

God and Evil:
A Contradiction in the Christian Faith?

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If there's anything likely to stump Christians when witnessing, it is the challenge, "If God exists, why is there evil?" Merely anticipating the objection can stop many Christians cold in their tracks.

Through the centuries people have tried various responses. Some have denied that anything truly evil occurs. What seems evil is really good. Our perceiving it as evil is illusion.

This has been the answer of pantheism, gnosticism, and modern Christian Science, but it has never been a serious option of Christians. For if evil is mere illusion, then first, disobedience to God's law is equally good as obedience, and second, Christ's atonement for sin was an exercise in futility, for there was no sin for which to atone. If evil is an illusion, Christianity is false.

But then, too, the illusion of evil certainly seems to be as evil as evil itself would have been if real. All the same suffering, grief, terror, anger, envy, and other mental states that we associate with evil still occur. Illusory evil doesn't solve the problem of evil even for the non-Christian.

Others have argued that while evil is not an illusion, neither is it a real thing in itself. Thomas Aquinas, and before him Augustine in his early thought, held that evil is not a thing but a deprivation, a lack. But to this the opponent of Christianity may reply, "Well, granted all the suffering involved in those deprivations, an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God wouldn't have allowed the deprivation any more than He'd have allowed a positive existent that was evil," and the Christian is left with the same problem. It seems that he affirms two contradictory propositions: that a God who would never allow deprivation to occur exists, and that deprivations occur.

A few have admitted that real evil occurs and that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God would not have created a world in which evil would occur. They have decided that God is not all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. The most prominent proponents of this view today, like Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, Greg Boyd, and John Sanders, call themselves "Open Theists."

Yet as John S. Feinberg in *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* and Bruce Ware in *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* have demonstrated, the god of Open Theism is not the God of the Bible.¹

The most common answer through the centuries has been the free-will defense: that God is indeed all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good; that there are certain things that even such a Being cannot do; and that one of them is to create a morally good world in which no evil occurs.

The Bible tells us that God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; 1 John 1:10; 5:10). Surely this isn't because He lacks the power to lie, or because He doesn't know how to lie; rather, it is because His goodness makes His lying impossible. Lying would contradict His own nature, for God is truth (Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 31:5; Isaiah 65:16). Neither could God make a round square, not because He lacks the power but because round squareness is not something subject to power. A round square is a contradiction—something the Bible condemns (Isaiah 5:20).

Proponents of the free-will defense, like C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* or Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil* or Ronald Nash in *Faith & Reason*, argue that it would be impossible for God to create a morally good world in which no one would ever sin. According to this argument, it is better to have moral capacity than to lack it. But moral capacity entails the equal capacity to choose right or wrong in any given circumstance—a view called “libertarian free will.” No prior condition can ensure either choice. The will must be entirely free, or the agent is amoral. It is better for God to create a world with moral than with only amoral beings; but moral beings by definition are capable of sin; consequently, if God were to create a world at all, He could not create one with moral inhabitants who could never do evil.

I used this solution in the first edition of *Answers for Atheists*. But then I noticed that if the free-will defense was right in its definition of a moral being as one that could as readily choose evil as good at any given moment, five things followed that the Bible denied. First, either God was not a moral being or God could as readily choose evil as good. The Bible, by affirming the holiness and goodness of God and the impossibility of His doing evil, rejects both those options. Second, Christ must have been able to sin, and God could not have prevented it; His sinning would have made His offering Himself a sinless sacrifice impossible and therefore would have made the prophecies of His sacrifice unreliable. Third, the Biblical doctrines of original (Romans 5:12ff), inevitable (Psalm 51:5), and universal sin (Romans 3:20) must be false. Fourth, the Biblical doctrine that the saints in Heaven cannot sin (Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 21:8, 27) must be false.

With regard to these last two, remember that, as Augustine taught, before the fall Adam and Eve were righteous but *posse peccare* (able to sin); since the fall, all men have been sinful and *non posse non peccare* (not able not to sin) until conversion; after conversion, one becomes still sinful but *posse non peccare* (able not to sin); and at death the believer becomes *non posse peccare* (not able to sin). If the free-will defense is right, then we have been wrong all along about the second and fourth of those conditions.

The fifth consequence of the free will defense is that the insistence that no prior condition

¹See my own refutation of Open Theism, under the name of Moral Government Theology, in *Evangelical Heathenism? Examining Contemporary Revival Theology* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1996).

could ensure the will's choice would make divine foreknowledge and prophecy impossible. But since God does foreknow and infallibly prophesy even the sinful acts of moral agents, moral choice and some kind of predetermination must be compatible, and hence libertarian free will is an unnecessary element of the solution to the problem of evil. Something other than libertarian free will, then, must be the real reason why a being is moral instead of amoral.²

As the late Gordon Clark put it in *God and Evil*,³ "Free will is not the basis of responsibility. . . . the basis of responsibility is knowledge" of right and wrong. As Paul wrote, "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who *suppress the truth* in unrighteousness For even though they *knew* God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks" (Romans 1:18, 21, NASB). Similarly, Jesus said, "that slave who *knew* his master's will and did not get ready to act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes" (Luke 12:47), and to the Pharisees He said, "if you were blind [i.e., didn't know], you would have no sin, but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:41).

The great Reformers Martin Luther, in *The Bondage of the Will*, and John Calvin, in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (II.ii.1-7), along with other great Reformed thinkers distinguished between freedom and free will. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* affirmed that God "endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil" (9.1), but in the discourse of the day this language affirmed not libertarian free will but that the human will is not subject to physical coercion. The mind being an aspect of man's spirit, not of his body, it is not subject to bodily (material) force. But the *Confession* simultaneously taught that "God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" (3.1).

God being spirit (John 4:24), the authors of the *Confession* recognized that the will's freedom from *physical* causality did not entail its freedom from divine (*spiritual*) causality. They held that God not only foreknew but even foreordained (predestined, predetermined) human acts that, though free (by natural liberty) and sinful (because contrary to God's law), were nonetheless, because of the infallibility of God's plan and foreknowledge, absolutely certain to occur. To demonstrate this they cited many Biblical texts, such as Acts 4:27-28 ("For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.") and 2:22-23 ("Jesus the Nazarene . . . delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men" [NASB]). And, as Clark points out, since only an omniscient person could know that his will was subject to no cause, and no mere human being is omniscient, no human knows that his will is subject to no cause, so there is no good reason to insist that it is.

If an act could be both sinful and inevitable, there must, they reasoned, be no contradiction

²In *Evangelical Heathenism*, pp. 80-92, I explain the difference between free agency and free will.

³Published separately (2d ed., Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2004) and as a chapter in his *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (3d ed., Trinity Foundation, 1995).

between moral responsibility and inevitability/predestination/foreordination. This insight implies the historic Reformed answer to the problem of evil: that the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God planned for evil to occur and uses it for His own good purposes.

Stated in its most powerful way, the logical problem of evil is this: A God that would create a world containing evil is not the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God of the Bible (the 3-O God); but the God that created this world (if anyone did) is a God that created a world containing evil; therefore the God that created this world is not the 3-O God. The first point of this argument sums up a longer argument: Christians believe that (1) the God who created this world is the 3-O God, and (2) the God who created this world is a God who would create a world containing evil. But, say the anti-theists, Christians should also believe that (3) a 3-O God is not a God who would create a world containing evil, and therefore (4) the God who created this world is not a 3-O God. But (4), though implied by (2 and 3) together, contradicts (1). Therefore the Christian must believe either (4) or (1) but cannot believe both. The anti-theist has posed a powerful dilemma: If you believe (1 and 2) together, you must deny (4); and if you believe (2 and 3) together, you must affirm (4); but (2 and 3) together are true; therefore (4) is true, so (1) must be false, so the Christian must deny (1 and 2) together and believe (2 and 3) together—and hence (4) also—instead.

As we have seen, pantheists and gnostics answer by denying (2) on the grounds that evil is an illusion; Open Theists answer by denying both (1) and (2). Neither option is compatible with historic Christian faith. Adherents of the free will defense deny (3) by arguing that a moral world without evil is impossible, which, as we have seen, is also mistaken.

The Reformed answer of Luther, Calvin, the Westminster Divines, and others, also denies (3) but on different grounds: that while it would not have been logically impossible for God to create only moral creatures that would never sin, in fact He created a moral world with creatures whose evil He foreordained for His own good purposes—to display His justice in punishing some (Proverbs 16:4) and His grace in redeeming and pardoning others (Ephesians 1:5-6; 2:7).

Does this mean God justifies His means by His ends? Yes. Is that wicked? No. While an end-justifies-the-means ethic is fallacious and therefore wicked for finite men (who can neither control nor know all the results of their choices), it is perfectly fitting for the infinite God (who both controls and knows all the results of His choices)—and, after all, God being supreme need not justify His choices to anyone: “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” (Romans 9:15-21, NASB).

Does the reality of evil make the existence of the Christian God impossible? No. For good reasons, God created a world containing evil, and the Christian position does not self-contradict.

Chad Meister published an article defending the free-will defense in the same issue of *Christian Research Journal*, to which Dr. Beisner wrote the following reply:

General Objections to the Free-Will Defense

Certain weaknesses affect all versions of the free-will defense. All wrongly assume no moral significance without libertarian free will—contrary to Acts 4:27-28, 2:22-23, and similar passages. The notion implies that since God does not have libertarian free will (i.e., it is impossible for God to do evil—Titus 1:2), God and His acts have no moral significance—contrary to Isaiah 6:3, Deuteronomy 32:4, and Psalm 119:68 (“You are good, and do good”).

All versions also fail in restricting God’s relationship to the occurrence of evil to “allowing” it rather than causing it. As Gordon Clark explained:

Free will was put forward to relieve God of responsibility for sin. But this it does not do.

Suppose there were a lifeguard stationed on a dangerous beach. In the breakers a boy is being sucked out to sea by the strong undertow. . . . He will drown without powerful aid. . . . But the lifeguard simply sits on his high chair and watches him drown. . . . After all, it was of his own free will that the boy went into the surf. . . . Would an Arminian now conclude that the lifeguard thus escapes culpability?

This illustration . . . does not do full justice to the actual situation. For unlike the boy who exists in relative independence of the lifeguard, in actuality God made the boy and the ocean, too. Now, if the guard—who is not a creator at all—is responsible for permitting the boy to drown, even if the boy is supposed to have entered the surf of his own free will, does not God—who made them—appear in a worse light? Surely an omnipotent God could have either made the boy a better swimmer, or made the ocean less rough, or at least have saved him from drowning.⁴

Far from teaching, “It’s not that God wanted those horrible things to happen, but yet He can take them and use them in positive ways,” the Bible teaches that God foreordains everything that happens (Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 33:10-11; 135:6; Acts 17:25-26, 28; Matthew 10:29-31; Ephesians 1:11). We do not serve a frustrated deity!

Specific Problems with Meister’s Argument

Certain weaknesses of the free-will defense are specific to Chad Meister’s able presentation.

First, Chad writes as if the challenge were to explain why God has not yet destroyed an already existing evil. But the real challenge is to explain why evil occurred in the first place. Christians cannot refute the problem of evil by appealing only to the future (which the skeptic, not presupposing Biblical eschatology, recognizes as the fallacy of *argumentum ad futuris*). Further, Chad’s argument misrepresents Biblical eschatology, for Scripture nowhere teaches that God will abolish all evil. On the contrary, sinners (human or angelic) never reconciled to God and therefore never repenting of their sin will suffer eternally (Revelation 20:10-15).

Second, Chad presents a false choice between libertarian freedom and “sham” freedom. That

⁴Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, in *The Works of Gordon Haddon Clark*, Volume 4, *Christian Philosophy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2004), 105-270, chapter 5, “God and Evil,” 238-270, at 245.

choice presupposes that for the compatibilist there is no difference between how a stone responds to gravity and how a child responds to his parent's command. Hidden within this mistake is a deeper one: the assumption that "a *real* ability to choose one way or the other"—"libertarian' freedom"—is the same thing as free will, i.e., a will that is not predetermined. Compatibilists assert that moral agents (God, angels, and men) *choose*, but choosing *per se* and choosing indeterminately are not synonymous.

Third, Chad mistakenly asserts that "both the Bible and our own experience affirm that we do have [libertarian] free will." Since he offers no Biblical evidence, I cannot reply here to whatever he might say in the follow-up other than to point out that the Bible teaches things contrary (Proverbs 16:1, 9; 21:1; Acts 2:22-23). But the notion that we have experiential verification of libertarian free will—that is, of the absence of any predetermining cause of our choices—is readily refuted.⁵ We all acknowledge that the will is influenced by physical causes—illness, fatigue, weather, injury, etc.—even though we frequently are unaware of them. Intellectual and moral influences also affect our wills (Proverbs 22:6). Why not God's predetermination? As Clark put it, "In order to know that our wills are determined by no causes, we should have to know every possible cause in the entire universe. . . . To be conscious of free will therefore requires omniscience. Hence there is no consciousness of free will; what its exponents take as consciousness of free will is simply the unconsciousness of determination."⁶

Fourth, it confuses the idea of evil's coming from God with God's being its author. To equate the two without argument, when no less brilliant theologians and philosophers than the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (and Reformed theologians before and after) explicitly distinguish them,⁷ is to beg one of the most serious questions in debate.

This Reformed apologetic still enables us to say that God uses evil in our lives for our good, to bring people to Himself, and to punish wickedness,⁸ but it avoids the pitfalls of the free-will defense. It also enables us to echo Paul's doxology, "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things"—*all* things, including evil. "To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

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⁵Put technically, it is an example of the fallacy of induction.

⁶Clark, "God and Evil," 262.

⁷Chapter 5 of the *Confession* states that "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things" (para. 1) and that God's "providence . . . extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding [them] . . . to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who . . . neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin" (para. 4)—the last phrase equating "author" and "approver."

⁸Using evil to punish wickedness is no answer by itself, for it only begs the question, "Why the wickedness?"