# Do We Know Why God Allows Evil and Suffering?



*This is the fourth essay of 18Forty's new "Faith in Reason" series with Rabbi Steven Gotlib, released the last Sunday of every month. Sign up for it here, and read the third essay here.*

The theological problem of evil and suffering—commonly referenced as "theodicy," literally "defending God"—is one of the most common stumbling blocks to faith that people experience. Conservative Rabbi Harold Kushner outlines this well in his famous book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

> There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting; somewhat like doing the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper and feeling very satisfied when you have made the words fit; but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care. Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God and religion has either started with this question, or gotten around to it before long. Not only the troubled man or woman who has just come from a discouraging diagnosis at the doctor's office, but the college student who tells me that he has decided there is no God, or the total stranger who comes up to me at a party just when I am ready to ask the hostess for my coat, and says, "I hear you're a rabbi; how can you believe that…" – they all have one thing in common. They are all troubled by the unfair distribution of suffering in the world.

Kushner continues, writing that this is a problem "to everyone who wants to believe in a just and fair and livable world." Even without going that far, it is certainly a problem for anyone who wants to believe in the traditional idea of God—an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being. In words attributed to Epirucus:

> Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

A similar observation led the philosopher Philip Goff to accept a consciousness at the center of reality but reject theism in his recent book *Why? The Purpose of the Universe:*

> If the traditional beliefs of any one of the Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – are correct… there is an all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly loving God – an 'Omni-God' — this Supreme Being looks on and chooses not to intervene to stop the terrible suffering and oppression we find in the world.

Atheist legal philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong presents this argument in the book *God?*:

> Premise 1: If there were an all-powerful and all-good God, then there would not be any evil in the world unless that evil is logically necessary for an adequately compensating good.
>
> Premise 2: There is lots of evil in the world.
>
> Premise 3: Much of that evil is not logically necessary for any adequately compensating good.
>
> Conclusion: There is no God who is all-powerful and all-good.

Christian apologist William Lane Craig has referred to this as "atheism's killer argument" and "undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to belief in God." He even admits that

> no one who is not deranged can contemplate the many examples of innocent suffering… and not be deeply moved and troubled by them. Their emotional impact is undeniable and makes it difficult to believe that an all-powerful and all-good God exists.

All that leaves us with much to comb through.

## An Adequately Compensating Good: Evil Allows for Good

The response to Sinnot-Armstrong's articulation of the problem of evil, however, is inherent within its own framing. The problem for him is not that evil and suffering exist but that they exist *without an adequately compensating good*. Craig picks up on this in his debate with Sinnot-Armstrong:

> Everyone admits that the world is filled with *apparently* gratuitous suffering [i.e. suffering without an adequately compensating good to go with it]. We are often unable to see any reason for why harm befalls us. But that doesn't imply that these apparently gratuitous evils really *are* gratuitous. Every one of us can think back on experiences of suffering or hardship in our lives, which at the time seemed pointless and unnecessary, but, when viewed in retrospect, are seen to have been ultimately to our or others' advantage, even if we would not want to go through them again.

Without getting into what qualifies as adequate compensatory good, this version of the problem of evil and suffering may only *appear* to be a problem but not present as one in the grand scheme of things despite its emotional impact in the moment. Alvin Plantinga even goes so far as to argue in his book *God and Other Minds* that the capacity for good could not exist without also allowing for the capacity of evil and suffering:

> A world containing creatures who freely perform both good and evil actions — and do more good than evil — is more valuable than a world containing quasi-automata who always do what is right because they are unable to do otherwise. Now God can create free creatures but he cannot casually or otherwise determine them to do only what is right; for if He does so then they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; but he cannot create the possibility of moral evil and at the same time prohibit its actuality.

That is certainly a response to evil caused by human beings, but what of "natural evils"—earthquakes, hurricanes, disease and the like? Plantinga answers elsewhere that it is possible that particular people "would have produced less moral good" if they had not faced such situations. Witnessing the damage of an earthquake or tsunami may, for example, inspire activism and greater relief efforts in the long run. Richard Swinburne even argues that "being allowed to suffer to make possible a great good is a privilege."

Goff, however, is unconvinced by these arguments:

> I agree that there are certain goods we find in the real world — compassion, courage, adventure, scientific inquiry — that would not exist in a more perfect world. But it seems to be to massively reduce the value of these goods if they were brought about through artificially engineering challenges and difficulties.

One may respond to Goff's concern, though, by becoming a "skeptical theist" rather than an atheist. In Lebens' words, "perhaps we shouldn't expect to know why God does everything that He does. In fact, one *consequence* of theism, and of its belief in a transcendent wisdom, is that we shouldn't *expect* that we can always understand what God is up to." Therefore, "just because we can't understand why God allows bad things to happen, it doesn't follow that there's no sufficiently good reason."

Given that fundamental uncertainty, Lebens argues that "the skeptical theist can believe in the existence of God, even in the face of the evils in this world, knowing that the distribution of goods and evils might turn out to be justified, despite our not being in a position to see how that could be." There is, however, a stronger formation of the problem of evil and suffering than the one Sinnot-Armstrong presents. Here is Lebens' formulation:

> Premise 1: If God exists, He would be powerful enough to remove all evil (given omnipotence)
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> Premise 2: If God exists, He would be knowledgeable enough to know where the evil is and how to remove it (given omniscience)
>
> Premise 3: If God exists, He would be loving enough to want to remove all evil (given omnibenevolence)
>
> Premise 4: Evil exists
>
> Conclusion 1: If God exists, there would be no evil (from lines 1, 2, and 3)
>
> Conclusion 2: God doesn't exist (from lines 4 and 5)

It is due to the strength of this argument that Lebens admits that the problem of evil "is perhaps the most difficult philosophical (and existential) challenge to face the theist, so long as they believe in a God who is omnipotent, omniscience, and omnibenevolent."

## Redefining God: A Solution for Theodicy?

One might argue, then, that the solution is simply to accept a more limited definition of God. That is, for all intents and purposes, what Goff does. Indeed, in our last piece, we saw that there is a pseudo-Maimonidean conception of God within the Jewish tradition that is immune to the problem of evil and suffering for this very reason. If God is an impersonal force that merely started and underlies the cosmos such that conscious free-willed beings could evolve over time, preventing free-willed evil is simply not in its job description.

One who is within that tradition may argue, based on Maimonides' writings in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, that there are, in fact, only three types of suffering that humans face:

1. "that which befalls man because of the nature of coming-to-be and passing-away, I mean to say because of his being endowed with matter."

2. “those that men inflict upon one another.”
3. “those that are inflicted upon any individual among us by his own action.”

All forms of evil and suffering, Maimonides argues, are the result of one of those. In the words of Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank in *Illuminating Jewish Thought Volume 2*:

> If we were to ask Rambam why there is so much pain and suffering he would respond that a) some pain and suffering is a necessary consequence of our having physical bodies and living in a physical world, and b) most of the pain and suffering experienced by people stems from the free choices that people make. Or, to put it differently, God willed us to live in a material world in which people have free choice.

Atheist philosopher Graham Oppy examines the problem of evil and responses to it in his book *Arguing About Gods*. He ultimately concludes that there is “no reason to suppose that there are *successful* arguments from evil, that is, arguments that ought to bring those who suppose that there is an orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god to change their minds on this matter.” Therefore, since atheists raise good points and theists have potential answers given their underlying assumptions, it is hard to say that the problem of evil and suffering raise a *logical* or *philosophical* problem for the existence of God even if they can legitimately present challenges.

But what of the experiential and emotional aspects of the problem of evil and suffering?

## Beyond Rationality: The Emotional Problem of Evil

In his newest book, *The People, The Torah, The God: A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology,* philosophy professor Yehuda Gellman calls this the *autobiographical problem of evil*: It “is not a claim of a contradiction or even a claim of improbability. It is rather a direct, visceral, emotional reaction to evil (as such, or its amount, or its horrendous quality) experienced or known about.” It is in response to that visceral feeling that many seek a *theodicy,* or a direct explanation of why there is evil.

Importantly, theodicies are not usually meant to convince an atheist to become a believer but to provide explanations to those who already believe that their beliefs are still compatible with the evil and suffering they have experienced. Gellman writes that the goal of theodicies is “to alleviate the problem somewhat for the believer or would-be believer” so that their faith “might well prevail in the face of the challenge” by showing “that a justification for many evils is at least imaginable, even if the explanation is not the real one.” Many creative theodicies have been offered lately, two of which we will now explore. Both are analyzed by me deeper in my recent review of the book.

One was recently offered by Gellman himself, combining two pre-existing theodicies in an original fashion: Multiverse theodicies attempt to respond to the problem of evil and suffering by implying that God created many universes and we exist in one that is less perfect than others; reincarnation theodicies respond to the problem by suggesting that the pain and suffering we experience in this life will be made up for in the next life that we find ourselves incarnated in. Gellman combines both of these into a unique theodicy.

## Reincarnation in the Multiverse?

Gellman essentially assumes that God created a multiverse with rising levels of fulfillment and the ability to become close to God. When one dies in one universe, they are reborn in the next and able to continue their journey towards complete fulfillment. But even granting that, and assuming that our universe is just one step on the way up a celestial ladder towards holiness, why does our universe (with all of the evil that it contains) exist as part of this multiverse at all? Surely God could have created a multiverse without such horrible evils and suffering? Gellman answers:

> Our life on earth is one, perhaps among many, in which we are shown the consequences of self-absorption and the ideal of self-giving. It is one in a series of universes from which, looking back at it from the vantage point of what follows it, we gain a measure of appreciation as to what extent our suffering is in our hands, both as perpetrators and victims of evil. With the new understanding as our starting point, we proceed to the next universe-station, where we might do more of the good and less evil, and where natural evils are lessened to the degree we have learned our lesson in the previous universes we have inhabited.

The universe we are in has so much evil within it because it is a place to learn about the great power that we possess and the great responsibility to wield it wisely. Pain and suffering are caused by a combination of chance events and the human ability to fall into self-centeredness. It is ultimately worthwhile because our experience in this universe will lead us to a better and better-informed one in the future.

Gellman admits that many may object to his theodicy since reincarnation is “not exactly a chief doctrine of traditional Judaism,” despite being common in both Chassidus and Kabbalah. However, we must recall that theodicy here need not be *probable* but only *possible*. Are all of these universes really out there? Gellman does not know, and he only advocates that “it would be fitting for God to have created them to bring as many people as possible to become freely one with God, in line with perfect goodness. The existence of such multi-universes is consistent with everything we know. And their existence is coherent with theism. Hence, a conceivable theodicy.”

But if the multiverse does exist, it is completely unobservable to us. Scientists may very well predict its existence, but at the end of the day, Sean Carroll notes that "some physicists would put the chances [of a multiverse] at nearly certain, others at practically zero. Perhaps it's fifty-fifty."

Gellman also admits that his theodicy "will not be enough of an alleviation of the autobiographical problem for those of us challenged by the methodological murder of Jews in the Holocaust and its haunting aftermath… The Holocaust is a black hole, emitting no light, in every theology since then. Every theology, when finished, must face the response of 'Yes, but…' Still, I am just trying to do the best I can with what I can, for others, for myself."

Another fascinating contemporary theodicy was proposed by Sam Lebens and Tyrone Goldshmidt. Here is how Lebens articulates it in his *Guide for the Jewish Undecided*:

> Imagine that God gives us free will and then, so to speak, He says, like a film director, "Take 1." Then we live our lives. We do some good and we do some bad. All of it is of our own creation. At the end of time, God says, "Cut." Imagine that scenes 1 and 3 are fantastic, but that scene 2 is horrific. Well then, wouldn't God simply edit the film and cut out scene 2, because, even after the scene has happened, God can change the past? Admittedly, this would leave a gap in the history of the world. But then God can say, "Scene 2, take 2." We'd then get another shot at linking scenes 1 and 3 together. Take 2 of scene 2 would, once again, be of our own authorship. God is a patient director. We can do a take 3, or 4, or however many more takes are required. Every evil that now exists will one day never have existed. These evils aren't just temporary; they are what philosophers might call hyper-temporary. A temporary evil is one that doesn't last forever. A hyper-temporary evil is one that will one day never have existed at all – once the past has been edited.

Like Gellman, Lebens and Goldshmidt make the case that "it doesn't matter whether the Divine Proofreader theory is true or not. What matters is that it *could* be true, and that it doesn't seem like an ad hoc explanation."

The major hole in Lebens' argument is that he himself admits that although natural evils like earthquakes, diseases, and animal suffering can ultimately be edited out, we have "no explanation as to why those things had to occur in the early takes of this film called history." Lebens' theodicy, however, can directly respond to the "But what about the Holocaust?" objection that serves as an explicit counterpoint to Gellman's.

Gellman's argument, reliant on a multiverse and reincarnation, may be less than compelling to Jewish "rationalists" who find reincarnation too mystical of an idea. But it also provides a reason for why evil had to exist in the first place. Both theodicies, though, are weakened by their admission that they are merely possible and not probable.

This raises an important question: Why theodicize at all? What if no theodicy is needed at all in the face of evil?

## Must The Problem of Evil Bother Us at All?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, wrote in *Kol Dodi Dofek* that "man, submerged in the depths of a frozen fate, will in vain seek the solution to the problem of evil in the context of speculative thought, for he will never find it." Rather, one should say:

> There is evil, I do not deny it, and I will not conceal it with fruitless casuistry. I am, however, interested in it from a halakhic point of view; and as a person who wants to know what action to take.

Rav Soloveitchik believed that if humans are to be truly fulfilled, they must solve "not the question of causal or teleological reason for suffering with all its speculative complexity, but rather the question of its curative role, in all its halakhic simplicity, by turning fate to destiny and elevating himself from object to subject." Our job, in other words, is not to ask why tragedy strikes but rather: "How can I move forward from the face of tragedy in the most productive and meaningful way?"

Expanding this viewpoint in an article entitled *Should Theists Eschew Theodicies?*, Rabbi David Shatz articulated many reasons why those who believe in God perhaps ought to eschew theodicy entirely. Here are only a few of them:

1. The Objection from Arrogance — "Theists… must not judge God: we stand before Him in judgement, not the other way around. It is arrogant even to try to read God's mind."
2. The Objection from Moral Complacency – "Theodicizing [both psychologically and logically] distracts us from sympathy and moral action, or, better put, makes sympathy and moral action unrationalizable."
3. The Objection from Futility — There is simply no answer available to us. Even Moses himself was not told why one suffers (see Talmud Bavli Brachot 7a).
4. The Objection from Risk — "If one fails to find [ a compelling theodicy], one may lose faith."
5. The Objection from Faith — "to believe in God's existence despite lack of a theodicy is to exemplify greater faith than to believe while armed with a theodicy."

Interestingly, Shatz himself is pro-theodicy, arguing that

> different theists can have opposing sensibilities, each may privilege different texts in authenticating the Jewishness of his or her views. Rarely will one find a knockdown objection to a particular sensibility that can't be turned back by accepting certain consequences — one person's *reductio ad absurdum* is another's *in hakhi nami*.

Nonetheless, there are clear objections that can and should be raised and ought to be taken seriously when anyone considers assigning theodicy to a particular tragedy.

At the end of the day, the goal of this essay is to show that there are many responses that one can have to the problem of evil and suffering so it is not a knock-down argument against traditional theism.

## Recommended Reading

*Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen-my Beloved Knocks*, by Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Here is Rav Soloveitchik's response to the problem of evil and call to action in the wake of the State of Israel.

*Conversations about God and the Problem of Evil*, by Graham Oppy, Sam Lebens, Jason Werbeloff, and Mark Oppenheimer

This book presents two thorough conversations about what the Problem of Evil means for theistic belief.

*The People, The Torah, The God: A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology*, by Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman

Professor Yehuda Gellman's defense of Judaism as the chosen people, the Torah as divinely revealed, and God as all good despite so much evil in the world is a must-read.

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