

The Problem of Evil

Two types of evil : Moral and Natural

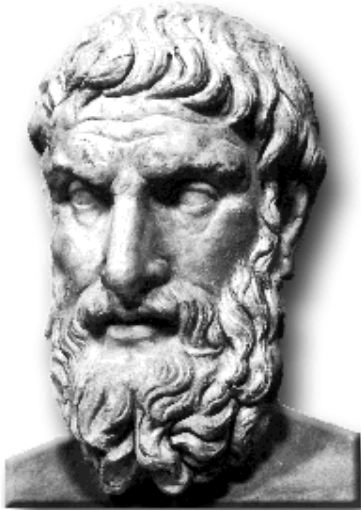
Moral Evil: The evil that people deliberately choose to do to one another

Natural Evil: The evil that occurs naturally e.g. disease, natural disasters

The problem of Evil:

Why does a supposedly powerful and good God allow natural and moral evil to occur?

This was expressed by the ancient Greek thinker Epicurus (341 BC – 270BC) in the following way:



Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?

Hume expressed the problem in a similar way:



Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him god?

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779)

Theodicy is the attempt to show how the existence of God is compatible with the existence of evil in the world.

Moral evil – Free Will Defence

1. A world with free will and sin is better than a world with no free will and no sin.
2. God gave us free will because He is good.
3. Unfortunately, when people are free they sometimes choose to do terrible things. (*This is an unavoidable logical truth*)

Conclusion: It is therefore possible for God to exist and for moral evil to occur.

Leibniz (1646-1716) believed that this is the “best of all possible worlds”. God could have chosen any world that it was (logically) possible to create. Because he is omnibenevolent, he chose the best one. One of the reasons that it is the best is because we have free will.



I do not believe that a world without evil, preferable in order to ours, is possible; otherwise it would have been preferred. It is necessary to believe that the mixture of evil has produced the greatest possible good: otherwise the evil would not have been permitted.

The combination of all the tendencies to the good has produced the best; but as there are goods that are incompatible together, this combination and this result can introduce the destruction of some good, and as a result some evil.

Letter to Bourguet (late 1712), as translated in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts* (2006) edited by Lloyd H. Strickland, p. 208

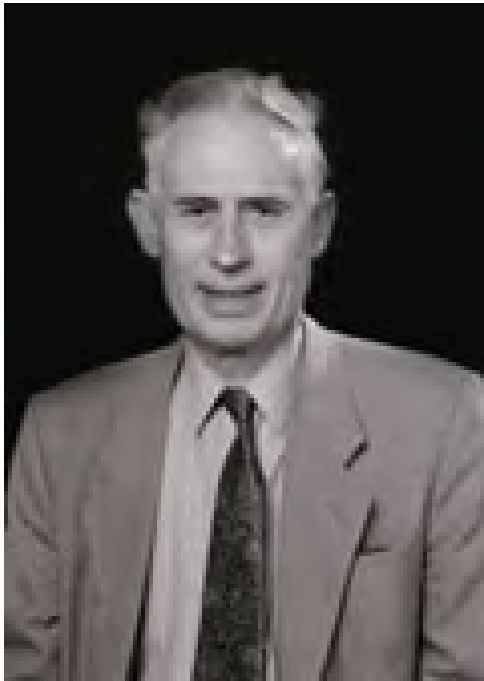
Problems:

- a) Why is a world with free will better than one without it?
- b) Couldn't God have made a world with free will and no sin? Couldn't He have changed the “logical truth” in premise 3?

Natural Evil (1)

The response to evil brings out the best in us. When people are confronted with tragedy and destruction, they tend to behave in very noble ways.

This is expressed by Richard Swinburne:



If the world was without any natural evil and suffering we wouldn't have the opportunity, or nearly as much opportunity, to show courage, patience and sympathy.

The Philosophers' Magazine, Winter 1999

Problems:

- a) Couldn't God find another way to encourage us to behave in such noble ways?
- b) Innocent people suffer and never get the chance to behave in these noble ways.

Natural Evil (2)

Perhaps natural evil is some form of punishment from God. Perhaps it is a consequence of “The Fall”? (i.e. the punishment that Adam and Eve received because they disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden).



Genesis 3 states:

¹⁶ To the woman he said,

“I will make your pains in
childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give
birth to children.
Your desire will be for your
husband,
and he will rule over you.”

¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you
listened to your wife and ate fruit
from the tree about which I
commanded you, ‘You must not eat
from it,’

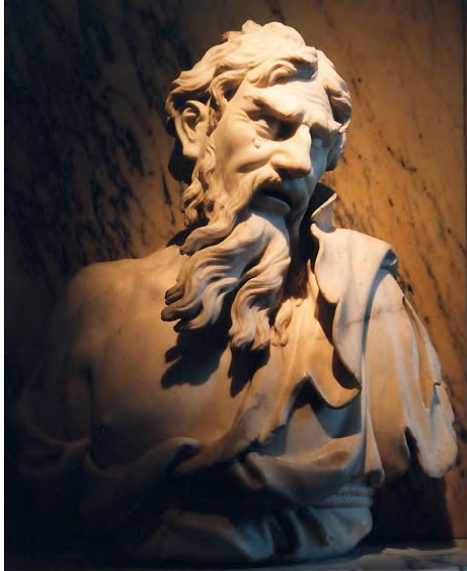
“Cursed is the ground because of
you;
through painful toil you will eat
food from it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles
for you,
and you will eat the plants of the
field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

Natural Evil (3)

Perhaps natural evil is not evil after all. Perhaps it is actually good, but humans, with their narrow understanding, cannot see it this way. Perhaps what we perceive to be natural evil is all part of some divine plan for the universe which, overall, is good?



To God all things are fair and good and just, but people hold some things wrong and some right

Heraclitus (535–475 BCE)

Natural Evil (4)

Perhaps much of what constitutes natural evil isn't really natural? People die in earthquakes because of *human* mistakes e.g. badly built houses.