

NEW ATHEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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ON THE SURFACE the problem of evil seems to have sunk out of sight in the current debate between theism and the new atheism. Given the Darwinian tenor of the debate, any ‘problem’ with ‘evil’ dissolves into the processes of evolution, as Richard Dawkins explains: ‘Evolutionary biologists see no problem, because evil and suffering don’t count for anything, one way or the other, in the calculus of gene survival.’¹

Dawkins dismisses the traditional debate about ‘evil’ to focus on other issues, particularly the argument from design, because he thinks believers have too much wriggle room to escape when it is God versus evil:

But for a more sophisticated believer in some kind of supernatural intelligence, it is childishly easy to overcome the problem of evil. Simply postulate a nasty god—such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament. Or, if you don’t like that, invent a separate evil god, call him Satan, and blame his cosmic battle against the good god for evil in the world. Or—a more sophisticated solution—postulate a God with grander things to do than to fuss about human distress. Or a god who is not indifferent to suffering but regards it as the price that has to be paid for free will in an orderly, lawful cosmos. Theologians can be found buying into all these rationalisations.²

At this point it is not all clear which is the worse situation to be in: to blithely accept that there are no questions or answers as regards suffering and evil or to struggle to find an answer in terms of God’s ultimate providence for us.

It is crucial to note that there are two diametrically opposed life situations at stake on this issue: the laboratory view of scientific

investigation and experimentation and the personal viewpoint of the victims of suffering. For a scientist such as Dawkins, evolution is the greatest show on earth, with its improbable events, random selection, consolidated gene survival, dead-ends and successes, even though these are less than perfect and the system is constantly ‘misfiring’. This may be good science, but it seems a less than satisfactory answer to someone who is suffering.

The problem of evil is a crucial problem for believers, first, because they believe the Creator God is good, but also, just as crucially, because religion faces the issue from a personal point of view. For Judeo-Christians, at least from the time of the writing of the first chapters of Genesis and the Book of Job, the question of human suffering has been an issue for faith: Why do innocent human beings suffer? Why is there so much violence and destruction in the world? In modern times the issue seems even more acute as the wars and violence of the twentieth century multiplied victims in unimaginable numbers. In particular, how could an evil as great as the Holocaust be allowed to happen? In this century we seem to be inundated with atrocities and calamities which continually fill our TV screens and keep the question inescapably before us.

While Dawkins may push the issue aside, others are not so dismissive. Colin Howson, a philosopher, rather than a scientist, considers the problem of evil still to be the principal and decisive argument against theism; as he explains:

Since God is the cause of everything that hap-

pens it would seem to follow that *God must be the cause of that suffering*. How could a supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good God be a cause of evil?³

And he concludes:

Earthquake, tempest, disease, to say nothing of the periodic infliction of terror and suffering by one part of the human creation on another, might have posed no logical threat to the vindictive warlords of the ancient religions, but they seem barely consistent with this new super-social-worker. Woody Allen's suggestion that God is simply an underachiever might exonerate a less capable individual but hardly an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and all-caring Demiurge.⁴

The argument is that an omnipotent and good God cannot coexist with evil and suffering in the world. Omnipotence, it is argued, means that God is always able to act: it is immoral for such a Being to stand by and allow innocent beings to suffer when he could intervene—God is therefore either impotent or evil.

The assumption is that God is like any human agent, who, when he or she is in a position to act to prevent a harm from occurring, has a general duty, in normal circumstances, to try and save that person from harm, *e.g.* a good swimmer who happens to see someone drowning. It is a powerful analogy, but does it apply to God? It is not clear that it does.

First, God's action in creating is unlike any other action that we know. God creates in the eternal 'Now' of the Godhead, outside all space and time, while space and time unfolds according to the laws, numbers and processes set in place with creation—it is this 'fine tuning' that modern science has uncovered.

Secondly, God's acts 'beyond' the Godhead never express all that God is, as Christians believe with regard to the *human* nature of Christ—such actions are always limited by God's free act in creating a *material* universe. When, therefore, we talk of God's omnipotence we must take into account the



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fine tuning of this particular material universe and the limitations it imposes.

Thirdly, theology has long maintained that God acts in our world through secondary causes. God is always the Ultimate Cause, not just another cause in the world, and all God's creative activity in our world happens through the unfolding processes of space and time together with human historical action in the world. What would it be like, we can wonder, for the Creator to be constantly directly 'intervening' in creation?

The New Atheism has a lot of suggestions towards improving the situation. Here is one of Howsen's suggestions for a world without human evil:

Let people have the intention of acting in a way that is harmful to others, but let God prevent them from performing those actions. Having the intention is enough to convict, so God can discharge his function of judgment in a no-harm world in which actors have free will. God is quite capable of constructing such a world, since it is logically possible, and he is, we can remind ourselves, bounded only by logical possibility.⁵

But, as we have just seen, it is not only a question of 'logical possibility', but of the kind of universe God has created. Howsen's solution seems to recommend a kind of shut-off switch hard-wired into our nervous systems. Neater and safer it might be, but we would be more like advanced computers or exotic pets than human beings. Given the amount of suffering in the world, we might be tempted to ask whether that would neces-

sarily be a bad thing!

Modern science tells us that we are one possible world among a billion billion others, each, we can suppose, with its own ‘tuning’ of set laws and numbers. We will never know what those other possibilities might be, but we are learning more and more of the chance events and evolutionary processes that have given us the life we have now. Is it, even given the amount of suffering, a good world?

Our world is a ‘perfectible’ world. It began with a given set of laws and numbers which were ‘fine tuned’ for life. This billions of years process has involved enormously improbable chance events, geological changes over aeons, successive climate changes, intricate food chains, mass extinctions, genetic survival mechanisms, random selection, and many dead-ends, to arrive finally at human self-consciousness and freedom.

We, as human beings, experience ourselves as beings of *indefinable* depth, with an unconscious that encapsulates the aeon-long development of the human species, a brain of immense complexity, a body with its own specific capabilities and connectedness with the evolving world, the freedom to create a distance of the self from the environment with the ability to act autonomously, and a self-consciousness that allows us to relate to others as persons. Are we, then, in a position to say what kind of complex conditions were necessary to produce such unique, thinking, feeling, choosing, and potentially responsible beings, able to share in the future of a perfectible world?

New Atheism’s evidence for suffering is stretched to include all animal pain and predation. Yet science tells us pain has crucial functions in biological evolution both as an awareness of something wrong with a system, and as a spur to development. Can you have bodies without pain? Ecological systems depend for the maintenance of their balance, complexity and diversity on the efficient

working of natural food chains, so that no one species endangers the system as a whole. It is difficult to see how you can have evolution at all without pain. Cruelty apart, from an ecological point of view, real animal pain consists in loss of habitat and threat of extinction.

At face value, we experience the world as ordered, intelligible, complex, unimaginably rich in species and ecosystems, beautiful and a fitting place for all species, including human beings, to live and prosper. On the human side, we find self-consciousness, autonomy, expanding knowledge, and the potential for goodness, culture and genuine civility.

The critical issue, however, remains human suffering, some of which is the result of natural disasters, much due to biological breakdown, and much again through human neglect and evil. Here suffering becomes personal and we look for answers which will address the human need for meaning and value in our lives.

As New Atheism has pointed out the problem of evil revolves around how we understand God. For the most part the debate has focused on the God of the Philosophers—omniscient, omnipotent, all-good, a collection of attributes each of which tends to be taken absolutely, rather than together as a dynamic whole. In the Scriptures, on the other hand, God is personal and God’s attributes are manifested in personal terms as word and action addressed to human beings. It is there that we find a truly *personal* response to suffering.

From the outset, Jesus’ mission confronted sickness, suffering and human evil. He did not stay by the Jordan as John the Baptist did, but travelled throughout the countryside, reaching out to the poor, the outcast, the sick and the sinner, offering them healing, inclusion and wholeness, as a sign of God’s Kingdom, now present in his ministry, and to be brought to fulfilment in his death and resurrection.

For Christians the cross confronts head-on the world's suffering, injustice and loss. Rejection, betrayal, cruelty, violence and Jesus' execution, are all part of God entering into the darkness of our world. God is identified in Christ with all victims of suffering, rejection and injustice throughout history. For us God is never more the One true God than on the cross of Jesus.

There is hope in suffering because the cross is not the final word. Rather, God's final Word is the resurrection of Jesus: there God's promise appears in the darkness of human suffering and death, assuring us that nothing good is ever lost and offering courage, consolation, hope and love to all those who suffer and struggle for a more just world.

The enormity of suffering and evil in our world is always a challenge to faith. The past hundred years have shown, as never before, the malignant forces in our world ever more capable of wreaking indescribable suffering and destruction. Yet, for faith, suffering,

victimhood and death, cease to be absolutes, opaque facts we cannot see beyond, but can, in the light of Christ, be seen in the context of our own part in the creation of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1).

Following Christ's own example, suffering is something we are meant to strive to overcome where possible. It is we who often stand by and do nothing or, worse, squander the world's resources. If the world spent the trillions of dollars it spends each year on armaments and excessive luxuries rather on ways to alleviate suffering, there would be much less suffering in the world today. This is our responsibility in a perfectible world.

Personal suffering in our world is inescapable, made worse when it involves those we love, and worse still when it involves innocent human beings. Glib answers do great harm. The cross of Jesus is God's own response to the utter darkness of that pain and the resurrection an offer of ultimate meaning and hope.

NOTES

1 *The Greatest Show on Earth* (London: Black Swan, 2009) 392.

2 *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 108.

3 *Objecting to God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 48.

4 *ibid.*, 61.

5 *ibid.*, 50.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchisedech. (Hebrews 5.7-10)