



A Good Reason for Evil

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The first step in answering the problem of evil is this: We've got to get clear on what this thing "evil" actually is. It does seem to follow that if God created all things, and evil is a thing, then God created evil. This is a valid syllogism. If the premises are true, then the conclusion would be true as well.

The problem with that line of reasoning is that the second premise is not true. Evil is not a thing. The person who probably explained it best was St. Augustine, and then Thomas Aquinas picked up on his solution. Others since then have argued that evil has no ontological status in itself.

The word ontology deals with the nature of existence. When I say that evil has no ontological status, I mean that evil, as a thing in itself, does not exist.

Let me give you an illustration to make this more clear. We talk about things being cold or warm. But coldness is not a thing that exists in itself; it has no ontological status. Coldness is the absence of heat. When we remove heat energy from a system, we say it gets colder.

"Cold" isn't a thing. It's a way of describing the reduction of molecular activity resulting in the sensation of heat. So the more heat we pull out of a system, the colder it gets. Cold itself isn't being "created." Cold is a description of a circumstance in which heat is missing. Heat is energy which can be measured. When you remove heat, the temperature goes down. We call that condition "cold," but there is no cold "stuff" that causes that condition.

Here's another way of looking at it. Did you ever eat a donut hole? I don't mean those little round sugar-coated lumps you buy at the donut shop. I mean the hole itself. Donut holes are actually what's left when the middle is cut out of a donut. There's a space called a hole, a "nothing," the condition that exists when something is taken away. Same thing with a shadow. Shadows don't exist as things in themselves; they're just the absence of light.

Evil is like that. Evil isn't like some black, gooey stuff floating around the universe that gloms onto people and causes them to do awful things. Evil is the absence of good, a privation of good, not a thing in itself.

When God created the universe, he created everything good. He made a universe that was perfectly good. Everything was as it should be. After God was completely done with creating

everything, something happened that reduced the good in the world. That loss of good is called evil.

That's why in Genesis 1 we read "it was good" many times. From the record we know that God didn't create evil. But something did happen in which evil--the loss of good--took place, and as a result a lot of other grotesque things came about.

So donut holes don't exist; they're just the absence of donut. Shadows don't exist; they're just the absence of light. And evil doesn't exist; it's just the absence of good.

The next question is, if God created everything good, why would He allow evil to infect His creation?

Satan would be the first example of an independent source of evil. Adam and Eve would also be a source of evil with regard to the human race. They didn't get Satan's evil; they initiated their own. Satan influenced them--he made his own hole in goodness--but Adam and Eve made their own holes in goodness. They're responsible for their own evil.

It isn't that Satan did something bad and passed that stuff on to them, because evil is not a stuff. This is a key point in this discussion. They cannot "dip into" evil because it's not a thing to dip into. When we make a shadow, we don't do it with shadow stuff, but by blocking existing light.

In the same way, evil doesn't cause our actions. In fact, it's the other way around. Our actions are what cause evil--or the loss of goodness--in us, and that loss of goodness does have an impact on future actions, giving us a predisposition to cause further evil.

God did not create Adam and Eve with bad stuff in them. What He did was to create them with a capability to rebel against Him or choose to do wrong. This is called moral free will, and it's a good thing, but it can be used for bad. It can be used to rebel against God, which digs out a hole in goodness, so to speak.

Satan and man both used their free moral agency to originate actions that fell short of the goodness of God. I'm sure God had a good reason for allowing evil. It has caused a lot of suffering, but that suffering has, in turn, also brought about a lot of good under God's direction.

When you forgive someone who's wronged you and you treat him kindly, is that a good thing? Sure it is, but you couldn't forgive him if he hadn't done something bad against you. I'm not saying that we should do evil so that the good of forgiveness could come about. I'm showing that it's not a contradiction to claim that good can come out of evil.

It's not good to promote evil itself, but one of the things about God is that He's capable of taking a bad thing and making good come out of it. Mercy is one example of that. Without sin there would be no mercy. That's true of a number of good things: bearing up under suffering, dealing with injustice, acts of heroism, forgiveness, long-suffering. These are all virtues that cannot be experienced in a world with no sin and evil.

Now the real question at this point is, "Was it worth it? Good can come out of evil, but was it worth it in the long run, the measure of good that comes out of the measure of evil in the world?" And my response is that the only One who could ever know that is God. You and I couldn't know that because our perspective is too limited. Only God is in a position to accurately answer that question.

Apparently God thinks that, on balance, the good is going to outweigh the evil that caused the good, or else He wouldn't have allowed it to happen. Christ paid a tremendous price, an example of the tremendous love God had for us. God would not be able to show His sacrificial love unless there was something to sacrifice for.

Here's the problem, and this is why we don't think that, on balance, it's really a fair trade. We think that life is about giving us pleasure and making us happy. That's what we think. This view is very prevalent in the United States. Our personal happiness, pleasure, and enjoyment are the most important things in life.

That's not what the Bible teaches at all, though. There are aspects of enjoyment, but the ultimate reason we were created was not so we can have fun and enjoy life. God's purpose for creating us was to develop us into certain types of people who were fit to spend eternity with Him. He does that by conforming us to His image by helping us grow through the process of living in a fallen world.

This is part of the message of the book of Hebrews. Even Jesus was conformed-made mature-by the process of suffering. In God's mind, the goal of the process-being conformed to the image of His Son-is a much greater good than the bad of the evil that we have to put up with on this earth. The balance is definitely on the side of good.

I admit that this is not an easy issue, and part of the reason is that we bring some baggage to the discussion. Part of the baggage is that we have this idea that if God put us here on this earth and created the world for us to live in, then it seems to make sense that the summum bonum-the greatest good-is our immediate sense of personal pleasure and satisfaction. Therefore, if there is some circumstance in which we can't have immediate satisfaction, then God must either have abandoned us, not exist, or be evil for allowing such a thing.

Last weekend I had a conversation with a young man about homosexuality. He challenged me with this point: Why would God create people as homosexuals if He didn't want them to experience the pleasure of homosexual sex?

Now, of course, I didn't agree with Him that God created people to be homosexuals. It wasn't God's design that they have this desire. But even if I conceded such a thing, why must I admit that-since one was created with a capacity for pleasure-only a mean, cruel God would allow conditions in which they'd have to say no to that pleasure?

When you think about it for a moment, doesn't it strike you as odd that we've developed a view that in order for us to acknowledge God as good, He must give liberty to all of our passions? And if God doesn't give liberty to all of our passions-if He doesn't allow us what we want, when we

want it-if He ever asks for self sacrifice, if He ever allows a condition in which we hurt, in which we suffer, in which we are inconvenienced, if He ever allows a circumstance in which our bodily desires are not given full reign, then certainly He must be a cruel God? Isn't that an odd view? Do you know what kind of person thinks that way? A child. A child sees what it wants and goes to get it, and if it's stopped, that child puts up a fuss.

I was with a little two-year-old today who wanted to go into the house while wearing muddy shoes. She was stopped, and she put up a fuss when her shoes were removed. Mom and Dad knew, though, that there were other things more important than their daughter's desires at that moment. Now she didn't understand it. All she knew was what she wanted (understandably, by the way, she's a two-year-old; that's the way two-year-olds think).

Unfortunately, we've bred a society that are, in many ways, like a bunch of adult two-year-olds, grown-ups who believe it's their divine right to feel every pleasure they can possibly feel, to never encounter any difficulty, any pain, any suffering. And if they do, then God must be a cruel God.

Now I realize that some of you might be thinking, Come on, Koukl, you're really whitewashing this, aren't you. How can so much egregious suffering be justified?

I don't at all mean to brush away the terrible impact of evil on people's lives. But I'm talking about a frame of mind that we do seem to have, a frame of mind that we are first and our pleasures are first and God owes that to us. And if He denies us our pleasures to any degree, then there must be something wrong with Him.

Now if God is a good God, and He denies us our pleasures, then I'll tell you one thing, there's a good reason He does so. That's what it means to be a good God. I'm not going to buy the idea-the infantile idea that Americans have-that in order for God to be considered good, He has to give me everything I want, when I want it, or conversely, He must protect me from every injury and every difficulty. No, it's fair to say that God has allowed suffering in the world for very good reasons, even though we're not clear on all of those reasons.

By the way, what's the alternative? If you conclude there's no God because of the existence of evil, then there's no possibility of ever redeeming that evil for good.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell said that no one can sit at the bedside of a dying child and still believe in God. My response to Mr. Russell is, "What would you say to a dying child?" What could an atheist say? "Too bad"? "Tough luck"? "Bum deal"? You see, in that circumstance, there's no possibility of redemption for that evil. In fact, it doesn't seem to make sense to even call it evil at all if there is no God.

But with God, at least there's the possibility that the evil can be used for good. That's the promise of the Scriptures.

And so, instead of the syllogism, "God created all things, and evil is a thing, therefore God created evil," we start from a different point. "All things God created are good-which is what the

text says-and evil isn't good, therefore God didn't create evil." Then we can progress to, "If God created all things, and God didn't create evil, then evil is not a thing."

You see, those two syllogisms are just as valid as the first one (if God created all things, and evil is a thing, then God created evil), and it seems that the premises are more reliable. The premises seem to be accurate and true.

The questions we have to ask ourselves are: Do we have reason to think that God is good, and do we have reason to think that evil is not a thing? If we have good reasons to think those two things, then our new set of syllogisms work.

We can then strongly trust that when God does allow a privation of good (evil) to influence our lives, He does it not for evil designs, but ultimately for good purposes.

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