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Explaining Evil

Four Views

Edited by W. Paul Franks

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Erik J. Wielenberg is Professor of Philosophy at DePauw University. He has authored three books: *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford, 2014), *God and the Reach of Reason: C.S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell* (Cambridge, 2008), and *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge, 2005), and over thirty journal articles/book chapters.

Introduction

W. Paul Franks

It is not terribly difficult to establish that the world contains evil. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to find yet another instance of immense harm befalling someone for no justifiable reason. While working on this introduction, the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, unfolded. Seventeen people, both students and teachers, were needlessly killed. Why do such terrible things occur? What about the various evils that result in far greater suffering, or even those that result in far less? When confronted with such evils it is commonplace, and natural, to seek out an explanation. Some explanations are meant to account for why some particular evil occurred, whereas others take a broader approach and are meant to give reasons for evil's existence in general. This book is focused on the latter task.

Establishing that there is evil is easy; determining *why* there is evil is a much more difficult task. Those familiar with the literature on the problem of evil will know that this has been a focus of Christian theists for centuries and with good reason. According to Christian theism, there is a being who exists apart from this universe, who cares about human welfare, and has a say in the goings-on of this universe. In addition, this being is said to be perfectly morally good, omniscient, and omnipotent. This alone is sufficient to give a rough approximation of what has come to be known as the problem of evil. Presumably, an omnipotent being would be able to prevent evil, an omniscient being would know how to prevent evil, and a perfectly good being would want to prevent evil. So why, then, is there evil?

In most contemporary discussions, problems like the one outlined above tend to amount to an argument for atheism since, it is alleged, one is incapable of justifying the belief that God exists

given the evil we find in the world. It is in this context that we see the familiar distinction between *logical* and *evidential* problems of evil. As Daniel Howard-Snyder has pointed out, these labels can be somewhat misleading since evidential problems tend to make rigorous use of logical structure, especially in terms of probabilities, and logical problems are often used as evidence that counts against theism (1996, xii). Still, with this qualification in mind, the distinction is useful. Briefly put, the evidential problem attempts to demonstrate that, given the existence of evil, it is more likely that there is not a God than that there is a God, whereas the logical problem attempts to demonstrate that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the very notion of God.[1] Advocates of either type of problem claim that the argument gives an individual reason to believe that God does not exist.

As one would expect, Christian theists have not remained silent on this issue and there is no shortage of responses to these problems.[2] However, before going any further it is important to note that this is not a book dealing with solutions to the problem of evil in either its logical or evidential forms. In fact, other than the brief synopsis above, you won't find the problem of evil defended, refuted, or even stated. While the four authors contributing to this book are grappling with the presence of evil in this world, they are not doing so only in the context of evil somehow generating a problem for theism. There are two reasons for this. First, the task of explaining evil is not something that falls to theists alone. Upon learning of another mass shooting or terrorist attack, theists aren't the only ones wondering why such things occur. Non-theists are just as prone to seek out explanations for evil as anyone else.

The second reason for taking a different approach than many "problem of evil" books follows closely on the first. In many discussions about the problem of evil it's not uncommon for the participants to never get around to stating what they believe are the actual reasons for evil. Instead, what often happens is that an atheist lays out what appears to be a problem for theism, and theists too easily content themselves with focusing on some alleged problem with that problem for theism. While this is a worthwhile activity, taken alone it doesn't actually give us what we were initially looking for—an explanation for evil. Instead of simply focusing on problems with other accounts of evil, the aim of this book is for each contributor to present his own positive account of evil and then also be able to respond to criticisms to it.

While this is not a typical book on the problem of evil, it is certainly still relevant to that topic. Those seeking theistic solutions to the problem of evil will find in Paul Helm and Richard Brian Davis resources for that task, even though resolving an argument against theism is not their primary aim. So, in some sense, these two theistic contributors will add to the ever-growing literature on the problem of evil, but they go about doing so in a different way. Their primary goal is to show how evil fits within their theistic worldview. That is, for both Davis and Helm the question to answer is not "Given evil, how can there be a God?" but instead, "Given God, how can there be evil?"[3]

This way of thinking about evil also extends to the two atheistic contributors: Michael Ruse and Erik J. Wielenberg.[4] Of course, as atheists, they aren't concerned with explaining evil's existence given that God exists. But, there remains a need to explain evil's existence given their atheism. Typically, when non-theists write on the problem of evil they do so in an attempt to establish that there is no God, but what is often missing are *their* explanations for evil. One might be tempted to just say that evil happens because we live in a world that pays no special attention to us. That is, we are no different in any significant way from the rest of the universe so we too are subject to the whims of nature and to the evil acts of other human beings. While I'm sure many non-theists believe something along these lines, one may still wonder why we should think of all that as *evil*. Given atheism, how does one maintain that instances of pain and suffering are in fact evil? Why are human persons so adept at intentionally causing the suffering of both humans and animals? Does the concept "evil" require, as many theists maintain, some sort of objective moral order? If so, can non-theism support such a thing? If it's not required, then how should we think about evil? These are the kinds of concerns that Ruse and Wielenberg address.

A word on "Evil"

Before continuing any further, a word or two on the term "evil" is in order. We use the word in a wide variety of ways and so it can be difficult to state precisely what it is that makes something or someone evil. This, it seems, is why few philosophers of religion working on the problem of evil ever bother defining it.[5] Instead of

defining it, we are often given various examples of evil and then
those examples are classified into categories. Consider, for example,
Alvin Plantinga's discussion of evil in *God and Other Minds*:

> A distinction must be made between *moral evil* and *physical
> evil*. The former, roughly, is the evil which results from human
> choice or volition; the latter is that which does not. Suffering
> due to an earthquake, for example, would be physical evil;
> suffering resulting from human cruelty would be moral evil. This
> distinction, of course, is not very clear and many questions could
> be raised about it; but perhaps it is not necessary to deal with
> these questions here. (1967, 132)

The distinction between moral and physical—or sometimes
"natural"—evil is useful, but it doesn't actually say much about
what evil is.[6] Instead, it tells us that whatever evil is, it can be caused
by human agents or by some act of nature. This way of thinking
about evil, especially when considering the problem of evil, is
certainly not unique to Plantinga. It's not much of a stretch to say
that this is far more common than not.

For example, nearly fifty years after *God and Other Minds* was
published, we see Chad Meister taking the same basic approach.
After first noting that "it is difficult, if not downright impossible, to
provide a clear and concise definition [of evil]," he then moves on
to classify evil in much the same way as Plantinga. He continues,
"A standard classification of evil divides it into two broad types:
moral and natural. Some examples may help to distinguish them"
(2012, 2–3). Perhaps when it comes to the problem of evil a more
precise account just isn't needed. Perhaps all we need to do to
raise the problem of evil is point to various states of affairs that
involve immense suffering and ask "Why does God allow *that*?"
This may be so; however it is worth noting that philosophers
who work on evil generally—that is, those who aren't primarily
concerned with the problem of evil—don't seem as hesitant to
attempt a definition.

In his book, *The Roots of Evil*, John Kekes is anything but
hesitant to provide what he takes to be a complete account of what
makes something evil. He writes,

> The evil of an action, therefore, consists in the combination
> of three components: the malevolent motivation of evildoers;

the serious, excessive harm caused by their actions; and the lack of a morally acceptable excuse for the actions. Each of these components is necessary, and they are jointly sufficient for condemning an action as evil. (2005, 2)

Here we have a clearly stated set of necessary and sufficient conditions for determining whether some action is evil. Kekes, however, is not alone. Todd Calder has claimed to pick out the "essential properties" of an evil action. Such properties include "a victim's significant harm" and a perpetrator's "inexcusable intention to bring about, allow, or witness, significant harm for an unworthy goal" (2013, 194). While both Kekes and Calder talk about evil in reference to harm caused, Daryl Koehn takes a different approach. According to Koehn, "Evil is frustrated desire stemming from our efforts to preserve a false conception of the self" (2005, 4). For Koehn, this provides a fuller account of evil because it serves to explain the cause of evil itself. The point here is not to adjudicate between these accounts of evil, but instead to note that philosophers working on the problem of evil may learn something interesting about evil by looking to those whose work is focused on evil in general.

For example, in light of the above discussion about moral and natural evils, one may wonder how these general accounts deal with natural evil. None of the three, it seems, have anything whatsoever to do with natural evil, as defined by Plantinga and Meister. In light of this one might simply state that the failure of these accounts in this regard means that they are not adequate conceptions of evil. However, one might also go in the other direction. Because harms caused by moral agents are just so different from harms caused by acts of nature, it may be better to dispense with the term "natural evil" altogether.[7] Evil just is a moral notion and so the suffering caused by natural events isn't evil at all. This is precisely what Calder has suggested elsewhere:

> No matter how much harm a hurricane, a falling tree, or a volcano might cause humans or animals, such harm does not admit of moral explanation in the absence of agency, and thus is not evil. (2002, 51)[8]

It's not that such events do not cause pain and suffering, it's just that such pain and suffering isn't *evil*.

One advantage of distinguishing the problem of *evil* from the problem of *nature-based suffering* (for lack of a better phrase) is that it helps make evident that there are two different kinds of problems related to suffering. If nothing else, this is another way in which this is not simply a book on the problem of evil. As you will soon see, each of the four authors' explanations of evil focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the moral variety. Although theists may still need to explain why God would permit such suffering, keeping the two problems distinct also makes it easier to see that a solution to one may have nothing at all to do with a solution to the other.[9] Separating the two also makes it easier for non-theists, who may not think there is a problem of nature-based suffering at all, to nevertheless fully engage in the project of explaining evil. So, for example, when Ruse writes in his lead essay that natural evil is not a problem at all (85), that doesn't mean he is offering any less of an explanation for evil than the theist.

Let us now turn to a synopsis of each chapter.

Summary of the discussion

The four contributors have authored a truly impressive number of important books and articles in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of religion, and theology. Given the divergent views of the authors—atheism/theism, moral realism/non-realism, free will compatibilism/incompatibilism, divine determinism/indeterminism—it is my hope that the structure of the book will allow the reader to benefit from the significant interaction each contributor has with the others. Each chapter consists of a lead essay, three responses to the lead essay, and a final reply.

In Chapter 1, Richard Davis attempts to explain evil's presence by appeal to "agent-causal theism." Evil, properly understood, involves immoral thoughts, desires, decisions, and actions freely and purposefully entertained or undertaken to inflict or permit unjustifiable harms being committed. This presupposes that there are immaterial, conscious agents with the power to act as agent-causes: to originate volitions to act without being caused to do so. If that's right, Davis argues, we can see that certain worldviews will preclude the existence of evil, since they rule out consciousness and/or agent-causal freedom. Here he singles out for particular criticism

Darwinian Naturalism and Calvinistic Theism. Both are bereft of the resources, he says, to explain the existence of conscious rational agents with the power of self-motion. Neither, then, can account for the reality of evil. It is only if theism is true, we're told, that evil would even be a bare possibility. Strangely then, and contrary to one's initial expectations, the existence of evil implies that we live in a theistic universe.

In Chapter 2, Paul Helm's explanation for evil begins by disambiguating the question "Why evil?" This is necessary, he says, for in asking this question one might mean "What is God's purpose in permitting or ordaining evil?" or given that God is the ordainer "How does evil occur?" Helm's approach is one of "faith seeking understanding." Given the existence of God, we can say that the universe is arranged for the display of God's perfection. As such, we find in the universe moral evil because it makes necessary the incarnation. Borrowing from Alvin Plantinga's *felix culpa* theodicy, Helm argues that a world "including the incarnation of the Son of God is immeasurably better than one without it." In answering the second question Helm employs a compatibilistic account of freedom to show that human persons are responsible for having departed from their original condition (as created by God). Consequently, although they are determined by their nature and circumstances to think, decide, and act as they do, they are nevertheless responsible for causing all of the moral evil we see in the world.

Next we turn to two powerful non-theistic attempts to account for evil. According to Michael Ruse, while we have sufficient grounds for being moral skeptics, we can still maintain that there are evil actions perpetrated by evil people. Evil certainly has a value component to it, but this doesn't mean that we must turn to theism (contra Davis and Helm) nor to something akin to a Platonic form (contra Wielenberg) to explain it. Instead, Ruse looks to Charles Darwin's evolutionary account to explain evil's nature and origin. Human persons are capable of making choices, understood along compatibilist lines, and some of those choices bring about moral evil. This happens when a person goes against his or her "biologically given sense of morality." This morality is system-dependent, so that what is morally wrong for humans may not be morally wrong for other species. This shouldn't be surprising, however, since what is beneficial for the survival of one species may not be beneficial for others.

In the concluding chapter, Erik J. Wielenberg provides us with
the second non-theistic account of evil. Wielenberg begins by
spelling out how ethical properties, including evil, neither reduce
to natural properties nor do they require the existence of a divine
being. Instead, ethical properties are sui generis. They are "entirely
different kinds of things from natural or supernatural properties."
Having shown what evil is, Wielenberg moves on to uncover its cause.
The property *being evil* is instantiated by nonethical properties, like
causing pain just for fun, via a "robust causal relation" that holds
between the two. To help determine *why* this occurs, Wielenberg
turns to empirical research into dehumanization. This phenomenon
is responsible for many instances of properties that directly robustly
cause the nonnatural property *being evil*. There is no need for a
natural or a supernatural explanation here. For states of affairs
involving ethical properties like *being evil* are said to be basic
ethical facts. Like mathematical truths, they are brute givens whose
obtaining requires no external explanation.

Thus is the (probably too) brief overview of the lead chapters.
If you are already familiar with the contributors, you likely won't
be too surprised by their general approach. What I think you will
find interesting is how they each apply their previous research
into the particularly difficult issue of explaining evil. Each author,
approaching the same question from a very different perspective,
not only gives his account, but also has the opportunity to respond
to each of the other lead essays. It is here that interesting "alliances"
emerge. Though Helm and Ruse disagree on whether God exists,
both find Davis's libertarian account of free will unsatisfactory.
They both also explicitly affirm a type of compatibilism, but do so
for very different reasons which, in turn, lead to their differences in
explaining evil. While Ruse and Wielenberg both reject theism, and
rely to varying extents on evolution to explain the occurrence of evil,
when it comes to explaining the nature of morality, Wielenberg's
objective account is more in line with the two theists than with Ruse.

Notes

1 See Howard-Snyder (1996) for a collection of evidential problems
   of evil. For a collection of classic problems of evil, including logical
   problems, see Adams and Adams (1991).

2 For a few of the more influential contemporary responses, see
  Plantinga (1974b), Swinburne (1998), Adams (1999), van Inwagen
  (2006), and Stump (2010).

3 This approach is similar to what Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams
  refer to as an *aporetic,* rather than an *atheological,* approach to the
  issue. See Adams and Adams (1991, 3–4). Murray and Greenberg
  (2016) note that the former was commonplace among Christian theists
  until the time of Leibniz, who was concerned with both.

4 Although Wielenberg refers to himself as an atheist, Ruse considers
  himself to be "atheistic about Christianity and agnostic about Ultimate
  Reality" (85). For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to them both as
  atheists.

5 One important exception to this is Langtry (2008, 42–47).

6 In the above quote we do see Plantinga *associate* evil with suffering,
  but it's not clear—nor does he claim—that "evil" just is "suffering."
  On the difference between the two, see Stump (2010, 5–8).

7 Some who work on evil have argued, for different reasons, that we
  dispense with the term "evil" entirely. See, for example, Cole (2006).

8 This serves as part of Calder's summary of Laurence Thomas's (1993)
  view, but Calder also notes he is in agreement with this part of
  Thomas.

9 For an argument against treating the two separately, see Trakakis
  (2005). In her masterful *Wandering in the Darkness*, Eleonore Stump
  uses "the problem of suffering" instead of the problem of evil because,
  regardless of the cause, it is suffering that really concerns us (2010, 4).
  While I am sympathetic to such an approach, it still may lead one to
  expect a single solution to both causes of suffering.