



**Gutenberg College 2012 Summer Institute**

**The Problem of Evil: How Do We Know God is Good?**

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A. Problem of evil.

1. The “problem of evil” is the problem of how to reconcile the co-existence of the Judaeo-Christian God with the evil that is in world.
  - a. The Judaeo-Christian God is a God who is both utterly sovereign and perfectly good.

B. Various forms of the “argument from evil.”

1. The evil in the world as an argument against the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God. [*There is no God!*]
2. The evil in the world as an argument against the goodness of God. [*God is not good!*]
3. The evil in the world as an argument against the sovereignty of God. [*God is not sovereign!*]
4. The evil in the world as an argument against divine determinism. [*God is not the author of absolutely everything!*]
5. The evil in the world as an argument for defiance toward and rebellion against God. [*God is not to be honored!*]
  - a. An “argument” that it is not morally right to bow one’s knee to God!
  - b. This is not actually an “argument” so much as it is an appeal to choose defiance. [Ivan Karamazov]

C. My focus in these talks will be to assess the argument from evil as an argument against divine determinism.

1. These comments will have relevance for the other forms of the argument from evil (including the argument for rebelling against God); but these other forms of the argument are not the focus of my concern in these notes.

D. Divine determinism has the following defining tenets:

1. God transcends (created) reality.
2. From his place of transcendence, God determines every aspect of everything that is and everything that occurs.
3. Created reality has a narrative structure. (Created reality is a story, a tale, that God is creating.)
4. God is the author of reality.
  - a. God’s relationship to human beings is analogous to an author’s relationship to the characters in a novel he is writing.

- b. God effects human choice by TRANSCENDENTLY causing the free-will choices of human beings; he does not cause human choice through ordinary causation.
  5. Created reality is a "story" that is created to give expression to the goodness of God. The purpose of the story is not to promote the well-being of each and every creature within the story.
- E. I will use the term "biblical divine determinism" to identify the view of God taught in the Bible, a view with the following defining tenets:
1. Every tenet of divine determinism described above; and
  2. God is flawlessly and absolutely good.
- F. The following statements are true of biblical divine determinism (vis-à-vis all the other theistic positions within the Judaeo-Christian tradition):
1. On the face of it, biblical divine determinism would seem to be the theistic position that is most vulnerable to the problem of evil.
  2. But, ultimately, biblical divine determinism is the only theistic position with the resources to adequately answer and resolve the problem of evil.
    - a. This is one of the important reasons why I, personally, embrace biblical divine determinism as the truth.
- G. Responding to the problem of evil, some preliminary points of clarification:
1. The standard of goodness that we must use to judge the goodness of God is the ordinary concept of goodness that we apply in ordinary, everyday moral judgment; it is a concept and standard that we share with God himself.
    - a. The problem of evil is defined by this standard.
      - i. That is, how can God be good (in the ordinary sense) in the light of all the evil (in the ordinary sense) in the world?
    - b. Since we are created in the image of God, it stands to reason that God would have created us to share in and reflect his own standard and concept of goodness.
      - i. Since we are rebellious, foolish sinners, it is possible and probable that we can have a distorted understanding of this concept of goodness. Therefore, we must have a humble self-awareness of how distorted and perverse our actual moral judgments might be.
  2. All moral judgment is dependent upon how an act or event is characterized or described. If an act is poorly, inadequately, or incompletely characterized, it can be easily misjudged.
    - a. No act can be accurately judged to be evil (or to be good) unless it has been accurately and fully described.
      - i. Note the different moral judgment made of a mugger opening up a person's abdomen with a knife and of a surgeon doing likewise.
    - b. No act can be accurately judged to be evil (or to be good) unless one has rightly understood the role, authority, position, relationships, and prerogatives of the one doing the act.

- i. Note the different moral judgment one makes of a husband being sexually intimate with his wife vis-à-vis an adulterous neighbor being sexually intimate with her.
    - ii. Note the different moral judgment one makes of a man treating his daughter as a child vis-à-vis treating his wife as a child.
  - c. When passing moral judgment on God, one must make his judgment in accordance with an accurate and complete description of God’s actions, and that judgment must include a recognition that, as the author of all reality, there are certain prerogatives that belong to God that do not belong to any human creature.
    - i. Note the different moral judgment made of a murderer purposely causing a person to have an automobile accident in which that person dies vis-à-vis God doing likewise.
      - (A) When God causes the death of person P, he has not “murdered” person P. That would be an inaccurate description of God’s act.
        - (1) God purposely ends every human being’s existence. It is his prerogative as the creator. One could never justly describe as “murder” God’s purposely taking a human being’s life.
      - ii. What is the right moral judgment to make with regard to the act of God’s causing person M to shoot person P to death?
        - (A) Did God “kill” person P? Did God COMMIT a murder?
        - (B) Or, did God cause M to kill person P? Did God CREATE a murder?
  3. When we judge God differently from how we judge a human being doing essentially the same thing, it does not necessarily entail that we are using a different standard of goodness. More likely, we are simply acknowledging God’s unique relationship to reality.
- H. The argument from evil as an argument against divine determinism:
  1. If a divine being exists who is perfectly and flawlessly good, then it is not possible for both of the following to be true: (i) divine determinism is true (that is, that God is the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs), and (ii) created reality contains inexcusable evil.
  2. As a matter of fact, created reality DOES contain inexcusable evil.
  3. Therefore, if a divine being exists who is perfectly and flawlessly good, then it follows that divine determinism is not true (that is, that God is NOT the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs).
  4. As a matter of biblical teaching and faith, a divine being exists who is perfectly and flawlessly good.
  5. Therefore, it follows that divine determinism is not true (that is, that God is NOT the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs).
- I. If we know—independently of any judgment about the nature and extent of evil in created reality—that biblical divine determinism is, in fact, true, then the above argument can be converted into an argument against the existence of inexcusable evil as follows:

1. If a divine being exists who is perfectly and flawlessly good, then it is not possible for both of the following to be true: (i) divine determinism is true (that is, that God is the author and determiner of everything that is and of every aspect of everything that occurs), and (ii) created reality contains inexcusable evil.
  2. Therefore, if biblical divine determinism is true (that is, if divine determinism is true and God is flawlessly good), then it follows that created reality does not contain inexcusable evil.
  3. As a matter of biblical teaching and faith, biblical divine determinism is true (that is, a divine being exists who is the author and determiner of everything and who is perfectly and flawlessly good).
  4. Therefore, it follows that created reality does not contain inexcusable evil.
- J. Both of the above arguments are equally valid; therefore, it comes down to a choice between two premises:
1. Premise #1: Created reality does contain inexcusable evil.
    - a. From this premise it follows that biblical divine determinism cannot be true.
  2. Premise #2: Biblical divine determinism is true.
    - a. From this premise it follows that created reality cannot contain inexcusable evil.
  3. Therefore, the argument from evil proves one and only one thing: Premise #1 and Premise #2 cannot both be true. One or the other of them must be false.
    - a. The argument from evil cannot prove that Premise #2 is false; for it cannot prove either premise false.
- K. The difference between the biblical divine determinist and the detractor of divine determinism consists in the following:
1. The detractor of divine determinism embraces Premise #1 because he thinks our experience in the world makes it obvious that there is inexcusable evil in the world.
    - a. The remainder of these notes are devoted largely to an assessment of the "obviousness" that inexcusable evil exists.
  2. The biblical divine determinist embraces Premise #2 because he thinks that the data of biblical revelation (and philosophical reflection) cannot be adequately explained by any other view.
    - a. It is beyond the scope of these notes to make the case of biblical divine determinism. For a reasonably thorough defense of most of the important tenets of biblical divine determinism, see my book *The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism*.

## Assessing the Respective Choice of Premises

- L. Assessing Premise #1: Is it obvious that inexcusable evil exists in created reality?
1. Factors that contribute to our perception that it is obvious that inexcusable evil exists:
    - a. Belief that the existence of ANY evil whatsoever is incompatible with biblical divine determinism.
      - i. Specious assumption: A good God cannot be the origin of any evil.
      - ii. In fact, God need not be evil in order to have the resources to create evil.
        - (A) God created matter, yellow, etc. without being material, yellow, etc.
        - (B) With imagination, God can conceive of the antithesis of what he is.
    - b. Belief that God must be culpable for any evil he causes his free-will creatures to do.
      - i. Specious assumption: If God is the ultimate cause of everything, then God is culpable for all the evil done by free-will beings.
      - ii. This involves a failure to note the important difference between God being a transcendent cause and God being an ordinary cause of the evil he determines. God is not morally accountable for the evil he causes his creatures to do.
        - (A) Transcendent causation has a different “logic” from ordinary causation.
          - (1) If God coerces Jack to do an evil act by force, he shares the blame—or, perhaps, he is to blame—for Jack’s evil act. [ordinary causation]
          - (2) If God creates Jack’s free choice to do an evil act, he shares none of the blame for Jack’s evil act. [transcendent causation]
        - (B) It is wrong to pass judgment upon God on account of his creative causation of evil deeds as if that creative causation were ordinary—and not transcendent—causation.
          - (1) God, the transcendent author, is not culpable for the evil deeds his creatures do. Hence, God is not to blame for all the evil that humans do in this reality. His moral character cannot be judged thereby.
        - (C) It is a common mistake to think that committing an evil act and transcendentally causing (creating) an evil act are morally equivalent.
          - (1) To create evil is not the same thing as doing and being evil! One can create evil and yet be a good person.
            - (a) Note that the presence of evil characters and evil deeds in a novel do not entail that the novelist is evil.
          - (2) To evaluate the CREATION of an evil act, one must determine the following:
            - (a) Was the act necessary to the narrative of which it is a part?
            - (b) And, is the narrative of which it is a part a narrative that ought to have been created? Is it a good story—a morally appropriate and worthy story?
          - (3) God’s creation of an evil act by a free-will creature is evidence of God’s being evil if, and only if, (a) he has created an evil act that was

- not necessary to the narrative that he is creating, and/or (b) the narrative that he is creating ought never to have been created (that is, it is not worthy to exist).
- c. Belief that a good and worthy reality (a good narrative) would contain no evil whatsoever.
- i. Specious assumption: A good creation (narrative) is made evil just to the extent that it contains evil deeds within it.
- ii. In fact, a good created reality (narrative) may very well contain evil deeds within it—if, in fact, those evil deeds are necessary to the “meaning” of the narrative (and the worthiness of created reality).
- (A) An occurrence can be meaningful and contribute to a good story even if the occurrence itself is evil.
- iii. As the author of the “story” of reality, God cannot rightly be judged by the moral nature of each and every occurrence within the story, he can only rightly be judged by the worthiness of the story itself, TAKEN AS A WHOLE.
- (A) Remember, divine determinism insists ...
- (1) on the narrative structure of reality.
- (2) and, therefore, that God is to be judged by the moral quality of the grand, sweeping, overarching narrative he is creating; and not by the moral nature of any particular occurrence; and not by the outcome of any given creature’s existence.
- (B) God can be judged to be evil if and only if
- (1) the story ought not to have been created, and/or
- (2) the evil within it is not necessary to its intrinsic meaning.
- (C) God can create free-will creatures who choose to do evil without himself, as the author of it all, being evil for having created them, if the overall story he created is a worthwhile story and if it was morally permissible to have created it.
- (1) It is no more evil for God to have created evil human beings who do evil things than it is for a novelist to have created evil characters who do evil things.
- (a) A “story” can be good (meaningful, significant, and WORTHY) even while it contains evil beings doing evil, ugly, harmful things.
- (b) The author of a story must be judged by the worthiness and goodness of the story as a whole.
- (i) If evil acts contained in the story make a necessary and significant contribution to the meaning and significance of the story, then their presence does not mean that the author is evil.
- (D) If the Story is worthy, then anything God creates is “good” to the extent that it contributes meaningfully to the meaning and significance of the overarching Story.
- (1) God can create a morally evil event without being evil himself insofar as the evil event he created contributes to a morally good story.

- (a) An evil deed within created reality does not necessarily make reality itself evil.
- d. Belief that I have a standpoint from which I can make a valid judgment that the evil I see is “meaningless” and/or “unnecessary.”
  - i. Specious assumption that I can know whether an evil event is necessary.
  - ii. In fact, we lack an adequate perspective from which we can claim to know such a thing.
    - (A) We do not have a perspective from which to know the ultimate and final “meaning” of any particular event within reality. The story is not over!
    - (B) I do not have a standpoint from which I can claim to evaluate—from my own standpoint—whether the story of created reality is worthwhile and, therefore, morally permissible.
    - (C) Contrary to fact, we would have to know the whole story of all of created reality in order to know such a thing.
- e. Belief that I have a standpoint from which I can make a valid judgment that the evil that exists in the world is “excessive.”
  - i. Specious assumption that a human being could know when the amount of evil in the world is excessive.
  - ii. In fact, we lack an adequate perspective from which we can claim to know such a thing.
    - (A) Contrary to fact, we would have to know the whole story of all of created reality—and know it from the “inside”—in order to know such a thing.
- f. Belief that created reality is not good and worthwhile if its outcome for me (or for any other creature of interest to me) is not beneficial to me (or for that other creature).
  - i. Specious assumption that a “good” created reality must necessarily result in a good outcome for any and every creature of concern to me.
    - (A) Since there are many bad outcomes for many creatures of concern to me, created reality is unnecessarily evil.
  - ii. In fact, in a perfectly good created reality, the outcome for any particular creature may not be a beneficial one.
    - (A) Whether what God creates is morally good is not rightly determined by whether any particular created being BENEFITS from it.
      - (1) An ultimately harmful outcome to one of God’s creatures (e.g., Satan) does not make reality itself evil.
    - (B) The Story of created reality (and each individual storyline within it) is good, right, and worthy to the extent that it reflects something meaningful, significant, and true about its morally good author, God.
      - (1) The purpose of the particular storyline that God is creating, centered in me, is to bring “glory” to him, not to bring benefit to ME.

- (2) The goodness and worthiness of any given storyline is NOT dependent upon whether its resolution benefits any particular actor within that storyline.
- (3) If one rejects this perspective on God and reality, then *there is no answer* to the problem of evil.
  - (a) The nature and extent of evil in the world just is incompatible with God being good in the sense that he a creator who desires to bring benefit to each and every one of his creatures. If that is how we insist on defining “good,” THEN GOD IS NOT GOOD.
- (4) This fact about God and created reality is the most significant stumbling block within the biblical worldview.
  - (a) We strongly resist the idea that reality is absolutely theo-centric (God-centered) in this way.
    - (i) We naturally gravitate toward a creature-centric (and especially a **me**-centric) perspective.
      - A) Namely: If **I** do not benefit by my existence, then it is not good that God created me. If my “story” does not end well for me, where I ultimately benefit, then my story cannot be judged to be a “good” one.
      - (ii) Five important, but offensive, implications of the above fact:
        - A) God did not create reality to bring benefit to me; he created reality to reflect who he is.
        - B) By the very nature of who God is and what created reality is, God is fully within his rights to “use” me to fulfill whatever purposes he chooses. If those purposes are good, then God is good—regardless of whether the outcome is good for me.
        - C) The moral goodness of God is found in the moral goodness of the story of reality as a whole; it is not found in whether he brings benefit to me and mine.
        - D) Creating me does not obligate God to bring me benefit. God can be perfectly good and, at the same time, bring nothing but harm to me.
        - E) If I concede that God is under no obligation to benefit me, then, in the end, I will be given an end that benefits me. But if I insist that God is under obligation to benefit me, then, in the end, I will not be given an end that benefits me.
2. In actual fact, as the above considerations show, it is not obvious that inexcusable evil exists in created reality. We do not have a standpoint from which we could possibly claim to know that the evil we see in reality is inexcusable.
  - a. If we were to judge created reality from our own vantage point, were to draw no inferences from what we can know about the character of its creator, and were to judge simply on the basis of the story that created reality is, we would justly have to remain agnostic with regard to whether it contains any inexcusable evil.



- i. Unless and until we can see how the story of reality ultimately and finally resolves itself, we have no basis from which to know whether the evil we see in the present is meaningful and necessary, or not.
- M. Assessing Premise #1: Is it obvious that inexcusable suffering exists in created reality? [In the following notes, “suffering” is intended to include physical pain as well as psycho-emotional pain or misery.]
1. It is fallacious to simply identify suffering with evil without qualification (such that any suffering is inexcusable). Clearly, some suffering can lead to a greater good.
    - a. The “problem of evil” often construes all the suffering in the world to be evil. This is wrong. Not all suffering (including physical pain) is evil.
      - i. The following is a specious argument:
        - (A) To cause suffering in another is to cause something that the other person does not want. By the “golden rule,” that is to fail to love. To fail to love is evil. Therefore, to cause suffering is necessarily evil. Therefore, God (who causes all suffering) is evil.
        - ii. Argument is fallacious because one can inflict suffering in order to achieve something good.
          - (A) Dentist / surgeon.
          - (B) Friend who tells me a painful truth about myself / parent who disciplines child.
      - b. However, suffering that leads to a good outcome is not necessarily good.
        - i. If God could have produced the same good outcome without suffering, it would, in fact, be evil for him to use suffering to produce that outcome.
          - (A) Note that our concept of a good existence = eternal Life = existence without pain and suffering. The absence of suffering seems inherently good to us.
        - c. Therefore, suffering that produces a good outcome is not, thereby, necessarily good. Ultimately, suffering must be inherently and intrinsically good. And suffering can be inherently and intrinsically good only by being MEANINGFUL.
          - i. Suffering can only be said to be “good” if it contributes significantly and meaningfully to a good story (that is, one that is meaningful, significant, good, and true).
          - ii. Suffering may bring about a good outcome and yet be evil if, in the context of the story of which it is a part, it is unnecessary, purposeless, senseless, or meaningless.
            - (A) Hence, it is the meaningfulness of suffering, not its outcome, that is the critical factor in whether it is evil.
            - (B) However, the outcome of suffering may very well contribute to its being meaningful.
          - iii. Any unnecessary (because meaningless) suffering would be inexcusable.
            - (A) Reality (and, therefore, God) is good if (and only if) ALL the suffering in reality is MEANINGFUL.

- (B) Suffering is MEANINGFUL, if and only if the suffering—in and of itself—contributes to the goodness of reality.
  - (1) Suffering is not good merely because it leads to a good outcome; meaningful suffering is, in and of itself, an element of what is good. *It is not sufficient that suffering bring about a good outcome. Why would a good God create a reality wherein the good he is creating can only come about through evil suffering? The suffering must itself contribute to the goodness of the reality (the goodness of the story) he is creating, or it is inexcusable. Good being created at the price of suffering is not truly good unless the suffering itself somehow contributes to the goodness of that created reality.*
- (C) Suffering need not be DESIRABLE to be meaningful and good in and of itself.
  - (1) All suffering is, by definition, undesirable. But if it makes a MEANINGFUL contribution to the morally good story it comprises, then it is good.
    - (a) Jesus chose suffering in the garden of Gethsemane, even though he did not desire it. Why did he choose it if it was undesirable? Was it not because it was morally good and meaningful?
- 2. Factors that contribute to our perception that it is obvious that meaningless (and, therefore, inexcusable) suffering exists:
  - a. Belief that suffering is an ineradicable part of created reality and that, therefore, some of it must necessarily be meaningless and, therefore, inexcusable.
    - i. Specious assumption that the sheer volume of suffering in the world must necessarily entail the meaninglessness of some of it.
    - ii. In fact, it is certainly possible that all the suffering in the world is meaningful.
  - b. Belief that any and all suffering is meaningless and unnecessary if it does not result in a discernibly good outcome.
    - i. Specious assumption that one can judge whether suffering is “necessary” (or “meaningful”) by whether it results in a beneficial outcome of some kind for the sufferer.
    - ii. In fact, the necessity or “meaning” of suffering must not be judged by the outcome, but by whether the suffering had any intrinsic meaning in its own right; suffering can be necessary and meaningful irrespective of whether it brings any benefit to the sufferer.
      - (A) A good example is the punishment of moral evil. The punishment of moral evil does not result in a beneficial outcome to the perpetrator of the evil. But the punishment could indeed be meaningful nonetheless.
        - (1) It is morally good to punish—to inflict suffering upon—the perpetrator of moral evil. However, it is not good because the perpetrator is “benefited” by the punishment.
  - c. Four human realities distort our perception of human suffering in such a way that we believe we see numerous instances of absurd, meaningless suffering in the world.

- i. Distorted perception due to EMPATHY.
  - (A) We are hard-wired to “feel” that the suffering of another ought not to exist. (Probably, this is in order that we might be moved to seek to alleviate that suffering.) But the “feeling” created by empathy is not moral knowledge, it is human feeling.  
*Empathy helps move us; it gets us going. It causes us to “feel” the rightness of loving others. It causes us to “feel” the goodness of showing tangible, concrete love to others. It causes us to move from knowing what would be good to do to actually doing the good that would be good to do.*
    - (1) If we confuse empathetic feeling with moral judgment, then we will necessarily (but fallaciously) judge all suffering to be absurd and meaningless; we would judge any instance of suffering as absurd.  
*But such an assessment is not my knowledge, understanding, and moral judgment speaking; it is my empathy speaking. I am “feeling” the horror of the suffering (as any humane person should do). I am not knowing the absurdity and meaninglessness of the suffering.*
- ii. Distorted perception due to HUMAN INSTINCT.
  - (A) We are hard-wired to “strongly” desire the happiness and well-being of our children (parental instinct). With every cell of his body, the parent wants his child to be safe and unharmed. But the desire created by this instinct does not constitute moral knowledge, it is human feeling.  
*Parental instinct is notorious for its tendency to distort a parent’s ability to truly love his children. Children get “spoiled” because a parent allows his need to make them happy overrule his judgment about what would actually be good for them. The parental instinct is satisfied by the child being pleased, even if the actions that please the child ultimately destroy his character and being. It is not an act of love to destroy a child’s character. That is why being guided by parental instinct can be contrary to love.*
    - (1) If we confuse any instinctual desire with moral judgment, then we will necessarily (but fallaciously) judge any suffering endured by one I love instinctively to be unnecessary and meaningless.
- iii. Distorted perception due to HORROR and REVULSION.
  - (A) We are hard-wired to “feel” revulsed and horrified by any and all suffering (and to “feel” that anything that revulses us ought not to be). But my “feeling” of horror at and revulsion toward evil is not moral knowledge, it is human feeling.
    - (1) My revulsion at the gruesomeness of an automobile accident is no different than my revulsion at the gruesomeness of a murder. But, clearly, they are not morally equivalent.
    - (2) If we confuse revulsion with moral judgment, then we will necessarily (but fallaciously) judge any and all suffering to be absurd and meaningless, for all of it is horrible.

(B) The infliction of suffering in the condemnation of evil is an instructive example of how suffering—while being totally repulsive and undesirable—can nonetheless be good (because morally meaningful).

- (1) I cannot judge God to be good when he “punishes” an evil person (e.g., Satan), and at the same time judge the infliction of suffering on another (e.g., Satan) to be evil (because it is repulsive).
- (2) Note the moral incoherence that results from the following sentiment—“A good God would never cause suffering.”
  - (a) If so, then a good God could never punish evil.
  - (b) And, yet, surely it is the case that a good God could never leave evil unpunished.

*My own moral judgment is that it is right and good that moral evil be punished. The Apostle Paul clearly believes the same. He believes that the fact that God punishes evil men is compatible with (indeed even essential to) God’s moral goodness. In Romans 3:5–6, Paul asks rhetorically, “God, when he deals out wrath, is not unjust, is he? (I mean, {when he deals out wrath} in response to the individual.) Of course not! Because, otherwise, how could God judge the world?” How could Paul approve of God “dealing out” any wrath at all? How could any force and violence directed toward evil men be good? The only possible answer is that the punishment of (the use of force and violence against) evil men is a morally coherent, morally meaningful, and morally significant act that ought to exist in a morally good reality.*

- (3) This example highlights two very important insights:
  - (a) Our moral judgment with regard to suffering must be understood to be distinct from our visceral human reaction to suffering.
    - (i) The use of force and violence against (the punishment of) evil men is a morally coherent, morally meaningful, and morally significant act, and it ought to exist in a morally good reality. And, yet, any humane human being will have a visceral reaction wherein he is repulsed by it.
      - A) There is an important distinction between moral judgment and psycho-emotional aversion.
  - (b) There is an important difference between objective moral goodness and benefit for a particular person.

*Causing harm to an evil person as an act of punishment may very well be morally good without being psycho-emotionally appealing or attractive. Furthermore, causing harm to an evil person as an act of punishment may be an objectively good thing to do, morally, without resulting in any “good”—any benefit—for that particular evil person. Objective moral goodness has to do with the moral meaning and significance of an act, not with the nature of the outcome for everyone involved. Objective moral goodness can be morally good without having benefit for everyone related to the act.*

- iv. Distorted perception due to IMAGINATION.
    - (A) Human imagination (wonderful gift and terrible curse that it is) can cause me to “feel” that I see what, in fact, I DO NOT see.
    - (B) Human imagination can cause me to “see” the absurdity and the meaningless of another’s suffering even when it is NOT meaningless.
      - (1) Seeing the world through the lens of human imagination leads me to “see” a world full of absurd, meaningless suffering.
      - (2) Note: it is always the suffering of others that is so clearly absurd and meaningless. My own suffering is never obviously meaningless (unless I willfully blind myself to its meaning).
        - (a) I experience my own suffering directly; the suffering of others I can only experience through my creative imagination.
  - v. All four kinds of distortions listed above result from substituting human feeling for rational moral judgment.
    - (A) Everyone can agree that our human feeling toward suffering ought to be to reject it, to be repulsed by it, and to desire to alleviate it.
    - (B) Note, however, that the argument from evil contends that our *rational moral judgment* should be that God is evil. [See Epilogue]
  - vi. The biblical worldview assumes a certain priority of reason and knowledge over passion and feeling. If we compensate for the distorting effects of our natural feelings and instincts, it is not at all clear that our rational moral judgment can know that unnecessary, meaningless suffering exists in the world.
  - d. Belief that, even if all the suffering in the world could be shown to be meaningful, the amount of suffering in the world employed to create that good and meaningful story is simply excessive.
    - i. Specious assumption that the sheer volume of suffering in the world must necessarily be morally inexcusable.
    - ii. In fact, it is certainly possible that the amount of suffering in the world is not excessive—that is, that the goodness of the reality that God is creating is NOT somehow negated by the sheer volume of suffering that is contained within it.
      - (A) No human being has a standpoint from which he could possibly make such a judgment.
  - 3. In summary, we do not have a standpoint from which we could possibly claim to know that the suffering we see in reality is inexcusable—that is, we do not have a standpoint from which we could know that the suffering in the world is either meaningless (unnecessary) or excessive.
- N. An assessment of the evil and suffering in the world leads to an impasse: perhaps there exists inexcusable evil or inexcusable suffering in the world; but it is equally possible that there does not.
- 1. We do not have a standpoint from which we could make that judgment. We would have to know the whole story of reality and have access to the inner experience of every human creature in order to have an adequate standpoint from which to make such a judgment.

- O. Why do the detractors of biblical divine determinism think that there exist compelling reasons to EMBRACE Premise #1?
1. They believe (due to specious assumptions and to the distorting effects of our instincts) that Premise #1 is obviously true.
- P. Why do the proponents of biblical divine determinism think that there exist compelling reasons to REJECT Premise #1?
1. Four reasons for believing that God, who authors everything, is a truly good being (and, therefore, that it cannot be the case that reality contains inexcusable evil):
    - a. The moral nature of ordinary, everyday experience.
      - i. Ironically, this is exactly what the argument from evil allegedly appeals to. But, while the argument from evil looks at the whole of reality and sees God as a moral monster (like Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*), I am proposing exactly the opposite.
      - ii. In truth, the occurrences of evil and suffering strike us as horrible and tragic because they strike us as a violation of the fundamental nature of reality. We have a striking sense that they “ought not be.” Why is that? Because they are a jarring departure from our ordinary expectations, which arise out of our ordinary experience.
        - (A) Our assessment of the fundamental nature of reality comes from our overall tacit assessment of our everyday, ordinary experience.
        - (B) Our experience-based expectations are these: we expect to be protected, fed, cared for, etc.
          - (1) Jesus appeals to just this tacit assessment of reality in Matthew 6:25-34.
            - (a) Most of God’s creatures, most of the time, are cared for.
            - (b) Any exception to the above is part of God’s providential knowledge and purpose. (Matthew 10:29–31)
          - (2) The benevolence of ordinary experience is so “normal” that we ignore it, don’t notice it, and take it for granted. The benevolence is so normal that it is invisible to us. We see and “count” the suffering and evil we encounter. We don’t even “see” the goodness, blessing, and benevolence that constitute our ordinary, everyday experience.
            - (a) Consider how truly exceptional tragedy and extreme suffering are!
              - (i) That is why we are shocked when tragedy happens.
              - (ii) Thought experiment: if evil and suffering were as likely to happen as good, would we be shocked by evil and suffering? Are you shocked by something that has a 50-50 chance of occurring?
              - (iii) How many total hours of my existence am I basically well cared and provided for? How many total hours of my existence am I not?  
*We are shocked at the occurrence of a devastating natural disaster. But for every day of devastation brought about by a natural disaster, how many hundreds and thousands of days of*

*normalcy—safety, ample provision, basic well-being, etc.—for hundreds and thousands of people led up to that tragic day. In terms of the sheer number of days, care and benevolence is the rule, tragedy is the exception. In ordinary, everyday reality, benevolence and care prevails over suffering and tragedy.*

- (b) If we were to give God the credit that is due him for every little gift and blessing, the “score” isn’t even close.
- (C) Ordinary, everyday human experience is a series of tragic storms moving across the surface of a vast ocean of divine benevolence. We are surprised by the storms; we take the ocean for granted.
- iii. The “argument from evil” ultimately depends for its power on painting God as a moral monster (Ivan Karamazov). While everyday experience cannot prove the perfect goodness of God, it certainly refutes the moral monster picture of God.
- b. My evaluation of my own personal experience of suffering and evil.
- i. Personal experience with suffering leads me to conclude that all the suffering I have and will experience is meaningful, purposive, and productive.
- (A) It led to wisdom and understanding.
- (B) I need not be able to articulate what I learned from suffering in order for it to be meaningful. Wisdom is something deeper than understanding that I can articulate.
- ii. Since I have personal experience with suffering being meaningful and “good,” it follows that I cannot know that the suffering of others in the world is not similarly meaningful and good. I have no basis for knowing that it is absurd and meaningless.
- iii. Therefore, the suffering and evil in the world do not provide incontrovertible evidence against the fundamental goodness of reality.
- The meaningfulness of my suffering does not prove that all human suffering is meaningful. That is not my argument. But, in light of my experience, it is certainly plausible that all human suffering is meaningful. Hence, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it is entirely rational to assume that the suffering of human existence is not in conflict with the basic beneficence of human existence.*
- c. My understanding of God’s self-revelation in history (as recorded in the Scriptures).
- (A) The Bible speaks of the moral character of God—it both declares him to be and depicts him as good. If we grant authority to the Bible, this is important data.
- (1) That this is the explicit teaching of the Bible is not particularly controversial.
- (2) Apart from the Bible’s explicit assertions, the history of God’s disclosure of himself to the people of Israel and to mankind—revelations that are recorded in the Bible—reveals him to be a good being.
- (a) The moral character of God the Transcendent is unknowable: he creates good, he creates evil.

- (b) Therefore, the moral character of God can only be known as it is revealed in the roles he plays within history and reality: Lawgiver, judge, God of Israel, etc.
    - (i) Within such roles, God reveals himself as one who is for good and against evil.
      - A) He is a God who rewards good and condemns evil. He is a God who delights to reward good and considers it tragic to have to condemn evil.
      - B) In his role as judge over all the earth, in his role as lawgiver to his people, in his role as protector and benefactor of his people—no matter what role we see God in, he conducts himself in accord with what is good, and never in accord with what is evil.
  - d. My understanding of the role of Jesus, and of the moral nature of Jesus.
    - i. According to biblical teaching, the moral character of God is revealed in Jesus.
      - (A) Jesus is the most accessible and clearest translation of the moral character of God. He is God translated into the medium of a human life.
        - (1) The eyewitness testimony with regard to Jesus is that Jesus is utterly good.
        - (2) The one dramatic action of Jesus on behalf of all mankind (to die for our sins) is the most elegant and dramatic statement of the love (and, therefore, of the goodness) of God.
    - e. Taken together, the four reasons listed above make a compelling case that God, the author of all reality, can be assumed to be a good person, and not an evil person. Hence, these make a compelling case for rejecting the notion that God’s creation contains inexcusable evil.
- Q. Why do the proponents of biblical divine determinism think that there exist compelling reasons to EMBRACE Premise #2?
- 1. They believe Premise #2 is right on the grounds that biblical divine determinism makes the most sense of all that the bible teaches and espouses.
- R. Why do the detractors of biblical divine determinism think that there exist compelling reasons to REJECT Premise #2?
- 1. Given that biblical divine determinism is incompatible with inexcusable evil in the world, and given their firm and confident belief in the reality of inexcusable evil in the world, it is impossible for them to even consider the arguments in favor of biblical divine determinism.
    - a. It is just obvious to them that God cannot be the author of all the absurd evil and suffering they assume to exist. Hence, it is just obvious—without any further reflection—that biblical divine determinism is not true.
    - b. But how “firm” and “confident” ought these detractors to be in the reality of inexcusable evil?



## **EPILOGUE: A Dialogue**

- Allosthelia:* I understand all the points you have made. But I am still not particularly satisfied. There remains a problem that you have not answered to my satisfaction.
- Jacrates:* Oh, what is that?
- Allosthelia:* It just seems to me that some suffering that evil people inflict on others is so horrible and so extreme that it is difficult to believe that a good God is responsible for it in any way. Think about an evil man who rapes a two-year old for example. It is utterly horrific to contemplate the terror and pain and damage that that evil man is inflicting on the child. You have not yet convinced me that a good God would employ such a horrific evil to bring about some good. What good could possibly come from it?
- Jacrates:* Okay, let's talk about your example and see if we can come to some clarity. What is it about your example that makes it particularly problematic in your eyes? Is it that the evil is more extreme than other examples of evil? Or is it that the horror you feel is more intense?
- Allosthelia:* Well, certainly it feels more horrible to me. But I think it is a more extreme evil. I think the evil itself is excessive.
- Jacrates:* Tell me then. Is it more evil than a husband treacherously betraying and deceiving his wife by having an affair for a decade and pretending that he was being faithful to her?
- Allosthelia:* I think so. That is certainly evil, but it doesn't strike me the same way. I don't find it as unthinkably horrifying. Probably because it doesn't involve a child.
- Jacrates:* But why should the age of the victim of my evil have anything to do with how evil I am?
- Allosthelia:* Well, because a child is so small, and helpless, and vulnerable. It is so terribly evil to take advantage of a child's helplessness and vulnerability.
- Jacrates:* But hasn't a trusting wife made herself vulnerable as well. Hasn't her trust in her husband rendered her vulnerable. He is taking advantage of her trust and using it to deceive her. That is the treachery. That is the evil of his betrayal. It is not clear to me that he is any less evil than the child rapist.
- Allosthelia:* But how can a man hurt a child like that? That is what strikes me as so grotesquely aberrant.
- Jacrates:* Certainly, the child rapist is engaged in aberrant behavior. And it is grotesquely aberrant precisely because it is so terribly unnatural. It violates every instinct that a human being has to nurture little ones. But I think you have put your finger on what it is you feel. You don't feel that the child rapist is more evil than the treacherously deceitful adulterer. Rather, you feel that he is more grotesquely broken and twisted with regard to his impulses and that he is more extensively abnormal with respect to what should be normal human instincts to protect and nurture a child. I absolutely share your feelings in those regards. But, however more grotesque the rape of a child might be than other human evil, I think it strikes us as extreme in the extremity of its grotesqueness, not in the extremity of its evil. So far as evil goes, I think it is just one more example of human evil. It is just one more example of rebellion against God,

against goodness, against truth, against nature—even to the point of totally disregarding normal human instinct. So, as far as evil goes, it is no more and no less problematic than any other evil. Either God can use it to bring about good or he cannot. Either it can be meaningful and purposive in creating a meaningful and good narrative in the reality that God is creating, or it cannot. I don’t think the degree of horror that it induces in us is relevant to the issue of whether it can be meaningful and purposive.

*Allosthelia:* Perhaps so, but just imagine the terror and horror that the child herself would experience. How can a good God even imagine creating such a thing?

*Jacrates:* Again, we have to separate the evil of the act from the suffering inflicted by the act. He can imagine the evil by extrapolating to that which he is not, can he not? As for the suffering, now that is a different matter. Can you imagine any suffering being meaningful and good, or do you think that all suffering is unnecessary and meaningless? Viktor Frankl—the holocaust survivor who became a famous psychiatrist—is famous for his perspective that suffering is essential to making existence meaningful. If he is right, then it cannot be suffering *per se* that is the problem. God can and does use suffering to create meaning in existence. So, what is it about the suffering inflicted that seems so unthinkable to you?

*Allosthelia:* Again, I think it is because it is a child. A child cannot understand. A child cannot see the meaning in his suffering. A child cannot grow and become deeper and become better because of suffering he or she has endured. It seems to me that such an event is just an absurd, meaningless nightmare to a child.

*Jacrates:* Yes, it is easy to see how it would seem so. But let’s be careful to distinguish what we know is true from how things seem to us. If the ultimate goal is to determine what sort of perspective we are going to take toward the creator, don’t you think it is necessary to make such a decision on the basis of what we actually know; not on the basis of what seems like it might be the case.

*Allosthelia:* Yes, certainly that is true.

*Jacrates:* So, do we actually know that a horrible, terrifying event in the life of a child will not and cannot ever be the cause of anything ultimately meaningful in that child’s life. As I argued in my paper, certainly we can imagine that it does not. We can imagine that nothing ultimately meaningful comes from it. But in real life events of such a nature, do we actually know, for a fact, that no good comes from them?

*Allosthelia:* No, you’re right. It would be rather arrogant and presumptuous to say that I know that no good can or does come from them. I just don’t see what it could be.

*Jacrates:* Granted. And I am in total agreement with you there. I am just as perplexed as you are at what possible good could come from such an event that would make a good God want to cause that to happen in any of his creatures’ lives. But are we in agreement that it is not a matter of you and me knowing what good might come of it? Rather, it is a matter of whether it is reasonable to think that God could mean it for some ultimate good?

*Allosthelia:* Yes, in terms of the issue at hand, you are absolutely right.

*Jacrates:* So, for the sake of whether biblical divine determinism is true, it is not a matter of whether I am comfortable with the evil that is in the world; and it is not a matter of

whether I like the nature and extent of the evil that is in the world. It is a matter of whether the nature and extent of the evil in the world provides a rational justification for my rejecting either the goodness of God or divine determinism. The argument I offered was not intended to make any of us more ready to accept the evil that is in the world. I don't think it can do that. Indeed, I think it would be horrible if it DID succeed to do that. We shouldn't be comfortable with and accepting of the evil that is in the world. Frankly, the evil in the world is intolerable. I think that is God's own perspective toward it; and it should be ours as well. God finds the evil in the world intolerable, and so should we. It would be a big mistake to get comfortable with and tolerant of the evil that exists in the world. We should grieve at the evil in the world, not be okay with it. What's more, some of the evil in the world is horribly and awesomely terrible. Some of it is such a grotesque distortion of what human existence should be, that I should have a strong and intense emotional revulsion toward it. There would be something wrong with me if I didn't. But my strong emotional revulsion must not be construed as proof that such an evil must necessarily be meaningless and without any good outcome in the ultimate scheme of things. I cannot know that. I do not know that.

*Allosthelia:* Yes, you are right. I must confess that what I wanted is an argument that would convince me to like the way God is scripting this reality. Frankly, I don't like everything that he does and everything that he allows. I don't think I am alone in wanting someone to offer me a different perspective that can show me how I can like it. But your argument doesn't do that. But, then, as you are saying, you never claimed that it would do that.

*Jacrates:* Exactly right. And I would go further and say that it would be wrong of us to "like" everything that God does and everything that he scripts. From the Bible's perspective, not even God "likes" everything that he scripts. Just because he "wills" it all doesn't mean he likes it all. There are some very grievous, sorrowful, and tragic elements within the fabric of this world. By its very nature, tragedy is not "likeable." Tragedy can be significantly meaningful. But it is not likeable. To say it again, there would be something terribly wrong with us if we actually liked tragedy for its sorrow, and not for its meaning and significance.

*Allosthelia:* I think what we all hope for is an argument that will show us how we can look at the horribly evil things in this world in such a way that we can directly see and know what good purpose they serve. And your argument has not shown me that.

*Jacrates:* That's right. And no argument ever could. We would have to be God himself to see directly and clearly how every evil accomplishes some greater good purpose. We do not have a perspective from which we could see that. Indeed, it is not possible for us to have such a perspective. We are not God; we are his creatures.