

File: Evil

OCCC ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL -27 JAN 1991

TOPIC THREE: WHY DOES A GOOD GOD ALLOW EVIL?

I) The Problems of Evil

1) The Logical Problem: the allegation that the propositions "a good & all-powerful God exists" & "evil exists" are logically contradictory.

2) The Evidential Problem: the fact of evil is evidence against God. Probabilistic formulation. More powerful is the *explanatory* version: as a worldview, theism should be able to explain the totality of experience; hence the failure to explain evil counts against theism.

a) The logic of the argument can be captured (in a simplified way) by the following syllogism:

A) If God exists & cares, He will perform action X.

B) God does not perform actions of X.

C) Hence, either God does not exist or God does not care.

b) The variable X can be filled out in many ways:

-abolishing *all* evils

-preventing *this horrendous evil* from occurring

-preventing such an enormous *amount* of evil from occurring

-preventing such a *distribution* of evil to prevail

c) The kinds of evil:

i) moral evil: evil intention $\implies$ evil action $\implies$ perversion
or society

of evil-doer + harm on others

e.g. murder, massacre, betrayal

(Note that God *could* stop a moral evil at different stages.)

ii) natural evil: natural event (+ human ignorance or
people

limitations) $\implies$ harm on

e.g. earthquake, car accident

iii) personal sufferings: experiences $\implies$ inner pain

e.g. bereavement, moral struggle, disillusion, emptiness

3) The Existential Problem: the challenge of evil is not primarily intellectual. More often it causes problem because we are *struck* by a certain evil:

i) We find it hard to *understand*. "It's just meaningless!"

ii) We can't *accept or come to terms with* it. "It shouldn't occur!"

iii) The ensuing consequence is that we find it hard to believe in God's love or the meaningfulness of life. It may issues in back-sliding or rebellion against God.

II) Why Denial of God is not the Solution?

1) The deeper problem of evil is not the intellectual problem; it is the problem of meaning & existence. How can we make sense of our lives & others' lives in which joy & sadness, blessings & tragedies, etc. are so randomly interwoven? The fact that we are deeply *shaken*, & *enraged* *sometimes*, by evil show that we are *actually searching for a meaning*. Implicitly we are insisting that there *should be a meaning*! If not, why should we bother to protest against God? Why shouldn't we just calmly accept that life & its many evils have no meaning at all? I suggest that this

is the crux. Seen in this light, denial of God is only a better solution if atheistic solutions have a better answer. So far as I can see, this has not been offered. Naturalism & Buddhism considered.

2) The related problem is "how to overcome evil". Does denial of God give us more moral resources to do that? The reverse instead seems to be true! Moral cynicism & protest alone are not helpful.

3) There is also the problem of ultimate justice. Our sense of indignation against some horrendous evils. Hitler, Stalin, Mao & their victims. Judge & vindication. The case of Luk Kwok Wing in a TVB series. Kantian argument not without force, especially when we take our moral intuitions seriously. (cf. the postulate of intelligibility of nature in science)

4) We should also take the evidences of God & our experiences into consideration.

III) Tackling the Evidential Problem

1) The flaw with the argument (p.1): premise A is not obviously true. Consider the parallel argument of a girl, say:

A) If he loves me, he will do X

B) He doesn't do X

C) Hence, he doesn't love me.

Here "do X" may represent "remember my birthday or the date of our first dating", "escort me home on that night", "listen to me patiently", ... The logic is impeccable! (This shows the wrongheadedness of male chauvinists who say women have no logic. The difference seems to be that women can more easily arrive at the conclusion intuitively without spelling out the premises.) However the premise A is at best dubious. Although the boyfriend may be culpable if he doesn't do X, the reason may not be lack of love. It may be due to negligence or lack of understanding. The relation between love & behaviour is so complicated in a human being that such categorical statements like A are precarious. So much worse are the similar statements made in the case of God.

2) Difficulty of modern man with understanding evil is mainly due to a certain sort of mentality: Fun-fair Mentality. Big air-cushions. The world is a big party, a hedonistic paradise? Love = sentimentalism? (I just want you happy & I won't mind what kind of person you are! True love?) We can't have any answer to the problem of evil if we don't break loose from the shackles of these expectations:

a) If there is indeed an all-knowing & all-good God who is our Creator, to whom we owe all our being, there is simply no point in insisting that we should decide *what* is the best way to live. Firstly, God knows better. Secondly, God has the right to say rather than us.

b) We have to recognize the diversity of goods: pleasure (satisfaction of desire), knowledge/wisdom, music, appreciation of beauty, creativity, relationship, community/ solidarity, compassion, bravery, love, worship, help, responsibility, depth of personality, sacrifice, repentance, reconciliation, growth/learning, humour ...

c) Love can be demanding, especially God's *holy love*. God's love is not sentimentalism. (Even a human parent who offers nothing more than sentimentalism is less than desirable.) It desires the best for us & seeks to bring out the best from us while preserving our personhood.

3) So much for the preparatory work. Let us now look at what can be a plausible interpretation of the concrete action of 4) 4) God's love. The general argument is that *many* kinds of evil can be seen as i) means to greater good; or ii) necessary side effects in achieving God's good purpose; or iii) consequence of Fall & human sin.

4) The Unexplained: however, it is not denied that there are still *some apparently pointless evils which seem to defy the above scheme. However, I would argue that a Christian can keep both his head & heart* without evading the above fact.

a) Consider this argument concerning an evil E:

- A) If there is a moral reason for E, we should know it.
- B) We do not know it.
- C) Hence, there is no moral reason for E.
- D) If there is a God, there should be a reason for E.
- E) Hence, there is no God.

Why should we subscribe to (A)? We shouldn't because of:

- i) the finitude of human mind; the complexity of the world order & the complicated relationship between good & evil; God's unfathomable wisdom & plan.
- ii) the fact that there are positive signs that the world is designed by a Mind who is much superior to ours. The example of the ET's super-computer.
- iii) the fact that many evils, though initially perplexing, are susceptible to reasonable explanations by theism. Inductive evidence for existence of solutions yet unknown.
- iv) the fact that we have access to only a small part of the drama of history. The alterability of value, especially by the *future*. The after-life. Possibility of compensation & transformation of apparently pointless evil.
- v) As a comprehensive worldview, it is to be expected that theism should leave something unexplained. It is the same with all worldviews. Also it is the case with a comprehensive scientific theory, e.g. failure of Newton's theory to explain the perihelion of Mercury. The heuristic value of the principle of tenacity. Again naturalism considered.
- vi) We should consider all the evidences. Evil may be some counterevidence against existence of God but it need not be decisive. The reason is that we may have positive evidence for existence of God. (ref. Topic Two of this class)

IV) Tackling the Existential Problem

1) Yes, we can't *understand*. However, why insist that we need to understand everything? Moreover the above discussion exactly points to a way to *understand why we can't understand*.

2) The problem of coming to terms with some evil:

a) Faith: existential doubt seen as trial of faith.

b) Hope: the present is not the last scene. There is the new heaven & new earth. God will provide a satisfactory answer to each individual for every single apparently unjustified suffering.

c) Love: contemplation of the Cross.

i) Why the Cross? The case of the poisoned child as analogy. ii) The suffering God revealed. The *universal* significance of the Cross- Christ is continuously revealed in human sufferings. (Mt 25's parable; Is 53.)

iii) A deeper principle of life revealed. (Jn 12.24-26; Mt 16.24ff) Life through death.

3) The reply in *action*

- a) By suffering with dignity & faith. Contemplation of the saints. The Queen of the Dark Chamber. The martyrs.
- b) By identifying with the suffering people. Jesus is suffering with us but who is suffering with Jesus? That is part of the meaning of taking up the cross & following Jesus.
- c) By actively striving to alleviate sufferings & remove the cause of them. Charity. Social action.

Quotes from William Temple:

"Cross and Resurrection together give us Tragedy transmuted into triumph as the key to the interpretation of the world. The analogy of Tragedy recalls the supreme illustration of the alterability of values. In any Drama, and pre-eminently in Tragedy, the value of the opening scenes is affected by what follows. The past as fact is fixed... but its value is not fixed. A man who commits a sin is to all eternity the man who committed that sin, but the value of the sin is one thing if he remains hard and impenitent, and quite another thing if he repents." (p.271f)

"A world into which evil has come can never again be a world innocent of all evil; but it may become a world in which evil has been overcome of good- a nobler world than one always innocent... The Love of God makes evil a contributory cause of that perfection; and this is the Atonement ... It tells us that sacrifice is the root principle of Reality..." (p.272)

"So God vindicates His Own Deity. Only such a God can be the God of the world we know. For the Name of God signifies the union of perfect goodness and absolute power. We should have to deny the one or the other if we could not believe in God as revealed in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus." (p.273)