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Can God Take Responsibility for Evil and Still be Good?

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Introduction

God is sovereign. That means that he is responsible for everything but we must be clear what we mean by responsibility for anything and everything. God's sovereignty means that nothing happens without His knowledge and permission.

I. Biblical Contexts

A key example is found in the first chapter of the book of Job. There we find Satan, the leader of the fallen angels, still required to give some account of what he does before the throne of the almighty, sovereign God. God draws Satan's attention to 'his servant, Job'. Satan sneeringly suggests that it is worthwhile Job being good and doing what is good, because it is profitable. God then allows Satan a

¹ His books include *The Moral Maze* (Romanian edition 2004, Spanish ed., 2005), *Blind Alley Beliefs* (Turkish edition, 2005), *Not Just Science* edited with D F Chappell (Zondervan, 2005), *Contraception* (IVP, 2005), and *Children of Prometheus* edited with D. Russ and P. Adman (Trinity Forum Publications, 2005). See www.Wheaton.edu/Philosophy/faculty/cook/cook.html for his vita.

² See www.Wheaton.edu.

certain amount of freedom to attack Job, to test the authenticity of Job's devotion, at the same time as setting severe limits to what Satan is permitted to do. The rest of the book of Job is a recounting of various attempts at solutions of why bad things happen to good people and whether God is responsible for the evil which happens to people and how that affects His standing as a good God. In the end when God appears to Job, as Job has begged God so to do, the sense of the presence and power of God makes the issue of whatever good and evil has happened pale into insignificance in comparison with the force of the encounter with the living, sovereign God. It becomes a moot point for Job as he never receives a theodicy – defence of God's actions – but rather his wealth is restored, he flourishes and he has an overwhelming experience of God. However, for the readers of the book of Job, we find that there is another dimension and set of questions at work. Is it possible to love God for nothing? Is it possible to love God even when bad things happen to us? God is sovereign, but God is not the author of evil. Satan clearly causes the evil that happens to Job to happen to Job. What God does do, is to allow Satan limited reign to do evil. It is not uninhibited evil but evil limited and within God's sovereign care and will. Some therefore argue that God is actually responsible for evil. The book of Job seems to suggest that even if God were so responsible then that would be part of what it means to be God, but in fact God does not wish evil. Rather he uses evil to bring about His good purposes.

This same kind of point is made in Romans 5 where Paul argues that as Christians we are justified and that brings us peace with God, access to God and His grace and participation in the triumph of the hope of God's glory. (v.1-2) Paul then examines the idea that we can triumph, even celebrate even in our troubles. Nowhere does Paul suggest that God sends these troubles on us. God is not a child molester. Rather the sovereign God is able to use troubles and evil to bring about good for us. Troubles produce endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, which never disappoints us (v. 3-5).

II. The Nature of God

Evil and trouble biblically speaking are never outside the permissive will of God, but he is not the author of pain and suffering. This drives us back to questions about the nature of God and our

understandings and definitions of goodness and evil. If we begin from a purely human understanding, then much of what happens to us seems clearly evil. If we had the power we would not let these things happen is what we tend to think. This has led to the philosophical dilemma about God's goodness and God's power. It suggests that because evil things do happen, God is not really good because he does not use His power to prevent evil happening. Or else God is not really all powerful, because even though He is all good, He is unable to prevent evil. If He was all powerful, there would be no evil, but there is evil so either He is not really all good or he is not really all powerful.

Interestingly this is not really a question about why is there evil, but a question about the nature of God, the nature of goodness and the nature of power. It is really an issue of how we think about God. Some suggest that we should consider redefining our accepted ideas of God's power and God's love and goodness.

Such appeals for a redefinition would require a very careful look at what it means to say that God is all-powerful and all-loving. To be all-loving does not necessarily mean letting people do whatever they like or removing all consequences of actions and behaviour. To be all-powerful does not mean an ability to do the logically impossible or the nonsensical. God cannot make square circles, but that says nothing at all about His power. As part of the Augustinian approach we would need to think carefully about humanity's relationship with God and about the nature of God's activity. Especially it would raise the question of how and in what way an all-loving and all-powerful God would act differently.

There is even more at stake here than humanity's relationship with God. There is also the question of God's relationship with the world itself. What kind of world would result from such interference and control on the part of God? If God were to step in to prevent evil and its consequences, what would our world be like? Imagine a drunken person leaping from the top of the Empire State building in New York. As he falls, he thinks, 'So far, so good'. At the very moment he is about to be splattered on the sidewalk of New York, somehow or other he gently floats to a soft landing. God has intervened. The speeding car suddenly slows down and avoids a crash. Mrs. Jones, in the kitchen slicing onions, discovers that her

knife suddenly turns to jelly as she is about to chop off her little finger. Chaos would result if God were to intervene in the world in these kinds of ways in order to prevent or restrain evil. The regularity and very order of the world would disappear. With the disappearance of that regularity and order, our ability to understand, relate to and act on the basis of the regularity and order of the world would come to an end. Science would falter and become unreliable and capricious. We would no longer be able to function. Our traditional understanding of God's power and love provides a reliable basis for coming to terms with the world and the reality of evil.

In practice no matter the answer we give to that question believer and unbeliever alike still have to face the reality of evil and the question of why bad things happen. This is often more of a pastoral than a theological issue because folk are looking for some kind of sense and meaning in the midst of whatever awful experiences they are going through. Christians are often unwilling to recognize that the reality of evil is still a problem for unbelievers and their own accounts of why there is suffering in the world need to be critically examined. Some have even suggested that if there is no God then why does it really matter that there is evil. That is the way things are so we have to make the best of it.

III. Augustine

However, Christian believers have tended to respond to the question of God's responsibility for evil and His goodness by moving in two main directions. The first was based on the theological approach of Augustine. He held two key notions. He argued that evil is a privation. Evil in itself is not anything real. It is simply a corruption of good. It is a falling short of what is good rather than a positive, independent reality. It fits well with one key New Testament word for 'sin' – hamartia – literally to fall short. The picture is of aiming an arrow at a target and falling short of the target. Evil is thus parasitic on goodness. It is the absence of good and so is a movement towards non-existence. Augustine believed that goodness is the most real thing. Hence of course God being all good is the most real thing and indeed the basis of all reality. All falling short of goodness is a move away from reality-from being to non being. Augustine supported his theory by describing the genesis of evil in terms of the free will choices of angels and men. Again, he is careful to emphasize

that this does not make evil a positive thing, but rather, it is a turning away from an higher good, particularly God.³ This is a classic description of the nature of sin. Sin is a falling short of God's standards. It is failing to do and to be what God intended and purposed. Accordingly, since God is good, He must punish sin. Thus we find the real reason why there is suffering and evil in terms of disease and death. These are the natural consequences of the fall and failure of humankind. Humanity falls from God's standards and so must inevitably be punished or else the fact of God's goodness would have no relevance either to God or to anyone else. We must not fail to see the complexity of Augustine's view. He is giving a double definition of evil. It is first of all sin in the sense of falling short, and that is the true basis and cause of all sin. The second sense of evil is that of the fruit, consequences and results that sin inevitably brings—the penalty and punishment of sin. For Augustine, evil is negation and deficiency (*Against Fortunatus*, 15).

God is in ultimate control but if evil is a falling short of God then God cannot be charged with direct responsibility and authorship of evil. But as God is sovereign then nothing that happens or fails to happen is outside His ultimate control and will. God is not responsible for evil as a falling short, for He can never fall short of Himself and His own standards of goodness. God's will is always for good. Human will falls short of that goodness and God gives humanity the freedom to reject Him and His standards.

Augustine has a second strand in his defence of God's responsibility for evil in the context of God's goodness. This depends on how we define and understand 'evil'. If we look at a tapestry, we see that there is an intermingling of threads and patterns. To highlight particular threads and patterns, dark threads are set against lighter ones. These light colours are seen in all their glory by the contrast with the dark colours. The overall effect, when seen from above or as a whole, is pleasing and aesthetically beautiful. If each thread were examined, individually, it would seem uninteresting and displeasing. Augustine builds on this kind of analogy. What appears to be evil is only what is seen in isolation. We are, in fact, viewing things from too limited a context. In this way, distortion occurs. What we call evil is a

³ Augustine, *City of God*, XII, 6.

necessary part of the universe. If we were able to view the universe as a whole and what happens in the light of everything else, we would then clearly see that the totality is good. When we call things evil, it is because we never see the whole. It is God alone Who sees that whole and He is the great designer.⁴ Thus we can have confidence in Him and in His judgement. Some people have described what lies behind Augustine's view as the principle of plenitude, which was even further developed in the work of Leibnitz. The universe is a better place, having a wider variety of things and experience, than it would be if everything were monochrome.

IV. Objections to Augustine

There are two main objections to this Augustinian view of evil. The first is to question why God did not make human beings differently. If we are created so that when we are faced with the choice of doing what is right and good, we choose to fall short of that standard, then it seems obvious that God could have done a better job. He could, and some suggest should, have made us so that we always, without exception, choose the good. In this way both evil in the sense of sin and evil as the penalty for sin would have been avoided.

The debate on this critique has centred on a defence of free will. In response to the question whether God could have made us so that we always chose the good, the reply comes that such a 'biasing' on the part of God would have robbed us of free will. In making men and women, God created them with the capacity to choose goodness or to refuse to choose goodness and thus fall short of his standards. If God had made people so that they 'had' to choose the good and could do nothing else, then they would not have had freedom. Indeed, it is argued that they would not really be people at all. Instead they would be like programmed robots, acting on the basis of preordained orders and be unable to disobey. The critics have responded with the suggestion that God could have made people so that they always freely chose goodness. The problem is how would we know whether they were truly free to do differently, if they never actually chose anything but goodness? It is also debatable whether it makes sense to create people who are free to do only one thing. Is this genuine

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 13.

freedom, or is it another, more sophisticated level of control by God? The question of responsibility for evil raises crucial questions about the nature of God, especially His power and His love and goodness, and the nature of human will and our responsibility for the choices we make. God certainly allows and permits human beings to make choices even to reject Him and His ways. The story of the rich young ruler, in St Luke's Gospel, chapter 18, emphasizes the awful consequences of humanity's free will. This good living, attractive young man who not only wants to grasp the secret of eternal life, but also knows that Jesus- God Incarnate- is the One who can and will guide him to the uncovering of the secret. Jesus tells the young man that in his case he must sell all he has give it to the poor and then he will be able and free to follow Jesus and gain eternal life. The young man finds this too high a price and in effect says to Jesus, 'Thank you, but no thank you'. He then goes off and we read the editorial comment that he had great wealth. Augustine and those in his tradition have offered this freewill defence, which stresses that God allows humanity free choice and that results in falling short of God's standards when human selfishness and pride leads to bad choices rather than obeying God's will.

V. Irenaeus and Schleiermacher

The other main theologically traditional theodicy comes from Irenaeus then popularized by Schleiermacher and John Hick.⁵ In this approach sin is a falling short of God's standards but this is a result not of God Himself but of human beings. Before the fall, Adam was a child. He was an immature creature who was not fully responsible. He was at the start of a process of development. Made then in the image of God he was yet to be conformed to the likeness of God. He had the form of God but lacked the content. The process of development really begins with the Fall. This was a growing up experience. This was learning the hard way. To become an adult, humanity needed to experience some degree of freedom and autonomy. The basic freedom to choose is that of choosing either to obey God's way or to disobey. It is only the developing of our freedom and making good choices that will enable us to enter into a fully adult relationship of love and trust.

⁵ W.W. Harvey, ed., *Adversus Haereses* (Cambridge, 1857); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube* (Berlin, 1821), and John Hick, *God and Evil* (London, 1966).

Evil is necessary to help people grow and develop. The world is a valley of soul making and eventually human beings will become worthy of and able to have a proper relationship of obedience to and with God. God is ultimately in total and sovereign control. He is working His purpose out. He sends evil and suffering as a way of helping people grow by developing and growing into maturity. God allows evil to reinforce people in their freedom and responsibility. By suffering and evil, we can arrive at maturity.

Critics again look at the nature of God and ask why God has not chosen to allow evil to bring about maturity and growth. Is there not some easier way? Why didn't God make humanity perfect from the start? To fail to make humanity perfect suggests that God is not really all-powerful or that He lacks the good will or power to make perfect creatures.

The Irenaean view seems to suggest that evil is not really evil at all. Always there is a point behind evil and that point is towards good. Evil is an helpful, developing thing.

One wonders if evil always and inevitably brings maturity and growth. The amount of pain and suffering which some people experience seems totally out of proportion to any lessons they might learn. In fact, sometimes the experience of pain and suffering makes people bitter and extremely antagonistic to God and other humans. For every example of people coming through bad experiences to greater maturity, there are as many examples of those who have been destroyed by the experience of pain and suffering.

Any denial of evil as truly evil makes the traditional doctrine of redemption and the cross unnecessary. Scripture takes sin and evil very seriously and reveals a God Who acts decisively in Christ to redeem women and men from the power and reality of sin and the consequences of evil.

VI. God's Responsibility for Evil

If we believe in the sovereignty of God we must accept that God is ultimately responsible for evil. That does not mean that God is the author of specific evils. It does mean that as nothing is outside the ultimate control of God and his nature is always to bring good out of evil. God in His goodness permits human beings the freedom to make choices. Men and women are able to follow God and His will and ways or to please themselves. Within that framework evil happens,

but God is at work in and through Jesus Christ redeeming humanity and the world to Himself.

The nature of God is that He is good. He is also the standard of goodness. Theistic morality recognizes that humanity only knows what is good because it is revealed to us by God and that it is most of all in Jesus Christ the perfect man that we see goodness embodied. To try to make sense of a God who is less than perfect and all – good is to undermine the very idea and reality of God. It literally would not and could not make sense. Thus God is Good and we can only seek to understand how evil exists in the world. Certainly cannot be the author of specific evils, but allows evil as the inevitable consequence of human choices stemming from the Fall of humanity. These bad choices affect human relationships with God, with each other and with the world itself. God in his goodness through the life, death and resurrection of Christ has reconciled the world and humanity to Himself and thus removing evil and evil choices.

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