

Theodicy: How Can God Allow Suffering?

DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think suffering and evil is one of the most challenging topics in talking about Christianity?

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson you'll learn:

1. What is a "theodicy."
2. The classical argument from evil against the existence of God.
3. Talking points as a beginning theodicy.

One of the reasons most people give for not believing in the biblical God is the existence of evil and suffering in the world. We'll learn how the formal argument is presented, and then how we can begin to respond.

TACTICS

Remember that every position or explanation for evil must be based upon some beliefs. You seek out those beliefs by listening to people. Don't assume that any one position doesn't require explanation. In other words, the burden of proof should apply to someone who explains evil with or without belief in God.

Ask them...

1. What do you mean by that?
2. How did you come to that conclusion?
3. Have you ever considered? ¹

WHAT'S A THEODICY?

A *theodicy* is a defense of God in the face of evil. When people point at evil and suffering in the world and say "How can there be a good God?" they are attacking the belief in an all good, all powerful, all knowing God. (Again, We're not talking about emotionally or personally attacking, but philosophically attacking.)

When a Christian (or theist) responds and defends the belief in God given there is evil in the world, that is called a *theodicy*. So what you are going to learn today is part of a theodicy.

There are different kinds of theodicies. One type of theodicy uses the Bible in responding to evil. This *biblical* theodicy attempts to explain how Christians can understand God allowing evil.

But since non-Christians don't believe in the Bible, we need to use a *philosophical* theodicy. This philosophical theodicy is the type we will learn about in this class.

¹ Again, Greg Koukl in his book *Tactics* suggests these three questions. I think these three questions probably are used by many for years. I've found them helpful for years before I found Koukl's book.

THE CLASSICAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL AGAINST GOD'S EXISTENCE

Remember: "MP" stands for *modus ponens* and "MT" for *modus tollens*.

Step #	Proposition	Rule
1	If God existed, then He would be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good.	Premise
2	If God was all-knowing, then He would know there is evil.	Premise
3	If God was all-powerful, then He could prevent evil.	Premise
4	If God was all good, then He would want to prevent evil.	Premise
5	Therefore, if God existed, then He would prevent evil.	MP 1, 2, 3, 4
6	Evil exists.	Premise
7	Therefore, God does not exist.	MT 5, 6

This formulation is known as the "Logical Problem of Evil" against the existence of God. It's a "logical" problem because it was argued that the existence of evil poses a logical contradiction of the existence of the Judeo-Christian God.

But look closely. Is this argument valid? You already know the answer I'm going for. The answer is "no." Step 5 doesn't follow from the first four steps. There's a missing premise. Think... what is that missing premise?

Here it is: If God wants to do something and can do it, He will.

So go ahead, fill in the blanks in the argument with "4.1 If God wants to do something and can do it, He will. (Premise)" But we're not done yet. Now we shall see the demise of the logical problem from evil.

Christians have responded with a most brilliant theodicy so that today, no philosopher believes in the “logical” problem of evil. That’s while this argument is now valid, it’s not sound. That’s because step 4.1 really isn’t completely true. The best way to write step 4.1 is this: “If God wants to do something and can do it, then he will do it, *unless he wants to do something else more.*”

Finally, step 4.2 is “God wants true love more than the prevention of evil.” If you include this step, then the argument isn’t valid anymore, because there’s a logical reason for God to allow evil: true love.

But this hasn’t satisfied many philosophers, so now they argue that step 4.2 is not a *good* reason to allow evil. So evil is not a logical problem for God’s existence anymore, but an *evidential* one. Another way to say it is this: the existence of evil is good *evidence* that there’s no God.

Today, one of the biggest topic between atheists and theists in philosophy of religion is the “evidential argument from evil” against the existence of God.

TALKING POINTS FOR A BEGINNING THEODICY

I’ve decided to not present you with a formal refutation of the evidential argument from evil. (I did, however, present the formal refutation of the logical problem of evil.) Rather, I’d like to talk head-to-head and heart-to-heart with you about how to begin a response when someone asks you about evil.

1. Are you dealing with the *intellectual* argument from evil or the *emotional* argument from evil?

The intellectual argument is what we’ve studied, and will learn how to respond to reasons and arguments. The emotional argument from evil is someone just expressing an emotion or asking a rhetorical question or when a person is not prepared or willing to address the issue intellectually. In other words, the intellectual argument from evil asks, “How can God let those people in Sudan suffer and die?” The emotional argument from evil asks, “Why did God have to let my best friend die?”

2. Nail down their definition of evil.

This goes back to our discussion on absolute truth and relativism. Be clear on the issue before you try and respond. If they don’t believe in absolute good and evil, you’ll need to talk about that first.

3. Ask what they think is the answer to their question. (Or ask, “What sort of response have you heard on this issue before?”)

This approach is good for any question or issue. Ask this early on to continue to let the other person talk about the question (and help you with #1) and also to see what responses they’ve received before. If they tell you the same stuff you were going to respond with, then you can ask them why they didn’t believe it.

4. Ask them how the disbelief in God helps them deal with evil.
Again, learning and respecting how they think to help you best respond.
This can also lead them to see how without God, they don't know how to deal with evil. They can't.
5. Ask them how there can possibly be true evil without God?
This goes back to the moral argument for God's existence. You can't have absolute morality (i.e., good and evil) without God.
Interestingly enough, the people in American culture who are most adamant against evil in the world are those who are passionate for social justice. But those very people often do not believe in God and are moral relativists. Again, see previous point on morality.
6. Human freedom is worth the possibility of evil to God. When God created humanity, He wanted true love, which means Adam and Eve had to have the freedom to reject God. Evil is a result of human choice.
7. Only the reality of an afterlife and God can there ever be true justice served.
If there is no God, then people can live their evil lives and get away with evil. People can also suffer great injustice and cruelty and nothing will ever remedy that. But if there's an afterlife, then all the good and all the evil can be accounted for and dealt with.
8. This can lead them to your personal testimony or story that points to Jesus.
Example of the family who lost their son in a freak discus accident. They were Christians who trusted in God and still believed he was good. They can count on God to work out justice and mercy in the end.