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GOD, FREE WILL, AND THE GREATER GOOD: A THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Abel Obinna Ugo[1] & Matthew Ikechukwu Akpa[2]*

[1,2]Department of Philosophy, Religion and Peace Studies, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria

*akpikechukwu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Society is filled with evil, leaving mankind surprised as theology says that God created everything and made it perfect, judging from its logical understanding that everything created by God ought to be perfect as God himself is a perfect God. The existence of evil is now questionable as man cannot trace its origin. Clearly, the curiosity of man, it is affirmed that evil exists, for a purpose. The major purpose for the existence of evil is to remind us of the existence of good. Evil is a pervasion of goodness. As a thing that prevents good, it reminds us that there is good and the need to strive towards achieving it. However, using 'the free will theodicy', we argue that moral evil is due to human abuse of free will. The value of free will is a great good: the possibility of morally good choices and of human beings imagining God by way of these choices. However, free will has the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of moral evil. In response to this, we might ask, if free will of this sort is so valuable, then why doesn't God have it, and why won't we have it in heaven? So, it is concluded that God created evil solely for reason. The search for the origin of evil is no longer necessary, as its origin is traced to the universal creator of all things.

Keywords: Problem of Evil, Free Will Theodicy, Moral Evil, Divine Goodness, Theological Determinism

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of the problem of evil is a perennial issue that has thrived from generation to generation. This theological topic has attracted philosophical and even social discussions. The major question in every discussion on the problem of evil has always been, "If God is all good, how come the existence of evil"? God is adjudged as the omniscient, omnipresent and all-perfect who dwells in supremacy and is overcrowded by the radiance of goodness. He made all things perfect through his spoken words and made man in His likeness and image. He oversees everything and places man in the garden where all things exist for man to enjoy. He knows and understands the thoughts of man and has dominion over all things that exist and are in existence. Where, then, does evil follow and enter the world?

In a more or even reformed thought on this issue is the pool conducted by some foreign journalists about what would be the first question if God could permit every man to ask a question. The Journalist Lee Strobel raised the question thus; "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The most common response, offered

by 17% of those who could think of a question, was "Why is there pain and suffering in the world"? If God is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good, why does he let so many bad things happen? (Strobel, 2000). So, these and many more questions are what we shall be discussing in this work.

The Concept of Evil

Evil has been a problematic concept in human history. It is a concept that has been universally discussed with contrary views from all aspects of disciplines. It is categorised into three sub-divisions. First, there is the axiological sense, where "evil" and "bad" are effectively synonymous. This is the sense in which evil can cover "everything adverse in human lives" from "wars and massacres" to "drought and plague" (Gerald, 2000). It is in this sense that evil takes on its familiar role as the opposite or lack of good. Second, there is the trivial moral sense, where "evil" and "wrong" are effectively synonymous. In this sense, we can speak of both white lies and genocide as evil. Third, "evil" is used in a more restricted sense when we say things like: "What Buhari did by giving us Tinubu was not merely wrong, it was evil". Here, "evil" refers to those acts of moral agents that go significantly beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing. Failing to keep a promise or telling a white lie may be morally wrong, but unlike genocide or sadistic torture, it is not evil. In this sense, the term "evil", or "EVIL", as Marcus Singer calls it, has no direct moral equivalents. Moral evil, in this restricted sense, is never trivial. It is a term that carries with it an enormous moral gravity and expresses our very strongest moral condemnations. It is the question of how we are to make sense of the specific moral difference between "evil" and "mere wrongdoing" that will be our concern. In order to specify this difference, we will defend a specific conception of what acts and which persons should be counted as evil.

So, evil is seen as a pervasion of good. It occurs where good does not exist. Linguistically, evil is the opposite of good and synonymous with wrong, not right. Things are called evil when they go against people's norms and traditions. When a people's culture is trampled upon, it is referred to as evil because it is evil to go against the dictates of the gods. While all moral evils are, at least, morally wrong, not all moral wrongs are evil. A clear example is the Holocaust. Such an event was wrong, but it was more than just wrong; it was evil. In contrast, failing to keep a promise may be wrong but not evil. As such, evil is clearly a "wrong intensifier," though this could mean two things. It could mean that there is a quantitative threshold that needs to be met so that an evil action is just a very wrong action. It could also mean that there is a qualitative difference, so evil action is a wrong one intensified by the presence of some additional property or properties (Hillel, 2002). These additional evil-making properties would pick out what it is about the evil that horrifies us and makes us wish to condemn it in the very strongest possible moral terms.

In the conception of evil, there are at least, and arguably only, four different general approaches or ways to conceive of evil acts. On a victim approach, it is something about the consequences for the victims of the wrongdoing, in particular the amount of harm inflicted upon them, that makes an act not just wrong but evil. On a perpetrator approach, it is something about the perpetrators of wrongdoing, such as their motive or intention, that makes an act not just wrong but evil. On a bystander approach, it is something about us as bystanders or evaluators of an act, such as our inability to comprehend why the act was done or our feeling of utter horror or disgust when

contemplating the act, that makes an act not just wrong, but evil. On a combination approach, it is some combination of the factors picked out by victim, perpetrator and bystander approaches that make an act not just wrong but evil. Alternatively, one might wish to shy away from an explicit conception of evil without shying away from thinking about evil, as Susan Nieman and Richard Bernstein attempt to do (Bernstein, 2000)

While this is certainly a reasonable approach, it is one that lacks a certain amount of clarity. A specific conception of evil, however broad, is implicitly at work, such as that genocide but not lying counts as evil, even if the conception remains, perhaps for good reasons, somewhat vague. For the sake of clarity, if nothing else, we should at least try to make our implicit assumptions about what evil is, explicit in the form of a conception of evil.

The claim is that there are many roots of evil and not a single root. The roots include but are not limited to the following: envy, malice, greed, hatred, boredom, honour, pride, revenge, ambition, thoughtlessness, a lack of self-esteem, ideology, and faith can all, at times, be roots of evil. In contrast, honour or boredom rarely lead to evil, although sometimes they do, whereas hatred and malice often lead to evil, although sometimes they do not. Some perpetrators of evil may think that they are doing their duty or what is right when in fact, they do evil, whereas others may revel in the fact that their acts are evil and may even perform such acts solely for the reason that they are evil. People are motivated to perform acts that are evil for all sorts of reasons. As such, there are many roots of evil. Philosophers who think that there is a single root of all evil, be it money, pride or a lack of self-esteem, are simply suffering from the effects of poverty of examples.

Guy Adams and Danny Balfour conceive of an evil act as one in which "humans inflict pain and suffering on other human beings". This conception is clearly insufficient. Doctors often inflict pain and suffering on others in the course of their practice, but we do not call this evil. Fred E. Katz conceives of evil as "behaviours that deprive innocent people of their humanity, from small scale assaults on a person's dignity to outright murder" (Kushner, 1981)

However, this conception is too broad as it includes, which the author takes as one of its merits, everything from the white lie to murder. But this fails to clearly differentiate wrong from evil, and so fails to invest the term "evil" with the moral gravity required. For Claudia Card, "an evil is a reasonably foreseeable harm (that need not be highly probable) that falls within a certain range of magnitude and importance and is brought about, seriously risked, sustained, aggravated, or tolerated by culpable wrongdoing" (Mackie, 1955). Victim approaches, such as Card's, are very appealing due both to their theoretical simplicity and their moral clarity. These two virtues are both exemplified in the isolation of the suffering endured by victims, rather than the perpetrator's psychology, as what makes an evil act evil.

The psychological thinness of victim approaches allows them to elegantly account for the fact that evil has many different roots and ensures that wrongs that cause very minor harm, no matter how maliciously motivated, are not thought of as evil. Nevertheless, as in many a tragedy, it is the very theoretical strengths of victim approaches that ultimately lead to their downfall. To see why, let us consider the following example. When Dave, who normally never drinks, hears of the sudden death of his closest friend, he drives to a nearby bar and gets grossly intoxicated. Dave then decides

to drive home from the bar. While on the way home his erratic driving, brought on by his intoxication, causes another car to swerve and crash into a tree, killing the family of five inside. On realizing what he has done the next day, Dave is overcome by guilt, shame, and remorse. Clearly, Dave acted culpably wrongly by driving home while intoxicated, and his actions were immensely harmful, as they brought about the deaths of five people, including three children. But is Dave's act evil? Many of us would find it intuitively plausible to think that what Dave did was very wrong but not evil. The general problem with victim approaches is that they must require that any culpably wrongful act that inflicts much harm is necessarily evil, because no other factors, besides the amount of harm, are at all relevant to a judgment of evil. But the example of Dave exposes the shortcomings of this approach, since surely, in at least this case, the perpetrator's situation, psychology, motive, and subsequent response are at least relevant to our judgment about whether or not his actions are evil. This being so, it follows that it is not only the amount of harm that is relevant to judging an act to be evil.

Therefore, the victim's approach to conceiving evil is inadequate. Perhaps, then, perpetrator approaches will prove to be more adequate. According to David Pocock, truly evil actions are "not explicable by reference to 'normal' motives such as greed or lust" (David, 1968). Hannah Arendt, in early work, held the view that perpetrators of, at least, radical evil acts from incomprehensible motives (Arendt, 1960).

Theological Arguments on the Existence of Evil

One of the major arguments of evil is its existence. Does evil really exist? Yes, evil exists for a purpose. The major purpose for the existence of evil is to remind us of the existence of good. Evil is a pervasion of goodness. As a thing that prevents good, so, it reminds us that there is good and the need to strive towards achieving it. Plato stated that evil results from humans' failure to pay sufficient attention to finding and doing good; evil is an absence of good where good should be. More says that Plato directed his entire educational program against the "innate indolence of the will" and the neglect of a search for ethical motives "which are the true springs of our life"(More, 1921). Plato asserted that it is the innate laziness, ignorance and lack of attention to pursuing good that, in the beginning, leads humans to fall into "the first lie, of the soul" that then often leads to self-indulgence and evil (More, 1921). The fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo also adopted Plato's view. In his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, Augustine maintained that evil exists as an "absence of the good" (Jeffery, 2007).

It is necessary for me to state here using theodicy that God permitted evil, and He has His reasons for permitting evil. The idea is that by allowing evil, God attains greater good than possible apart from evil. The way of theodicy shows that it is false, arguing that God wouldn't prevent every evil he could prevent. So, no one can know enough to conclude that God *doesn't* have a good reason for permitting evil. We just cannot grasp God's knowledge, the complexity of his plans, or the deep nature of the good he aims at in providence. There is no proof that God does not have good reasons for allowing evil, but because he is good, we can only assume that he does. Here, we don't have to come up with 'theodicies' to defend God against the problem of evil. Rather, the way of inscrutability shows that it is entirely to be expected that creatures like us *can't* come up with God's reasons, given who God is and who we are.

However, using *the free will theodicy*, for example, we shall argue that moral evil is due to human abuse of free will. The value of free will is a great good: the possibility of morally good choices and of human beings imagining God by way of these choices. However, free will has the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of moral evil. In response to this, we might ask, if free will of this sort is so valuable, then why doesn't God have it, and why won't we have it in heaven? More so, the natural law theodicy argues that natural evil is due to the laws of nature. The value of laws of nature is a great good: a stable environment is needed for making rational choices of any sort. But laws of nature have the unfortunate consequence of allowing for the possibility of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.). In response to this, we might ask, if a stable environment requires the possibility of natural evil by requiring laws of nature, then why isn't there any natural evil in the pre-fall Garden of Eden or in the new heavens and the new earth?

More still, *the punishment theodicy* argues that suffering is a result of God's just punishment of evildoers (Gen 3:14-19; Rom 1:24-32, 5:12, 6:23, 8:20-21; Isa 29:5-6; Ezek 38:19; Rev 6:12; 11:13; 16:18). In punishment God aims at the good of displaying his judgment against sin. *The soul-building theodicy* argues that suffering leads us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness (Heb 12:5-11; Rom 5:3-5; 2Cor 4:17; Jas 1:2-4; 1Pet 1:6-7; cf. Prov 10:13, 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-24, 29:15). In painful providences God aims at the good of displaying his goodness in shaping our character for good. *The pain as God's megaphone theodicy* argues that pain is God's way of getting the attention of unbelievers in a noncoercive way so that they might forget the vanities of earth, consider spiritual things instead, and perhaps even repent of sin (Luke 13:1-5). In pain, God aims at the good of displaying his mercy so that through such warnings, we might be delivered from the wrath to come. *The higher-order goods theodicy* says that some goods can't exist apart from the evils to which they are a response. There is no courage without danger, no sympathy without suffering, no forgiveness without sin, no atonement without suffering, no compassion without need, no patience without adversity. God must often allow lots of evils to make *these* goods a part of his world, given how these goods are defined (Eph 1:3-10; 1Pet 1:18-20).

Thus, a "greater good theodicy" (GGT) argues that the pain and suffering in God's word play a necessary role in bringing about greater goods that could not be brought about otherwise. The question that remains, then, is just this: Does the Bible really teach that God aims at great goods by way of various evils? Our argument here is that *Scripture combines the ways of theodicy and inscrutability*. The biblical accounts of Job, Joseph, and Jesus reveal the goodness of God in the midst of evil, weaving together these three themes:

1. God aims at *great goods* (either for mankind, or for himself, or both).
2. God often intends these great goods to come about *by way of various evils*.
3. God leaves created persons *in the dark* (in the dark about *which* goods are indeed his reasons for the evils or about *how* the goods depend on the evils).

Thus, the Bible seems to strongly suggest that the GGT (God's aiming at great goods by way of various evils) is, in fact, his *modus operandi* in providence, his "way of working." But this GGT is tempered by a good dose of divine inscrutability.

In the case of Job *God aims at a great good:* his own vindication – in particular, the vindication of his worthiness to be served for who he is rather than for the earthly goods he supplies (Job 1:11; 2:5). God intends the great good of the vindication of his own name to come to pass *by way of various evils*. These are a combination of moral evil and natural evil (Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19, 21-22; 2:7, 10; 42:11). *God also leaves Job in the dark about what God is doing*, for Job has no access to the story's prologue in chapter 1. When God speaks to him "out of the whirlwind," he never reveals to Job *why* he suffered. Instead, Job's ignorance of the whole spectrum of created reality is exposed (Job 38:4-39:30; 40:6-41:34), and Job confesses his ignorance of both creation and providence (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6).

In the case of Joseph, we find the same. *God aims at great goods:* saving the broader Mediterranean world from famine, preserving his people amid such danger, and (ultimately) bringing a Redeemer into the world descended from such Israelites (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). God intends the great good of the preservation of his people from famine to come to pass *by way of various evils* (Gen 45:5, 7; Psa 105:16-17), including Joseph's betrayal, being sold into slavery, and suffering unjust accusation and imprisonment (Gen 37, 39). Joseph sees these evils as the means of God's sovereign providence (Gen 50:20). But God leaves Joseph's brothers, the Midianite traders, Potiphar's wife, and the cupbearer *in the dark.* None of these people knew the role their blameworthy actions would play in preserving God's people in a time of danger. They had no clue *which* goods depended on which evils or that the evils would even work toward *any* goods at all.

In the case of Jesus, we see the same thing again. *God aims at great goods:* the redemption of his people by the atonement of Christ and the glorification of God in the display of his justice, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, and power. God intends the great good of atonement to come to pass *by way of various evils*: Jewish plots (Matt 26:3-4, 14-15), Satan's promptings (John 13:21-30), Judas's betrayal (Matt 26:47-56; 27:3-10; Luke 22:22), Roman injustice (Matt 26:57-68), Pilate's cowardice (Matt 27:15–26), and the soldiers' brutality (Matt 27:27-44). But God leaves various created agents (human and demonic) *in the dark*, for it is clear that the Jewish leaders, Satan, Judas, Pilate, and the soldiers are all ignorant of the role they play in fulfilling the divinely prophesied redemptive purpose by the cross of Christ (Acts 2:23, 3:18, 4:25-29; John 13:18, 17:12, 19:23-24).

In each narrative, the first two paragraphs highlight *the way of theodicy* (God aiming at great goods by way of evils), while the third theme highlights *the way of inscrutability* (left to ourselves, we cannot discern what God's reasons are for any case of evil). By way of the first two themes, Scripture repeatedly encourages the view that God has a justifiable reason for permitting the evils of the world. That is what's right with the way of theodicy. But Scripture, by way of the third theme, repeatedly discourages the view that we can never *know* what that reason is in any particular case of evil. That is what's right with the way of inscrutability. In contemporary philosophy, these are usually presented as two different ways to solve the problem of evil (theodicy and inscrutability). However, the Bible seems to combine these two ways when it speaks of God's relation to the evils in the world. That is, it licenses the greater good theodicy as an overall perspective on evil, but wisely limits that perspective in a way that is instructive for both Christians and non-Christians.

Is God Responsible for the Existence of Evil?

Following the above analysis, we can vividly affirm that God created evil for a purpose. Acknowledging God's sovereign and purposeful providence over the moral and natural evils mentioned in the Job, Joseph, and Jesus' narratives is one thing. It is quite another to claim that God is sovereign over *all* moral and natural evils. But this is what the Bible repeatedly teaches. The Bible presents multitudes of examples of God intentionally bringing about natural evils – famine, drought, rampaging wild animals, disease, birth defects such as blindness and deafness, and even death itself – rather than being someone who merely permits nature to 'do its thing' on its own. Here are some samples:

- Famine (Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 8:1; Psa 105:16; Isa 3:1; Ezek 4:16, 5:16-17, 14:13, 14:21; Hos 2:9; Amos 4:6, 9; Hag 2:17)
- Drought (Deut 28:22; 1Kgs 8:35; Isa 3:1; Hos 2:3; Amos 4:6-8; Hag 1:11)
- Rampaging wild animals (Lev 26:22; Num 21:6; Deut 32:23-24; 2Kgs 17:25; Jer 8:17; Ezek 5:17, 14:15, 14:21, 33:27)
- Disease (Lev 26:16, 25; Num 14:12; Deut 28:21-22, 28:27; 2Kgs 15:5; 2Chron 21:14, 26:19-20)
- Birth defects such as blindness and deafness (Exod 4:11; John 9:1-3)
- Death itself (Deut 32:39; 1Sam 2:6-7)
- Ten Egyptian plagues (Exod 7:14-24, 8:1-15, 8:16-19, 8:20-32, 9:1-7, 9:8-12, 9:13-35, 10:1-20, 10:21-29, 11:4-10, 12:12-13, 12:27-30)
- 'Impersonal' forces and objects (Psa 65:9-11, 77:18, 83:13-15, 97:4, 104:4, 104:10-24, 107:25, 29, 135:6-7, 147:8, 147:16-18, 148:7-8, Jonah 1:4, Nah 1:3-4, Zech 7:14, Matt 5:45, Acts 14:17)

In addition, and perhaps surprisingly, the Bible presents God as having such meticulous control over the course of human history that a wide range of moral evils – murder, adultery, disobedience to parents, rejecting wise counsel, and even human hatred, can be regarded as "of the Lord". Without erasing or suppressing the intentionality of creatures, and this includes their deliberations, their reasoning, and their choosing between alternatives they consider and reflect upon, God's own intentionality stands above and behind the responsible choices of his creatures. Again, some samples:

- Eli's sons' disobedience (1Sam 2:23-25)
- Samson's desire for a foreign wife (Jdg 14:1-4)
- Absalom, Rehoboam, and Amaziah rejecting wise counsel (2Sam 17:14; 1Kgs 12:15; 2Chron 25:20)
- Assassination (2Chron 22:7, 9, 32:21-22)
- Adultery (2Sam 12:11-12, 16:22)
- Human hatred (Psa 105:23-25; Exod 4:21; Deut 2:30, 32; Josh 11:20; 1Kgs 11:23, 25; 2Chron 21:16-17)

So, the Job, Joseph, and Jesus passages are not anomalies but part and parcel of a more general view the Bible takes on the subject of natural and moral evil. Indeed, in addition to this large swath of 'particular' texts about individual cases of evil, there are quite a few "universal" texts that seem

to trace all calamities, all human decision-making, and all events whatsoever back to the will of God.

- God's sovereignty over all calamity (Ecc 7:13-14; Isa 45:7; Lam 3:37-38; Amos 3:6)
- God's sovereignty over all human decision-making (Prov 16:9, 19:21, 20:24, 21:1; Jer 10:23)
- God's sovereignty over all events whatsoever (Psa 115:3; Prov 16:33; Isa 46:9-10; Rom 8:28, 11:36; Eph 1:11)

Nevertheless, each specific theodicy mentioned earlier has significant limitations. For instance, the Bible frequently discourages the idea that the punishment theodicy can explain *all* evils in the world (Job 1:1, 1:8, 2:3, 42:7-8; John 9:1-3; Acts 28:1-6). More generally, Christians can never know enough about a person's situation or about God's purposes to *rule in* a specific theodicy as being God's reason for permitting evil in a particular case. In fact, it would be entirely presumptuous to do so. But if he who affirms must prove, then the question in the problem of evil is not whether *Christians* know enough to "rule in" the applicability of theodicy on any particular occasion but whether *critics* know enough to "rule out" the applicability of any theodicy. But how could a critic reasonably claim to know that *there is no reason* that would justify God in permitting suffering? How could he know that premise (2) of the original argument is true? For why think that God's reasons for permitting particular cases of evil are the kinds of things that *we* would discern by our cognitive capacities, if such reasons were there?

It is widely recognised that we have cognitive limitations with respect to discerning goods and connections, at least in territories where we lack the relevant expertise, experience, or vantage point. Some examples:

- It doesn't *seem* to me that there is a perfectly spherical rock on the dark side of the moon right now, but that's no reason to conclude that such a rock *isn't* there.
- It didn't *seem* to any medieval that the theories of special relativity or quantum mechanics were true, but that was no reason to think they *weren't* true.
- It didn't *seem* to humans in earlier eras that fundamental human rights of one sort or another were in fact *fundamental* human rights, but that was no reason to think there *weren't* any such rights.
- It wouldn't *seem* to a non-Greek-speaker that spoken Greek sentences have any meaning, but that is no reason to think they *don't* have a meaning.
- It wouldn't *seem* to the musically uninitiated that Beethoven projected the 'sonata form' onto the symphony as a whole, giving the entire musical work a fundamental unity it would not otherwise have had. But it wouldn't follow from their ignorance that Beethoven *did not* have such a purpose, much less that he was unsuccessful in executing it.
- It might not *seem* to my one-month-old son that I have a good reason for him to receive a painful series of shots at the doctor's office. But it wouldn't follow from his ignorance that there *isn't* a good reason.

God is omniscient, which means he not only knows everything that *we* are likely to guess at, but every truth whatsoever. This means that God knows things that we cannot even fathom. As the above analogies suggest, this is easily demonstrated for a huge range of cases. If the complexities of an infinite God's divine plan for the unfolding of the universe *do* involve God's recognizing

either deep goods or necessary connections between various evils and the realisation of those goods, or both of these things, would our inability to discern these goods or connections give us a reason for thinking they aren't there? What would be the basis of such confidence?

Conclusion

The discussion on the problems of evil above, which hinged on the origin of evil, has been laid-bay. We can no longer be searching for how evil came to the world after God had finished creating all things and making it perfect. We have seen that evil came through the means that good followed. But what differs is that evil was created for a specific purpose in order to know if man really trusts in God. However, from the above we have seen that evil occur as a lack of good. Thus, this discourse affirms that the problem of evil, rather than undermining divine perfection, underscores a complex providential design. While theodicies offer partial resolutions, the inscrutability of divine will remains a central tenet in theological interpretation.

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