

The Problem of Evil and Suffering

Ten Talking Points

By John DeRosa

There are many ways to respond to the argument against God known as the *Problem of Evil and Suffering*. Remember, it's always a good practice to start by asking questions like "What do you mean by that?" or "How did you come to that conclusion?" This way, you will get a sense of the type of argument from evil the other person is presenting. Also, with questions, you gain a better sense of how much he or she has studied. In this PDF, I've organized some useful talking points and replies to assist you in conversations about evil and suffering.

The Argument

Suppose someone presents the argument like this.

God does not exist. If an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God existed, then there would be no evil and suffering in the world. And all-loving God would desire a world without suffering. An all-knowing God would know all potential instances of evil and suffering. And an all-powerful God could eliminate all suffering. Yet, evil and suffering still exist in the world of our experience. Therefore, there is no all-good, all-knowing God and all-powerful God.

Outline of Ten Talking Points

In points (1) and (2), I present tactics of clarification to help frame the discussion. In points (3) through (6), I present several points that can be made at a popular level without going deep into a philosophical discussion of evil or the God of classical theism. Those points can be made by most (if not all) Christians.

In points (7) through (9), I summarize Thomistic points made by Fr. Herbert McCabe OP and Fr. Brian Davies OP as they comment on Aquinas in relation to God and evil. I find these points to be the most forceful in debunking the intellectual problem of evil, though I also recognize many find them pastorally unsatisfying. Finally, in point (10), I give a few tips for when your discussion partner is suffering from a deep emotional/pastoral problem related to evil. After that, I give a list of resources for further study.

Ten Talking Points

- 1. Ask the objector to spell out their objection clearly.** The POE is the most well-known objection to God. Everyone who has considered the issue has some ideas about it floating around in their mind. Moreover, there has been a ton of ink spilled by Christians, Jews, and Muslims in response to this argument. Don't assume the person is making a specific type of objection from evil. Ask them at least one or two follow up questions to clarify the type of objection they are making. At the very least, you want to know the following:

- a. Are they approaching evil as an *intellectual* problem (i.e. a philosophical puzzle) or a *pastoral* problem (i.e. they are physically/emotionally damaged by some recent form of evil or suffering)?
 - b. If they are raising an intellectual problem, are they raising a *logical* problem of evil? Do they think it's **impossible** for God to exist and the world to contain evil?
 - c. If they are raising an intellectual problem, are they raising a *probabilistic* problem of evil? Do they think it's **probable** that God does not exist but not go as far to say God and evil are logically contradictory?
2. **The problem of evil is an internal critique of the Christian theistic worldview, and so the objector cannot handwave *other* Christian premises.** The objection from evil and suffering, when made against a Christian, is meant to show an inconsistency with believing in God and seeing the world as it is. However, if *other* Christian premises help explain the world as it is, and the objector denies *these other* premises to buttress the argument from evil, then he is no longer making the same argument from evil. Rather, the *real objection* is to these other premises, and that real objection, whatever it is, will have to do the heavy lifting in place of an argument from evil. This will become more clear through examples I give in points (4) and (5).
3. **God created a world where humans can exercise their free choice by actualizing a wide variety of actions, including evil actions.** This permission of a wide variety of free choices is a good thing as it accounts for the genuine love, courage, bravery, and compassion we experience. However, this also accounts for a large sum of evil and suffering when human beings freely choose evil actions. Also, God does not intend moral failure as an end in itself, but He *permits* immorality for the sake of many goods (more on this in point 5).

Humans possess the ability to make *free choices that are not automatic*. There is a great nobility and dignity that comes with freely loving and choosing the good in the midst of temptations and the real possibility of choosing evil. This is the nature of our temporary life on Earth. We have the real possibility of choosing evil, yet also the real possibility of choosing to love and choosing the good. This is made possible by God creating us with the power of free choice by which we can select a wide variety of actions.

4. **Natural evils were not part of God's original plan in the paradise of the garden, but He allowed them to inflict us because of the sin of our first parents. They are part of the cosmic chaos that results from rejecting God.** When you raise *free human choices* as the explanation for lots of evil in the world, you must immediately expect the rejoinder, "But what about tornadoes, tsunamis, or cancer in children that bring great suffering? Those physical evils are not caused by men freely choosing evil." It's true that individual earthquakes and tsunamis are not directly caused by people choosing evil. However, on the Catholic Christian worldview, the physical evils we experience result from the fact that we live in a *fallen world*. God originally created our parents in a state of grace and happiness such that they were protected from physical evils like cancer and tsunamis.

When our first parents sinned against God, they turned away from Him, and thus experienced the cosmic chaos that comes with separation from God. As Catholics, we hold that “the Fall” was a real, historical event consisting in the rebellion of our first parents against God. We allow that the Genesis account may use figurative language to describe what occurred, but *that a first serious sin occurred* leading to the loss of God’s special protection from physical and natural evil is part and parcel with the Catholic worldview. At this point, the objector might say, “But I don’t believe in the Fall; I think that’s all made up.” This is an instance of what I mentioned in point (2) where the objector’s denial of the Fall is doing the heavy lifting and not their argument from evil. If they want to maintain an inconsistency in *our worldview*, they must show how their argument goes through given that the Fall occurred.

So, our world is no longer perfect, and this is due to the Fall of our first parents. Our imperfect world, with all of its natural evils, serves as a reminder of how bad it is to separate from God. As we are all born into this fallen world, we experience these natural curses and eventually bodily death. But this shows that all of the evil and suffering we experience is traceable back to human beings choosing badly: either the evil choices we witness people making daily or the natural evils resulting from the cosmic chaos brought about by the Fall.

5. **Some evil/suffering is necessary if God wants to create a world with the *kinds of goods* that are logically linked with evil and suffering.** Some may argue that point (4) is overkill since God did not *have to* punish Adam and Eve so severely, and that He could have made a perfect world with no evil and suffering. At this point, we must point out that particular *kinds of goods* are inextricably linked with evils. So, if God wants to create a world containing a wide variety of goods (including those), then necessarily He will have to make a world with *some* evil. Also, if God wants to manifest more supremely the divine character (i.e. his mercy and justice in addition to *only* goodness), then He must create a world where justice and mercy can be manifested. Again, this world involves *some* evil.

Bravery, courage, forgiveness, charity, and compassion in the face of evil indicate a few of those goods that cannot be had apart from a world with evil and suffering. Those concepts lose their meaning in a perfectly good world. Additionally, Jesus said to “love your enemies” and “pray for those who persecute you.” The love shown through those Christian commands cannot be fulfilled without *actual enemies* and thus *actual evil*. At this point, the objector might again *deny that bravery, courage, forgiveness, charity, and compassion* are real goods and claim that they are merely instrumentally good. **Again**, this commits the error I spell out in point (2), since on the Catholic Christian worldview, those goods are *real goods* and contribute to making human beings more virtuous people in a real sense. So, that type of objection denies a Christian view of virtue, the soul, and transformation in Christ, and thus it is **this denial** which is now doing the heavy lifting and not an argument from evil.

This point (5) also answers the “why Not Heaven now objection” since if there were only Heaven (and not a time of trial), then God could not manifest more of his attributes (like justice and mercy) and could not create a world with a wide variety of goods (like bravery, courage, justice, compassion, and so forth).

6. **We can't see all of the picture like God does, and so we cannot know that He does not draw good out of seemingly horrendous evils.¹ After all, the greatest goods are spiritual goods that bring a person more in conformity with Christ and secure their destiny in Heaven.** Eleonore Stump provides the following example of a child with a fever. Suppose a child's dangerously high fever could be lowered significantly by placing them in a tub and dumping ice water on them. Suppose one parent goes ahead and delivers this treatment, despite the screams of agony from the child. But, another parent just wants to hold the child in a warm blanket to comfort them. Who is the more loving parent here? The parent who causes the child to scream in agony is **more loving**. In other words, the parent is able to bring good out of the suffering the child experiences.

Now, if our ultimate good is to be with God in Heaven and ultimate misery consists in eternal separation from God, then physical flourishing is not what is most important for human beings. Rather, the flourishing of their soul, receiving and living in God's grace, is most important. Perhaps permitting evil and suffering leads to more people turning to God than otherwise would have. These considerations can only be known by an all-knowing creator, yet they are very important considerations. Chaos theory and the butterfly effect² tell us that small alterations can have huge repercussions and effects over time. We are not in position to judge that any particular instance of evil and suffering will not lead to overwhelming greater goods in the future.

7. **Evil is not a real *thing* or *substance*; it consists of a *lack of good that ought to be*.** In his recent book, Dr. Feser explains:

Goodness and badness, then, are not on a metaphysical par. Goodness is primary since it is to be understood in terms of the *presence* of some feature. Badness is derivative, since it amounts to nothing more than the absence of some feature, and in particular the absence of *goodness* of some kind or other. Goodness is a kind of *actuality* and badness is a kind of *unrealized potentiality*. To be bad in some respect is, ultimately, to *lack* something rather than to have something, just as to be blind is simply to lack sight rather than to have some positive feature.³

8. **Since evil is a *lack of good* and not a *substance that God creates*, God does not create evil in the strict sense. God brings about what is good, and in a material world, the goodness of some things curtails the goodness of other things.** Evil can be divided into "evil suffered" and "evil done." Evil suffered occurs when things interact in the physical world, and the goodness of one thing impedes the flourishing of another thing. A lion may flourish by eating a lamb. Here, a lion succeeds in being the kind of thing it is as the lamb's flourishing is curtailed by the lion's success. A tsunami consists of water and wind succeeding as the kinds of things they are, but this might curtail the goodness of human beings in a town covered by a tsunami. Here, the badness lies in the *curtailment*, yet such *curtailment* is simply the natural

¹ Some frame this idea as God having *morally sufficient reasons* for the evil He allows. I tend not to use this language for reasons which will become clear in point (9), but some people might find that language helpful.

² [This short video](#) at Dr. William Lane Craig's website helps to make this point clear.

³ Feser p. 219, [Five Proofs of the Existence of God](#), 2017.

result of a *material world* where some things are corrupted by other things succeeding, and all things break down over time. If the objection is that God should have created a world with *no curtailment*, then the objection is that God should have made a **very different type of world**.

For example, a world where everything is prevented from corrupting other things by a perpetual miracle. Not only might this world lack the goods I speak of in (5), but it would also be a **very different type of world** that transcends the bounds of our imaginations, intuitions, and experiences. Such a suggestion cannot be the basis for denying that God *can create* a material world. He is simply not obligated to make *only this complete different type of world* that the objector will allow (more on obligation in the next point).

“Evil done” occurs when human beings freely make bad choices, and here the evil consists in the defective human choice. Again, the **evil done** is not some substance or thing that God brings about creatively, but rather the *lack of goodness* or the *deficiency* in a person who acts poorly. So, when it comes to God’s causation in the world, one can maintain that in “evil suffered” and “evil done,” God brings about only what is good, and evil enters the world through human deficiency or when some goods impede other goods in our material world.

9. **God is not a moral agent like human beings are.**⁴ The transcendent God of classical theism is the one, immaterial, immutable, powerful, creator of all things that exist for every moment of their existence. Are we intimately acquainted with what such a reality is like? No! We only know creatures, finite things, and the like. We experience God through His effects in the world. We can know *that* He exists and some things about the divine nature, but we are without a grasp of what He’s truly like in His essence. So, we should not assume that He is a moral agent like human beings are because **God is not a human being**.⁵ He is *radically different than us*.

Now, human beings conform to moral standards, follow certain obligations, or exemplify certain virtues. For that reason, they are rightly deemed moral agents subject to moral praise or censure. But God is not a finite thing and He does not change. There are no obligations He must follow, since no one can obligate God. There are no moral virtues or moral rules to which He must conform in order to be good; He’s already perfect and good in Himself. Whatever God does is consistent with His goodness, but God’s goodness is not *moral goodness*. It is the goodness of being the creator of all that is good, the fully actual being in whom all goodness preexists in in some way, and that which is most desirable of all things.

So, we are simply not in the position to indict God for bad moral behavior. Not just because we don’t have all of the facts, but because He’s not the type of thing that can be indicted with facts in a courtroom (i.e. a human moral agent). In His essence, God is not a moral agent like we are, and He is not a creature inside the world. And so, He cannot be thought of as acting morally good or bad, yet He still remains Good and brings about only Good, as I argued in point (8). As

⁴ Feser defends this point in [this written interview](#). Fr. Davies defends it at length in the books I mention in the list of resources for further study.

⁵ It’s true that God voluntarily took on a human nature in the Incarnation. However, God *essentially* remains radically different than us in His divine nature.

it turns out, an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God should not be considered *morally good like we are* and cannot be judged as morally bad either. God simply is not a moral agent subject to moral praise or censure, and any argument from evil that insists that's what God is has no force against the God of Classical Theism.⁶

10. The love of Jesus Christ is the best solution to the emotional/pastoral problem of evil and suffering. Someone who suffers deeply and personally with some form of evil or loss is not likely to be moved by philosophical argumentation. Rather, you should pray for them and encourage them to take refuge in the love of Jesus Christ. God always knew what it was like *for us* to feel evil and suffering, yet the divine persons experienced no evil or suffering *themselves* prior to the Incarnation. When God became man in Jesus Christ, the divine son of God literally felt what it was like *Himself* to be mocked, tortured, betrayed, abandoned, and crucified. Moreover, since Christ retained the beatific vision in His human nature (as Aquinas teaches), Jesus saw all of the evil and suffering that would ever occur as He grieved over our sins in solidarity with us. Those suffering should cling to Christ who knows all of their deepest troubles intimately. Lastly, I'll note that some may not feel able to cling to Christ in love because they are so overcome with grief. In such situations, Dr. Michael Rea argues it is legitimate to communicate with God via protest and complaint.⁷ This can lead to repaired relationship.

List of Resources for Further Study

- Dr. Taylor O'Neill responds to the problem of evil and suffering in [this podcast episode](#).
- Dr. Edward Feser responds to evil on pp. 296 - 300 in [his recent book](#).
- Karlo Broussard responds to the problem of evil and suffering in several chapters of [Prepare the Way](#) as well as an appendix of that book.
- Fr. Brian Davies discusses a Thomistic approach to the Problem of Evil in two books. This [advanced monograph](#) as well as this [popular level book](#).
- Fr. Herbert McCabe discusses a Thomistic approach to God and Evil in this [advanced book](#) as well as this [popular level book](#).
- In this [episode of Pints with Aquinas](#), Matt Fradd tackles the Problem of Evil.
- In this [episode of Catholic Answers](#), Karlo Broussard tackles the Problem of Evil.

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⁶ I defend this point further in [this blog series](#).

⁷ See Ch. 9 of [The Hiddenness of God](#). Dr. Rea mentions this point toward the end of [this podcast episode](#).