

MB Herald Digest

Can't Live with It. Can't Live without It?

The Perplexing Enigma of Evil in Human Existence

The First in a Series of Four Articles

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This may seem a little odd to people who do not know me well, but it will be no surprise to those who are familiar with my academic journey. I have devoted much of my time in the last few years to broadly thinking and teaching about the problem of evil. This sustained effort recently gave birth to a book on that very topic: *God Never Meant for Us to Die: The Emergence of Evil in the Light of the Genesis Creation Account* (Wipf & Stock). In this series of articles the MB Herald graciously accepted to publish, I will walk you through some of the key landmarks of a book that focuses on what must surely is the most infuriating and frustrating problem men and women face. Evil, pain, and suffering are as intrinsic to human experience as cream in coffee. To be human is to be condemned to live with the constant threat of suffering, misery, and death.

I must note, however, that after investing so much time and energy into this project, I was surprised to rediscover a wonderful truth about human existence. That there is a problem of evil is unquestionable. But perhaps the real question is not why there is so much evil, but why there is any good at all.

I am not talking about minuscule samples of good peppered here and there like rare specks of gold in an abandoned mine. Human experience is surprisingly full of goodness, joy, and happiness. As C. S. Lewis observes, "The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has

scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy.”¹ Or think of little children. Unless they are mired in dire circumstances, children everywhere are happy and delight in life. Little boys and girls laugh at the merest pretext: the sight of a wiener dog, an unusual sound, a funny word, a hiccup, even a facial contortion can send a toddler reeling with delight and uncontrollable laughter.

That there should be so much joy and happiness despite the ever-looming presence of evil is perhaps the real conundrum. But unless we are prodded to focus on that particular enigma, we simply will not, for it is the deafening reality of pain and evil that will always win this tug of war.

Evil trips us up for two reasons. First, embodied evil is abrasively and oppressively real. To be trapped in its jaws is to be caught in a vice-grip that urgently and intensely commands our attention. Second, if we are powerless to divert our attention from it for any length of time, it is because we intuitively sense that there is something unnatural about it. Evil exists. But it *ought* not to.

This brokenness that imposes itself on every man and woman is not just out there. It is inside our very self; something deep within us is amiss. It is as if we are no longer what we once were. Christian tradition refers to this sense of loss as the Fall. Chesterton’s description of this aberration is as insightful as anything ever written about it:

And to the question, “What is meant by the Fall?” I could answer with complete sincerity, “That whatever I am, I am not myself. This is the prime paradox of our religion; something that we have never in any full sense known, is not only better than ourselves, but even more natural to us than ourselves.”²

¹ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 116.

² Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 167.

If evil is not congenial to who we are, where does it come from and why do we find it in the deepest recesses of the human soul, as if fused to our very DNA? While our society is exceedingly proficient at depicting evil, it is also proportionately inept at explaining why the world is as it is.

Why does evil, in all its perverse “glory,” rise up, like some ghoulish Phoenix, with every new generation? Is this a learned behavior that is somehow transmitted through an intractable socialization process we are not fully aware of? And if that is the case, why can’t we identify these mechanisms and use our formidable body of knowledge to eliminate evil from human history once and for all?

But deep down we know better. Evil is not some alien entity that surreptitiously emerges out of thin air to invade our souls. In our most lucid moments, we have no choice but to admit, even if reluctantly so, that Jesus was right: evil nests in our innermost being (Matt 15:19)!

For believers, this reality represents the most ferocious assault on the Christian faith and gives rise to a seemingly inextricable dilemma: how can a good, loving, and omnipotent God allow evil and suffering to plague the lives of his creatures. This is the question I relentlessly pursue in the pages of my new book.

Despite the tsunami of attention the issue has received throughout history, the explanations offered to account for human suffering fall into two major camps. In the one instance, evil is viewed as eternal and necessary, rooted in the very person of God (or the gods) or the fabric of reality. The other way to frame evil is to negate its reality, as witnessed, for instance, in pantheistic belief systems, where the distinction between good and evil collapses.

There is almost a universal resignation (a capitulation?) to the idea that evil is an unavoidable and necessary component of human existence. Somewhat surprisingly, Christian

tradition has also failed to offer a truly distinct perspective on evil. Augustine, a giant whose footprint looms large on the theological landscape, postulated that all instances of evil have purpose and will eventually be woven into a greater whole that will attribute significance even to the most revolting acts of human cruelty. For his part, the second-century bishop, Irenaeus of Lyons, posited that God designed the world as a “sphere of soul-making.”³ Most theologians, philosophers, pastors, and ordinary Christians comfortably live between these two poles.

If these views are correct, then evil must ultimately be defined as a good; an indispensable element of reality. This position entails two inescapable difficulties. On the one hand, such an outlook effectively limits the goodness and power of God, for any pronouncement in that respect is undermined by the notion that God could not bring about the completion of his project for humanity without the introduction of evil in the creation process. On the other hand, Christians who experience tragedy will either face a crisis of faith with little or no confidence in God’s power and goodness, or they will frantically search for the key that unlocks the mystery of divine purpose as it pertains to their specific circumstances.

My book represents a response to the problem of evil that affirms the absolute goodness and power of God, as well as the irredeemable nature of evil. The originality of my approach lies in framing the reality of evil in the light of God’s original design for humanity, as formulated in Genesis 1:26–28, and a more precise assessment of the purpose and the implications of the injunction against eating of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in Genesis 2:15–17.

At the core of my thesis is the conviction the God never intended for humans to experience suffering and death, and that evil never was an inevitable component of God’s original plan for humanity.

³ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 372.

I begin with the assumption that the Genesis creation account was expressly written to exonerate God from all responsibility for the presence of moral evil in the world. I demonstrate that the narrative argues against any form of divine determinism and strictly ascribes the emergence of evil to human agency.

The major benefits of this study are twofold. First, it creates a credible scenario in which God bears no moral responsibility for the deployment of evil in the world, thus removing one of the major stumbling blocks to belief and trust in God. Second, it serves to rehabilitate the credibility of the creation narrative as the most coherent explanation for the emergence of evil in human history.

The book ends with a reflection on the profound and overwhelming hope that the Christian faith offers to those who commit their lives to Jesus Christ. The hope of the resurrection encompasses all dimensions of human life: the need for justice, the human yearning for a permanent home, psychological healing without the loss of personal identity, and eternal life as perfect and free creatures living forever in joyful fellowship with the living God and the myriads of men and women who will populate the New World.

In the next article, I will explain why, despite the massive efforts theologians, philosophers, and scientists have deployed to subvert it, the Genesis creation story still offers the most plausible and original response to the presence of evil in our world.