

# The Problem of Evil—Part 4

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## The Problem of Physical Evil.

The solutions to the problem of evil mentioned in the previous articles do not appear to solve the problem of natural disasters. Why tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes? It does not suffice to say that the free will of creatures caused all these. Further, many innocent people are killed in them. How, then, can natural evil be explained? In logical form:

1. Moral evil is explained by free choice.
2. But some natural evil does not result from free choice.
3. Natural evil cannot be explained by free choice of creatures.
4. Hence, God must be responsible for natural evil.
5. But natural evils cause innocent suffering and death.
6. Therefore, God is responsible for innocent suffering and death.

Theists question several premises of this argument. One response to premise 5, for example, is that in this fallen world no one is innocent. We sinned in Adam (Rom. 5:12) and as a consequence deserve death (Rom. 6:23). Natural disaster is a direct result of the curse on creation because of the fall of humankind (Genesis 3; Romans 8). It will not be removed until Christ returns (Revelation 21-22).

Likewise, proposition 6 is mistaken, since it implies God is morally culpable for taking the life of a creature. This is a category mistake, since it wrongly assumes that, since it is wrong for a creature to take innocent life, it is also wrong for the Creator to do so. But God gave life and alone has the right to take it (cf. Deut. 32:39; Job 1:21). We did not give life, and we do not have the right to take it.

Premise 3 is definitely untrue. For theism can explain all natural evil by reference to free choice. In biblical language, the free choice of Adam and Eve brought natural disaster on this world. In addition the free choice of evil angels accounts for the rest of human suffering. But even putting this possibility aside, which could in itself explain all natural evil, physical suffering can be explained in reference to human free choice.

1. Some suffering is brought on directly by our own free choice. The choice to abuse my body can result in sickness.
2. Some suffering is brought on indirectly by free choice. The choice to be lazy can result in poverty.
3. Some physical evil to others can result from our free choice, as in the case of spouse or child abuse.
4. Others suffer indirectly because of our free choice. Alcoholism can lead to poverty of one's children.
5. Some physical evil may be a necessary byproduct of a good process. Rain, hot air, and cool air are all necessary for food and life, but a byproduct of these forces is a tornado.
6. Some physical evil may be a necessary condition for attaining a greater moral good. God uses pain to get our attention. Many have come to God through suffering.
7. Some physical suffering may be a necessary condition of a greater moral good. Just as diamonds are formed under pressure, even so is character.
8. Some physical evil is a necessary concomitant of a morally good physical world. For instance, it is good to have water to swim and boat in, but a necessary concomitant is

that we can also drown in it. It is good to have sex for procreation and enjoyment, even though it makes rape possible. It is good to have food to eat, but this also makes dying of food poisoning possible.

At this point the critic could always ask why a physical world is necessary. Why did not God make spirits, who could not hurt their bodies or die. The answer is: God did; they are called angels. The problem is that, while no angel can die of food poisoning, neither can they enjoy a prime rib. While no angel has ever drowned, neither has any angel ever gone for a swim or went water skiing. No angel has ever been raped, but neither has any angel ever enjoyed sex or the blessing of having children (Matt. 22:30). In this kind of physical world, we simply must take the concomitant evil along with the good.

Eventually, of course, Christian theists believe God will redeem us from all physical evil too, giving us immortal and incorruptible bodies. But if we had those before we were morally ready for them, we would not have made the necessary moral progress toward being suited to them.

### **The Avoidability of Evil.**

If God knew evil would occur, why did he create it? God was free to create or not to create. Why did he choose to create a world he knew would fall? Theists believe God is all-knowing, all-good, and free. As all-knowing, God foresaw evil. As free, he could have avoided creating the world. But this conflicts with God as all-good, for such a God must have had a good purpose for creating a world he knew would fall. Why then did he create it?

There were other better alternatives open to God. He could have not created at all. He could have created a nonmoral world where no sin could occur. He could have created a free world where no one would have chosen to sin. He could have created a world where sin occurred but where everyone was ultimately saved. Any one of these worlds would have been better than the world conceived by the orthodox Christian theist, where evil occurs and where not everyone will be saved in the end. The problem takes this form:

1. God could have chosen a better alternative by: (a) not creating at all; (b) not creating a free world; (c) creating a free world that would not sin; (d) creating a world that sinned but would all be saved.
2. But God did not choose one of these better alternatives.
3. Therefore God did not do his best.
4. But to do less than his best is an evil for God.
5. Therefore, no all-perfect God exists.

Some theists challenge the fourth premise, arguing that God does not have to do his best; he merely has to do good. And what he did in creating this world was good, even if there could have been something better. But assuming, for the argument, that God must do his best, is any other alternative really better than this world? Theists say No.

A nonworld is not better than some world. Nothing is not better than something. This is a classic category mistake. Something and nothing have nothing in common, so they cannot be compared. It is not even like comparing apples and oranges, since they both are fruit. It is like comparing apples and non-apples, insisting that non-apples taste better.

A nonfree world is not morally better than a free world. A nonfree world is a nonmoral world, since free will is necessary for morality. A nonmoral world cannot be morally better than a moral world. Since a nonfree world is not a moral world, there is no moral basis for comparison. This too is a category mistake.

A free world where no one sins or even a free world where everyone sins and then gets saved is *conceivable* but it may not be *achievable*. As long as everyone is really free, it is always possible that someone will refuse to do the good. Of course, God could force everyone to do good, but then they would not be free. Forced freedom is not freedom at all. Since God is love, he cannot force himself on anyone against their will. Forced love is not love; it is rape. And God is not a divine rapist. Love must work persuasively but not coercively. Hence, in every conceivable free world someone would chose to do evil, so a perfect evil-free world may not be possible.

A world where sin never materializes is *conceivable* but it may not be the *most desirable* morally. If evil is not permitted, then it can not be defeated. Like automobiles, a tested world is better than an untested one. Or, to put it another way, no boxer can beat an opponent without getting into the ring. God may have permitted evil in order to defeat it. If evil is not allowed, then the higher virtues cannot be attained. No pain, no gain. Tribulation works patience. There is no way to experience the joy of forgiveness without allowing the fall into sin. So, a world where evil is not defeated and the higher goods attained would not be the best world achievable. Therefore, while a world where sin does not occur is *theoretically conceivable*, it would be *morally inferior*.

### **Conclusion**

No one has demonstrated that any alternative world is morally better than the one we have. Hence, no antitheist can show that God did not create the best world, even given the privation of good. This, of course, does not mean that the theist is committed to the belief that this present world is the best world that can be achieved. God is not finished yet, and Scripture promises that something better will be achieved. The theist's assumption is that this world is the best way *to* the best world achievable.