivated to seek God

in the midst of their pleasures? If you supernaturally intervened to eliminate evil, where would you draw the line—to prevent murder? Child abuse? Theft? Slander? Evil thoughts that may prompt evil actions? At what point are people turned into puppets who lack free will and therefore cannot truly express love? Could you make a world that would not also have self-imposed limits that make suffering a possibility? The truth is, God used His power to create a perfect world; we messed it up by our choice to sin!

The argument from evil is self-condemning. We often look to God to alleviate suffering when it is we who should be acting.

Atheist Templeton describes a poignant moment when he concluded God did not exist. A woman with a dying child in her arms because she did not have “rain”.

I thought about that for a while, and then it dawned upon me, the child died because it did not have “water”! Water is something abundantly available to relieve a drought stricken land. Why would not that child’s death not equally indict human beings on this planet who stood by and let that happen!

A cartoon shows two turtles in conversation: Sometimes I’d like to ask why he allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it? The other responds, “I’m afraid God might ask me the same question!” There was a bitter irony here. If God is unloving and unjust to allow such things, then where does that put the person who questions God? Are we morally superior if we do not do what we can to relieve the suffering in this world? Are we not also culpable?

God’s answer to a suffering world is to call upon us to “love one another”. Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

The argument from evil ignores God’s ultimate justice against all evil and his ultimate reward of grace to the believing.

Atheist and unbelievers point out that life is unfair. And it is!

Perhaps one of our greatest problems is the realization that by allowing freedom people get by with what is wrong and they hurt others. The answer of course is to understand that justice delayed is not justice denied! There will come a time when God will judge all men and their deeds. Every evil doer shall be punished.

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

At the same time God has offered to the disobedient, to those who have because of sin made others suffer and caused God to suffer, a gracious reward for turning to Him.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. (Romans 8:16-17)

But keep in mind that these “children of God” were once “children of disobedience” whose sins resulted in the suffering of God Himself. Those of frequently mention the “unfair” suffering are unwilling to speak of the “unmerited favor” or grace of God.

The argument from evil fails to consider God’s own involvement in suffering.

The ultimate answer to suffering is not an argument but an action.

When God made the world he knew we would mess it up but He made it anyway. And then He could have said, “They didn’t listen to me”, so I’ll let them simply bear the consequences of their mistakes. But instead what did God do?

God has responded to our suffering.

He entered our suffering by becoming a man and then bore our sins on the cross to free us from this world of sin and suffering.

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, (Hebrews 5:8-9)

The answer to the question, “where is God when people are hurting” is “He is with them, loving them, comforting them, inviting them to come to Him for rest, for strength, for forgiveness”. He is offering them a place without pain and tears!

Conclusion: Consider this final thought. What if the atheist is right? What if because suffering exists, God doesn’t exist. Where does that put us? “In a world of suffering without God”. The only thing that has changed is the loss of the greatest resource and comfort we could ever have!