

WHAT IS EVIL?

What is the nature of evil? We talk about evil acts (murder), evil people (Charles Manson), evil books (pornography), evil events (tornadoes), evil sicknesses (cancer or blindness), but what makes all of these things evil? What is evil when we look at it by itself? Some have said that evil is a substance that grabs hold of certain things and makes them bad (like a virus infecting an animal) or that evil is a rival force in the universe (like the dark side of Luke Skywalker's Force). But if God made all things, then that makes God responsible for evil. The argument looks like this:

1. God is the author of everything.
2. Evil is something.
3. Therefore, God is the author of evil.

Augustine vs. Manichaeus: Manichaeus was a third-century dualist who claimed that the world was made of uncreated matter which was, in itself, evil. Hence, all physical existence was evil; only spiritual things could be good. Augustine wrote a great deal to show that all that God created was good, but evil was not a substance.

“What is evil? Perhaps you will reply, Corruption. Undeniably this is a general definition of evil; for corruption implies opposition to nature; and also hurt. But corruption exists not by itself, but in some substance which it corrupts; for corruption itself is not a substance. So the thing which it corrupts is not corruption, is not evil; for what is corrupted suffers loss of integrity and purity. So that which has no purity to lose cannot be corrupted; and what has, is necessarily good by the participation of purity. Again, what is corrupted is perverted; and what is perverted suffers loss of order; and order is good. To be corrupted, then does not imply the absence of good; for in corruption it can be deprived of good, which could not be if there was the absence of good.” [*On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, 5.7.]

The first premise is true. So it appears that in order to deny the conclusion we have to deny the reality of evil (as the pantheists do). But we can deny that evil is a thing, or substance, without saying that it isn't real. It is a lack in things. When good that should be there is missing from something, that is evil. After all, if I am missing a wart on my nose, that is not evil because the wart should not have been there in the first place. However, if a man lacks the ability to see, that is evil. Likewise, if a person lacks the kindness in his heart and respect for human life that should be there, then he may commit murder. Evil is, in reality, a parasite that cannot exist except as a hole in something that should be solid.

In some cases, though, evil is more easily explained as a case of bad relationships. If I pick up a good gun, put in a good bullet, point it at my good head, put my good finger on the good trigger and give it a good pull ... a bad relationship results. The things involved are not evil in themselves, but the relationship between the good things is definitely lacking something. In this case, the lack comes about because the things are not being used as they ought to be. Guns should not be used for indiscriminate killing, but are fine for recreation. My head was not meant to be used for target practice. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with strong winds moving in a circle, but a bad relationship arises when the funnel of wind goes through a mobile home park. Bad relationships are bad because the relationship is lacking something, so our definition of evil

still holds. Evil is a lack of something that should be there in the relationship between good things.¹

WHERE DID EVIL COME FROM?

In the beginning, there was God and He was perfect. Then the perfect God made a perfect world. So how did evil come into the picture? Let's summarize the problem this way:

1. Every creature God made is perfect.
2. But perfect creatures cannot do what is imperfect.
3. So, every creature God made cannot do what is imperfect.

But if Adam and Eve were perfect, how did they fall? Don't blame it on the snake because that just backs the question up one step; didn't God make the snake perfect too? Some have concluded that there must be some force that is equal with God or beyond His control. Or maybe God just isn't good after all. But maybe the answer lies in the idea of perfection itself.

1. God made everything perfect.
2. One of the perfect things God made was free creatures.
3. Free will is the cause of evil.
4. So, imperfection (evil) can arise from perfection (not directly, but indirectly through freedom).

One of the things that makes men (and angels) morally perfect is freedom. We have a real choice about what we do. God made us that way so that we could be like Him and could love freely (forced love is not love at all, is it?). But in making us that way, He also allowed for the possibility of evil. To be free we had to have not only the opportunity to choose good, but also the ability to choose evil. That was the risk God knowingly took. That doesn't make Him responsible for evil. He created the **fact** of freedom; we perform the **acts** of freedom. He made evil **possible**; men made evil **actual**. Imperfection came through the abuse of our moral perfection as free creatures.

Defining Free Will

There are several points on which there is confusion about what is meant by free will. Some have said that it refers to the ability to *desire*. But a better definition is that it is the ability to *decide* between alternatives. Desire is a passion, an emotion; but will is a choice between two or more desires. Also, some think that to be free means that there can be no limitation of alternatives—one must be able to do whatever he wants. But the opposite of freedom is not fewer alternatives, it is being forced to choose one thing and not another. Freedom is not in *unlimited options*, but in *unfettered choice* between whatever options there are. As long as the choosing comes from the individual rather than an outside force, the decision is made freely. Free will means the ability to make an **unforced decision** between two or more alternatives.

As for the snake, the same answer applies. God made Satan the most beautiful of all creatures with the perfection of free will. Satan rebelled against God, and that became the first sin and the

¹ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (60–61). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

pattern for all sin that followed. Some people ask, “What made Satan sin?” That is like asking what caused the first cause; nothing outside his own free will caused him to sin. He was the first cause of his sin and you can’t go back any farther than that. When we sin, ultimately we (by our wills) are the cause of the evil we do.²

WHY CAN’T EVIL BE STOPPED?

The classic form of this argument has been rattling through the halls of college campuses for hundreds of years.

1. If God is all-good, He *would* destroy evil.
2. If God is all-powerful, He *could* destroy evil.
3. But evil is not destroyed.
4. Hence, there is no such God.

Why hasn’t God done something about evil? If He could and would do something, why do we still have evil? Why is it so persistent? And it doesn’t even seem to be slowing down!

There are two answers for this question. First, evil cannot be destroyed without destroying freedom. As we said before, free beings are the cause of evil, and freedom was given to us so that we could love. Love is the greatest good for all free creatures (Matt. 22:36–37), but love is impossible without freedom. So if freedom were destroyed, which is the only way to end evil, that would be evil in itself, because it would deprive free creatures of their greatest good. Hence, to destroy evil would actually be evil. If evil is to be overcome, we need to talk about it being defeated, not destroyed.

The argument against God from evil makes some arrogant assumptions. Just because evil is not destroyed right now does not mean that it never will be. The argument implies that if God hasn’t done anything as of today, then it won’t ever happen. But this assumes that the person making the argument has some inside information about the future. If we restate the argument to correct this oversight in temporal perspective, it turns out to be an argument that vindicates God.

Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) was one of the most influential skeptics of the seventeenth century. His writings, and particularly his *Dictionary* which states this argument, had a profound effect on the later Enlightenment writers Hume, Voltaire, Berkeley, and Diderot. In it he attempted to confront every mistake ever made by philosophers, and in doing so, provided grounds for doubting virtually everything. He wished to show that all human reasoning is “big with contradiction and absurdity.” In another series of articles he shows that Christians cannot refute the Manichaean doctrine of two gods, one good and one evil. However, Bayle claimed to be a Christian and a defender of Calvinism. In one of his last messages, he wrote, “I am dying as a Christian philosopher, convinced of and pierced by the bounties and mercies of God, and I wish you a perfect happiness.” It is unclear how he reconciled these beliefs.

1. If God is all-good, He will defeat evil.
2. If God is all-powerful, He can defeat evil.

² Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (61–63). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

3. Evil is not *yet* defeated.
4. Therefore, God can and *will one day* defeat evil.

The very argument used against the existence of God turns out to be a vindication of God in the face of the problem of evil. There is no question here that if it has not yet happened and God is as we suppose Him to be, that we simply haven't waited long enough. God isn't finished yet. The final chapter has not been written. Apparently God would rather wrestle with our rebellious wills than to reign supreme over rocks and trees. Those who want a quicker resolution to the conflict will have to wait.³

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EVIL?

The question that roars in the minds of those who suffer is, “*WHY?*” “Why did I lose my leg?” “Why did our church burn down?” “Why did my little girl have to die?” “*WHY?*” Unfortunately, we can't always give an answer that satisfies the souls of those who hurt and makes sense of their pain. But to those who use this as a reason to deny God's existence or goodness, we can give an answer. Their argument is this:

1. There is no good purpose for much suffering.
2. An all-good God must have a good purpose for everything.
3. So, there cannot be an all-good God.

We can deal with this problem in two ways. First, we need to make a distinction. There is a difference between our knowing the purpose for evil and God having a purpose for it. Even if we don't know God's purpose, He may still have a good reason for allowing evil in our lives. So we can't assume that there is no good purpose for something just because we don't know what it could be.

Furthermore, we do know some of God's purposes for evil. For instance, we know that God sometimes uses evil to warn us of greater evils. Anyone who has raised a child has gone through the months of fearing that the baby would touch a hot stove for the first time. We hate the thought of it, but we know that once she does it, she won't do it again. She will instantly have an existential awareness of the meaning of the word “hot” and will obey our warning readily when we use it. That first small pain is allowed to avoid the danger of bigger ones later.

Pain also keeps us from self-destruction. Do you know why lepers lose their fingers, toes, and noses? Usually, it has nothing directly to do with the leprosy itself. Rather, the disease causes them to lose feeling in their extremities, and they literally destroy themselves. They can't feel the pain when they touch a hot pan, so they hang on to it until it burns them. Without feeling things that they are about to bump into, they hit them full force without slowing down. Without the sensation of pain, they do tremendous damage to themselves and don't even realize it.

The Gift of Pain

Dr. Paul Brand, a leading researcher and therapist of Hansen's disease, expressed significant insights on the problem of pain. Having just examined three patients, Lou—who may lose his thumb to infection from playing the autoharp, Hector—who can't feel the damage he is doing

³ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (63–65). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

to his hand while mopping, and Jose—who is unwilling to wear special shoes to prevent the loss of the nubs that were once his feet, Dr. Brand says this:

Pain—it's often seen as the great inhibitor which ropes off certain activities. But I see it as the great giver of freedom. Look at these men. Lou: we're desperately searching for a way to give him simple freedom to play an autoharp. Hector: he can't even mop a floor without harming himself. Jose: too proud for proper treatment, he's given a makeshift shoe which may keep him from losing even more of his feet. He can't dress nicely and walk normally: for that, he would need the gift of pain. [From *Where Is God When It Hurts?* by Philip Yancey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 37]

While it may seem like a high price to pay, some evil helps to bring about greater good. The Bible gives several examples of this in men like Joseph, Job, and Samson. Each went through real suffering. How would the nation of Israel have survived the famine and had a refuge in which to grow if Joseph had not been sold into slavery by his brothers and imprisoned unjustly? Would Job have been able to make his marked spiritual growth had he not suffered first? (Job 23:10) What kind of leader would the Apostle Paul have been if he had not been humbled after his exalted revelations of God? (2 Cor. 12) Joseph summarized the matter when he told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

Finally, permitting some evil actually helps defeat evil. One of the first steps in some of the substance abuse rehabilitation programs (alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine) is to give the patient all that he can stand of the substance until he gets sick of it. It's easier to quit once you've had a bad experience. Projects like the “Scared Straight” program at Rahway Prison have stopped many young people from following a life of crime, but the convicts who tell them about prison life have both caused suffering and are suffering. And then there is the ultimate example: the Cross. It seems that there an infinite injustice was wrought on an innocent Man so that good might come to all. The evil that He endured as our substitute allows us free access to God without fear, because our guilt and punishment have been taken away.

On the Cross

Why would God allow His own Son to suffer and die a cruel and violent death as a criminal when He had done nothing wrong and, by nature, had no need to die? This injustice is very hard to explain unless there is some greater good accomplished by Christ's death which overshadows the evil of it. Jesus' own explanation was that He had come “to give His life [as] a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and saying, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for [on behalf of] his friends” (John 15:13). Hebrews 12:2 states the purpose of Jesus, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame,” meaning that the reconciliation of sinners was worth the suffering. As Isaiah says, “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (53:5). The higher purpose and greater good derived from Christ's death as our substitute for the penalty of our sins is more important than the evil inherent in the process.

C.S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” In some sense, we need pain so that we are not overcome by the evil that we would choose were it painless. He alerts us to the fact that there are better things than misery.⁴

⁴ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (65–67). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

AFFIRMING ABSOLUTE VALUES

Just showing that relativism is wrong does not prove that Christian values are right. The relativist says, “So there are some absolute values? Name one.” C.S. Lewis named several in his writings. He showed that many things are universally recognized as wrong, such as cruelty to children, rape, murder without cause, etc. He also noted (in the appendix to *Abolition of Man*) that values do not change greatly from one culture to another, but are very similar. But our challenge is to name just one.

Some thinkers have tried to reduce all moral principles to one central absolute. Immanuel Kant came up with a “categorical imperative,” which ought to be followed in all circumstances. It can be discovered by asking, for each decision, “Would I want this action to be a universal practice for all men?” If you answer no, then don’t do it. Would you want all men to lie to you? Then don’t lie. Would you want all men to murder? Then don’t murder. Do only those things that you would want all men to be able to do.

The Heart of the Matter

If you want to get to the heart of the matter and find out what someone really believes about values, find out what his expectations are. A person can easily say that people are of no greater value than things, but he will balk if you treat him like a cigarette butt and step on him. He still expects to be treated as a person with value, even if he denies that worth with his words. Even someone who claims that there are no values still values the right to his opinion and expects you to do the same. This fact helps us greatly in affirming absolute values because it makes values actually undeniable. Whenever someone denies absolute values, they expect to be treated as a person of absolute value.

Martin Buber said that the most important moral principle is to treat people as persons, not things. He said that we can go through life seeing everything else as an “It” or we can recognize that some things have a similarity to ourselves and should be called “Thou.” To Buber, it is the “I-Thou” relationships that bring meaning to life and are the basis for all values. People should be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to an end. People should be loved, not used.

It is not hard to see that both Buber and Kant agree in principle with Jesus about the single most important value. Jesus said, “However you want people to treat you, so treat them.” When asked what the most important Law of the Old Testament was, Jesus replied, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” What is Kant’s categorical imperative but a restatement of Christ’s Golden Rule? And what is the greatest commandment if not an imperative to maintain “I-Thou” relationships with all persons, especially the Ultimate Thou? On this one principle, all other ethical norms are established: the Christian ethic of love.

I and Thou Martin Buber (1878–1965), the famed Jewish existentialist, explored the realm of relationships in a book entitled *I and Thou*. He uses the familiar term for “you,” which expresses intimacy. Noting that we experience life on three levels, he says, “Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal you” (p. 123). Defining love, he writes, “Love is responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling—the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that is nailed his life long

to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love man” [Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), pp. 66–67].

Love is an absolute value that is universally recognized. Even Bertrand Russell, famous for his essay *Why I Am Not a Christian*, said, “What the world needs is Christian love or compassion.” Humanistic psychologist Erich Fromm said that all psychological problems come from a lack of love. Confucius had the same idea, but he stated it negatively: Do not do unto others what you do not want them to do to you. Who would argue against love?

At the heart of Kant’s test question is the issue, “How do I want people to treat me?” Surely we all desire to be loved. If we want to be loved, then we ought to love others. Not to love others is to deny their personhood, for we love persons as such. In fact, isn’t that why we expect to be loved—because we are persons and persons should be loved? If we ought to be loved, then all persons ought to be loved. To conclude anything else would be inconsistent and arbitrary. Love is an absolute moral value that is universally accepted and expected by all people.⁵

⁵ Geisler, N. L., & Brooks, R. M. (1990). *When skeptics ask* (276–278). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.