

**Evil, Problem of.** If God is absolutely good, then why is there evil? (see [GOD, NATURE OF](#))? The problem of evil is a serious challenge to the defense of Christianity. Actually there are many problems relating to evil, for example, the problems about its origin, nature, purpose, and avoidability. The problems of evil can be divided among moral, metaphysical (see [METAPHYSICS](#)), and physical.

**Worldviews and Evil.** Although every worldview has to deal with the problem of evil, it is an especially acute problem for [theism](#). Of the three major worldviews, [Atheism](#) affirms the reality of evil and denies the reality of God. [Pantheism](#) affirms the reality of God but denies the reality of [evil](#). [Theism](#) affirms the reality of both God and evil. Herein is the problem; how can an absolutely good Being (God) be compatible with evil, the opposite of good?

As compared with the other worldviews that affirm both God and evil, [theism](#) would seem to be in a more disadvantageous position. [Finite godism](#), for example, can claim that God desires to destroy evil but is unable to because he is limited in power. [Deism](#), likewise, can distance God from evil by stressing that God is not immanent in the world, at least not supernaturally. We are on our own. And for [panentheism](#) evil is a necessary part of the ongoing progress of the interaction of God and the world (his body).

The problem for [theism](#) is that it not only believes God is all-powerful and could destroy evil, but he is all-loving and should destroy it. Further, the theistic God is all-knowing and created this world fully aware of what would happen. What is more, God created the world freely (see [CREATION, VIEWS OF](#)), so that he could have done otherwise.

It is in the context of this kind of theistic God that we

approach problems of evil.

*The Origin of Evil.* Where did evil come from? An absolutely good God cannot create evil. Nor, would it seem, can a perfect creature give rise to imperfection. Whence, then, evil? The problem can be summarized:

1. God is absolutely perfect.
2. God cannot create anything imperfect.
3. But perfect creatures cannot do evil.
4. Therefore, neither God nor his perfect creatures can produce evil.

However, in a theistic universe these are the only two sources for moral evil. Therefore, there seems to be no solution for the origin of evil in a theistic universe.

The basic elements in the theistic response to this problem are found in [Augustine](#) and [Thomas Aquinas](#). Theists since then have followed the contours of their thought. Both agreed on the response that can be stated as follows:

1. God is absolutely perfect.
2. God created only perfect creatures.
3. One of the perfections God gave some of his creatures was the power of free choice.
4. Some of these creatures freely chose to do evil.
5. Therefore, a perfect creature caused evil.

God is good, and he created good creatures with a good power called free will. Unfortunately, they used this good power to bring evil into the universe by rebelling against their Creator. So evil did arise from good, not directly but indirectly, by the abuse of a good power called freedom. [Freedom](#) in itself is not evil. It is good to be free. But with

freedom comes the possibility of evil. So God is responsible for making evil possible, but free creatures are responsible for making it actual.

Of course, other questions attach to this free choice solution to the origin of evil. One is, what caused the first creature to choose evil?

Theists distinguish between the primary cause of a free action (God) and the secondary cause (a human being). God gave the power of choice. However, God is not responsible for the exercise of that free choice to do evil. God does not *perform* the free action for us. Human free choice is not a mere instrumental cause through which God works. Human beings are the efficient, albeit secondary, cause of their own free actions. God produces the *fact* of free choice, but each human performs the *act* of free choice. God then is responsible for the *possibility* of evil, but we must bear the responsibility for the *actuality* of it. God neither wills evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done. He wills to permit evil to be done, and this is good.

But if God cannot will evil, then what is the cause of it? No action can be uncaused, since this violates the first principle of causality (see [CAUSALITY, PRINCIPLE OF](#)) that demands that every event has a cause.

To respond to this question it is necessary to unpack the nature of free choice. There are three basic views of the nature of free choice: In determinism, a free act is caused by another; in indeterminism, it is uncaused, and in self-determinism it is caused by oneself. [Determinism](#) would eliminate human responsibility, since another caused the action, not ourselves. [Indeterminism](#) is irrational, since a fundamental rule of reason is that every action has a cause.

It follows, then, that every free choice must be self caused.

Of course, a person uses the *power* of free choice to make free choices. However, the person is not free choice. He simply *has* free choice. It is wrong to say I *am* free choice; I simply *have* free choice. So, I am the efficient cause of my own free actions, but the power of free choice is the means by which I freely act.

*The Nature of Evil* . There is another dimension to this difficulty. What is the *nature* of evil? That is, what is the essence or identity of evil? This too, is a particularly pesky problem for a classical theist (see [CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS](#)). For God alone is eternal, and everything he created was good. What, then, is evil?

Theists reject [dualism](#) . Evil is not a coeternal principle outside of God. For not all opposites like good and evil are first principles. This wrongly assumes that just because something can be essentially good (God), something can be essentially bad. But once [dualism](#) is rejected, one has great difficulty explaining the reality of evil. If evil is not something outside of God, and it cannot be anything inside of God, then what is it ? The problem can be summarized this way.

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

Rejecting the first premise leads to [dualism](#). Likewise, denying the second leads to illusionism which denies the reality of evil (see [PANTHEISM](#)). Neither is acceptable to a theist. What, then, is the solution? To agree that God did not create all things is to deny his sovereignty. To say evil is nothing denies reality. However, to admit that God caused

all things and evil is something is to acknowledge that God caused evil—a conclusion rejected by [Aquinas](#). But this conclusion seems to follow logically from these premises. Unless one rejects the truth of one of the premises, he must accept the truth of the conclusion.

The theist responds that evil is not a *thing* or substance. Rather it is a *lack* or privation of a good thing that God made. Evil is a deprivation of some particular good. The essence of this position is summarized:

1. God created every substance.
2. Evil is not a substance (but a privation in a substance).
3. Therefore, God did not create evil.

Evil is not a substance but a corruption of the good substances God made. Evil is like rust to a car or rot to a tree. It is a *lack* in good things, but it is not a thing in itself. Evil is like a wound in an arm or moth-holes in a garment. It exists only in another but not in itself.

It is important to note that a privation is not the same as mere *absence*. Sight is absent in a stone as well as in a blind person. But the absence of sight in the stone is not a privation. Absence of something that *ought to be there*. Since the stone by nature ought not to see, it is not deprived of sight, as is the blind man. Evil, then is a deprivation of some good that ought to be there. It is not a mere negation.

To say that evil is not a thing, but a lack in things, is not to claim that it is not *real*. Evil is a real lack in good things, as the blind person knows only so well. Evil is not a real substance, but it is a real privation in good substances. It is not an actual entity but a real corruption in an actual entity.

Evil as privation comes in different kinds. There are physical privations, such as mutilations and there are moral privations, such as a sexual perversity. Privation can be in substance (*what* something is) or in relationships (*how* it relates to others). There are not only bad *things* but there are bad relations between things. A relationship of love is a good one; hate is an evil one. Likewise, when a creature worships its Creator, it relates well; blaspheming the Creator is an evil relationship.

From this perspective, it follows that there is no such thing as something that is totally evil. If it were totally deprived of all good, it would be nothing. A totally rusty car is no car at all. And a totally moth-eaten garment is only a hanger in a closet. Evil, like a wound, can only exist in something else. A totally wounded arm means the person is maimed.

In view of this, something cannot be totally private, at least not in a metaphysical sense. A totally corrupted being would not exist at all. And a totally incapacitated will could not make any moral actions. One must take care not to carry human depravity so far that one destroys the ability to sin. There cannot be a supreme evil, for although evil lessens good; it can never totally destroy it. Nothing can be complete, unmitigated evil. For if all good were entirely destroyed—and this would be required for evil to be complete—evil itself would vanish since its subject, namely good, would no longer be there.

The fact that evil cannot be total in a metaphysical sense by no means implies that it cannot be total in a moral sense. A being can be *totally* (or, *radically*) depraved morally in the sense that evil has invaded every part of being. But the

moral total depravity can only be extensive, not intensive. It can extend to every part of a person's being, but it cannot destroy personal being. If it destroyed one's person, there would no longer be a person to do evil. Total evil in this sense would destroy a person's ability to do evil.

Classical theists described things in terms of their four causes: (1) *efficient*; (2) *final*; (3) *formal*, and (4) *material*. A human being has God as the *efficient cause*, God's glory and their good; as *final cause*, a soul as *formal cause* and a body as the *material cause*. However, since evil is not a substance, it has no formal cause, and its material cause is a good substance.

Efficient Cause—Free choice

Final Cause—None. Evil is the lack of order.

Formal Cause—None. Evil is the privation of form.

Material Cause—A good substance

The efficient cause of moral evil is free choice, not directly but indirectly. There is no purpose (final cause) of evil. It is lack of proper order to the good end. Evil has no formal cause of its own. Rather, it is the destruction of form in another. Its material cause is a good but not its own. It exists only in a good thing as the corruption of it.

*The Persistence of Evil* . There is another aspect of the problem of evil. Why does God allow it? Even if he did not produce it, he does permit it. Yet he is all-powerful and could destroy it. So why doesn't he do so?

The classical way to state the problem of the persistence of evil is this:

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. Therefore, there is no such God ☞ .

Put this way, the argument leaves open the possibility of a finite god, but theists reject such a concept. For every finite or limited being has a cause (see [COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT](#)). So a finite god is only a creature that needs an infinite Creator. And since God is powerful, then he must be infinitely powerful. Likewise, since he is good, he must be infinitely good. So, a finite god is not an option for a theist. God has both the desire and ability needed to do anything possible.

Is it possible to destroy evil? The theist responds as follows:

1. God cannot do what is actually impossible.
2. It is actually impossible to destroy evil without destroying free choice.
3. But free choice is necessary to a moral universe.
4. Therefore, God cannot destroy evil without destroying this good moral universe.

It is impossible for God to do what is contradictory ☞ . He cannot make an affirmation to be true and false at the same time. He can do nothing which involve such an impossibility, such as, making a square circle or a stone so heavy he cannot lift it.

Even an omnipotent being cannot do anything. It can only do what is possible. But it is not possible to force people to freely choose the good. Forced freedom is a contradiction. Therefore, God cannot literally destroy all evil without annihilating free choice. The only way to destroy evil is to destroy the good of free choice. But when there is no moral free choice, then there is no possibility of moral good. Unless hate is possible, love is not possible. Where no crea-

ture can blaspheme, no creatures can worship either. Therefore, if God were to destroy all evil, he would have to destroy all good too.

However, theism holds that even though God could not *destroy* (annihilate) all evil without destroying all good, nevertheless, he can and will *defeat* (overcome) all evil without destroying free choice. 🍌 The argument can be summarized as follows:

1. God is all good and desires to defeat evil.
2. God is all powerful and is able to defeat evil.
3. Evil is not *yet* defeated.
4. Therefore, it will one day be defeated. 🍌

The infinite power and perfection of God guarantee the eventual defeat of evil. The fact that it is not yet accomplished in no way diminishes the certainty that it will be defeated. Even though evil cannot be destroyed without destroying free choice, nonetheless, it can be overcome. 🍌

An all-powerful God could, for example, *separate* good persons from evil ones according to what persons freely choose. Those who love God will be separated from those who do not. Those who desire the good but are hindered by evil will no longer have their good purposes frustrated. And those who do evil and are hampered by good influences will no longer be nagged by the proddings of good. Each, whether in heaven\* or hell, will have it according to their free choice 🍌 . In this way God's victory over evil would not violate free choice.

Not only *can* a theistic God defeat evil, but he *will* do it. We know this because he is all good and would want to defeat evil. And because he is all-powerful and is able to defeat evil. Therefore, he will do it. The guarantee that evil

will be overcome is the nature of the theistic God.

*The Purpose of Evil* . No evil is good, but some evil has a good purpose . Warning pains for example are painful, but their painfulness has a good purpose. Of course, not all evil seems to be of this type. What, then, of evil which seems to have no good purpose? The problem can be summarized as follows:

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

It seems evident that there is useless suffering in the world. Some people get better through suffering, but others get bitter. Broken bones are stronger when they heal, but some never heal. Many die. What about all the purposeless evil in the world?

The theistic answer to apparently purposeless evil is fourfold. First, God has a good purpose for everything. Second, we do know a good purpose for much evil. Third, some evil is a byproduct of good. Fourth, God is able to bring good out of evil.

*God Has a Good Purpose for Everything* . The antitheist overlooks an important distinction: God knows a good purpose for all evil, even if we do not. Simply because finite minds cannot conceive of a good purpose for some evil does not mean that there is none. Since God is omniscient, he knows everything. And since he is omnibenevolent, he has a good purpose for everything. Hence, God does know a good purpose for all evil, even if we do not know it:

1. An omnibenevolent God has a good purpose for everything.

2. There is some evil for which we see no good purpose.
3. Therefore, there is a good purpose for all evil, even if we do not see it.

The fact that finite beings don't see the purpose for some evil does not mean there is none. This inability to see the purpose for evil does not disprove God's benevolence; it merely reveals our ignorance.

*The purpose for much evil is known by us.* In spite of the fact that we do not know everything, we do know something. And what we do know is that there is a good purpose for much evil. Warning pains have a good purpose. In fact, the ability to have pain has a good purpose. For if we had no nervous system we could destroy ourselves without even feeling any pain. Also, physical pain can be a warning to save us from moral disaster. As [C. S. Lewis](#) noted, pain is God's megaphone to warn a morally deaf world. And if we as finite beings know a good purpose for much evil, then surely an infinite Mind can know a good purpose for the rest.

*Evil sometimes is a byproduct of a good purpose.* Not every specific evil needs a good purpose. Some evil can simply be a necessary byproduct of a good purpose. The early bird gets the worm, but the early worm gets eaten. What is life for higher forms is death for lower forms. Plants and animals die so that man may have food to live. Thus, evil results indirectly from good because it is the consequence of a good purpose. Hence, the response may be put this way:

1. God has a good purpose for everything he does.
2. Some good purposes have evil byproducts.
3. Therefore, some evil is a byproduct of a good pur-

pose.

Not every *specific* event in the world needs to have a good purpose; only the *general* purpose needs to be good. The blacksmith has a good purpose for hammering the molten iron into a horseshoe. However, not every spark that flies has a purpose for its destiny. Some sparks may ignite unintended fires. Likewise, God had a good purpose for creating water (to sustain life), but drowning is one of the evil byproducts. Thus, not every specific drowning needs to have a good purpose, even though making the water in which they drown did. So many good things would be missed if God did not permit evil to exist. Fire does not burn unless air is consumed. Neither just retribution is inflicted nor patience is achieved, but for the evil of tribulation.

God can bring good out of evil. Of course, God is all-powerful and he is able to redeem good even from evils. A drowning person may inspire acts of bravery. Although sawdust is an unintended byproduct of making lumber, it can be salvaged to make paper. Likewise, God in his providence is able to redeem much (if not all) good out of the evil byproducts in the world. God would in no wise permit evil to exist in his works unless he were so almighty and so good as to produce good even from evil.

That does not mean that this present world is the best of all possible worlds. It means that God has made it the best possible way to attain his ultimate goal of the greater good. God may not always redeem good out of every evil byproduct in a fallen world. This could be true in both the physical and the moral realm. Like radioactive waste, some evil byproducts may resist reprocessing. Indeed, in view of the second law of thermodynamics, the physical world is decay-

ing. But God has the power to recreate it (cf. [2 Peter 3:13](#)). Human death can be overcome by resurrection (cf. [Romans 8](#); [1 Corinthians 15](#)). Neither of these is any problem for an omnipotent God.

*The Problem of Physical Evil* . The above solution to the problem of evil do not appear to solve the problem of natural disasters. Why tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes? It does not suffice to say that the free will of creatures caused all these. Further, many innocent people are killed in them. How, then, can natural evil be explained. In logical form:

1. Moral evil is explained by free choice.
2. But some natural evil does not result from free choice.
3. Natural evil cannot be explained by free choice of creatures.
4. Hence, God must be responsible for natural evil.
5. But natural evils cause innocent suffering and death.
6. Therefore, God is responsible for innocent suffering and death.

Theists question several premises of this argument. One response to premise [5](#), for example, is that in this fallen world no one is innocent. We sinned in Adam ([Rom. 5:12](#)) and as a consequence deserve death ([Rom. 6:23](#)). Natural disaster is a direct result of the curse on creation because of the fall of humankind ( [Genesis 3](#); [Romans 8](#) ). It will not be removed until Christ returns ([Revelation 21–22](#)).

Likewise, proposition [6](#) is mistaken, since it implies God is morally culpable for taking the life of a creature. This is a category mistake, since it wrongly assumes that, since it is wrong for a creature to take innocent life, it is also wrong for the Creator to do so. But God gave life and alone has the

right to take it (cf. Deut. 32:39; Job 1:21). We did not give life, and we do not have the right to take it.

Premise 3 is definitely untrue. For [theism](#) can explain all natural evil by reference to free choice. In biblical language, the free choice of Adam and Eve brought natural disaster on this world. In addition the free choice of evil angels accounts for the rest of human suffering. But even putting this possibility aside, which could in itself explain all natural evil, physical suffering can be explained in reference to human free choice.

1. Some suffering is brought on directly by our own free choice. The choice to abuse my body can result in sickness.
2. Some suffering is brought on indirectly by free choice. The choice to be lazy can result in poverty.
3. Some physical evil to others can result from our free choice, as in the case of spouse or child abuse.
4. Others suffer indirectly because of our free choice. Alcoholism can lead to poverty of one's children.
5. Some physical evil may be a necessary byproduct of a good process. Rain, hot air, and cool air are all necessary for food and life, but a byproduct of these forces is a tornado.
6. Some physical evil may be a necessary condition for attaining a greater moral good. God uses pain to get our attention. Many have come to God through suffering.
7. Some physical suffering may be a necessary condition of a greater moral good. Just as diamonds are formed under pressure, even so is character.
8. Some physical evil is a necessary concomitant of a

morally good physical world . For instance, it is good to have water to swim and boat in, but a necessary concomitant is that we can also drown in it. It is good to have sex for procreation and enjoyment, even though it makes rape possible. It is good to have food to eat, but this also makes dying of food poisoning possible.

At this point the critic could always ask why a physical world is necessary. Why did not God make spirits, who could not hurt their bodies or die. The answer is: God did; they are called angels. The problem is that, while no angel can die of food poisoning, neither can they enjoy a prime rib. While no angel has ever drowned, neither has any angel ever gone for a swim or went water skiing. No angel has ever been raped, but neither has any angel ever enjoyed sex or the blessing of having children ([Matt. 22:30](#)). In this kind of physical world, we simply must take the concomitant evil along with the good.

Eventually, of course, Christian theists believe God will redeem us from all physical evil too, giving us immortal and incorruptible bodies. But if we had those before we were morally ready for them, we would not have made the necessary moral progress toward being suited to them.

***The Avoidability of Evil.*** If God knew evil would occur, why did he create it? God was free to create or not to create. Why did he choose to create a world he knew would fall? Theists believed God is all-knowing, all-good, and free. As all-knowing, God foresaw evil. As free, he could have avoided creating the world. But this conflicts with God as all-good, for such a God must have had a good purpose for creating a world he knew would fall. Why then did he create it?

There were other better alternatives open to God. He could have not created at all. He could have created a non-moral world where no sin could occur. He could have created a free world where no one would have chosen to sin. He could have created a world where sin occurred but where everyone was ultimately saved. Any one of these worlds would have been better than the world conceived by the orthodox Christian theist, where evil occurs and where not everyone will be saved in the end (see [HELL](#); [ANNIHILATIONISM](#); [UNIVERSALISM](#)). The problem takes this form:

1. God could have chosen a better alternative by: (a) not creating at all; (b) not creating a free world; (c) creating a free world that would not sin; (d) creating a world that sinned but would all be saved.
2. But God did not choose one of these better alternatives.
3. Therefore God did not do his best.
4. But to do less than his best is an evil for God.
5. Therefore, no all-perfect God exists.

Some theists challenge the fourth premise, arguing that God does not have to do his best; he merely has to do good. And what he did in creating this world was good, even if there could have been something better. But assuming, for the argument, that God must do his best, is any other alternative really better than this world? Theists say No.

A nonworld is not better than some world. Nothing is not better than something . This is a classic category mistake. Something and nothing have nothing in common, so they cannot be compared. It is not even like comparing apples and oranges, since they both are fruit. It is like comparing apples and nonapples, insisting that nonapples taste better.

A nonfree world is not morally better than a free world. A nonfree world is a nonmoral world, since free will is necessary for morality. A nonmoral world cannot be morally better than a moral world. Since a nonfree world is not a moral world, there is no moral basis for comparison. This too is a category mistake.

A free world where no one sins or even a free world where everyone sins and then gets saved is *conceivable* but it may not be *achievable*. As long as everyone is really free, it is always possible that someone will refuse to do the good. Of course, God could force everyone to do good, but then they would not be free. Forced freedom is not freedom at all. Since God is love, he cannot force himself on anyone against their will. Forced love is not love; it is rape. And God is not a divine rapist. Love must work persuasively but not coercively. Hence, in every conceivable free world someone would choose to do evil, so a perfect evil-free world may not be possible.

A world where sin never materializes is *conceivable* but it may not be the *most desirable* morally. If evil is not permitted, then it can not be defeated. Like automobiles, a tested world is better than an untested one. Or, to put it another way, no boxer can beat an opponent without getting into the ring. God may have permitted evil in order to defeat it. If evil is not allowed, then the higher virtues cannot be attained. No pain, no gain. Tribulation works patience. There is no way to experience the joy of forgiveness without allowing the fall into sin. So, a world where evil is not defeated and the higher goods attained would not be the best world achievable. Therefore, while a world where sin does not occur is *theoretically conceivable*, it would be *morally inferior*.

**Conclusion.** No one has demonstrated that any alterna-

tive world is morally better than the one we have. Hence, no antitheist can show that God did not create the best world, even given the privation of good. This, of course, does not mean that the theist is committed to the belief that this present world is the best world that can be achieved. God is not finished yet, and Scripture promises that something better will be achieved. The theist's assumption is that this world is the best way to the best world achievable.

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