



The Problem of Evil and Its Fruit

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Abstract: The enduring philosophical and theological question of evil, deeply embedded in the human experience, has historically been navigated by diverse religious traditions, each elucidating a unique perspective. This essay delves into the Christian and Buddhist approaches to defining the problem of evil and its solutions, emphasizing the shifts in understanding from theological exploration of the nature of suffering and evil for the sake of orthodoxy and orthopraxy into apologetic responses in contemporary contexts. By examining the profound insights of Christian figures such as Augustine and Jonathan Edwards, juxtaposed with the foundational teachings of Buddhism, we see that prior to the modern era humans sought to understand the essence of human existence and the transformative potential of grappling with the existential quandaries of suffering and evil. We show that the conversation extends beyond East/West divides and bears the most fruit when the *telos* of inquiry is not winning a debate but becoming a better human being.

Changing The Context and Changing the *Telos*

The problem of evil is one of the quintessential questions about the human condition. The problem of evil as a question and as a field of exploration did not arise in the halls of academia, the dark, smoky rooms of a cold post-enlightenment society, it is not a question that came from the atheist. The problem of evil is an inherently Theocentric question, and as a result, we see that religions of all kinds have wrestled with the problem of evil. Christianity is no exception to this. Christians should never be afraid of the problem of evil because Moses did not fear it, the prophets did not fear it, Jesus (God Himself) did not fear it, nor did the apostles, nor have the great theologians and people of the church throughout history. In recent generations, within Western culture, Christians have seemed to become afraid of the problem of evil. This begs the question, “Why?”

If it is the same problem of evil that has been asked millions of times in history, then why now does it offer this unique anxiety? As stated, the problem of evil is a question of theology, and in the past, the question of evil arose in a

theological context, whether it was a Priestly Class presiding over sacred rites, a mentor to his disciples, or a broken person looking up to heaven and crying out. But since the Enlightenment – especially Voltaire and the earthquake in Portugal, this question has started coming from a new direction, the atheist’s challenge. This changes the nature of how we have perceived the question. Rather than being a question for exploration that deepens the relationship of the person asking with the object of worship or changing their relationship with creation, the question has become one of apologetics and polemics. As a result, the desired outcome in answering this question is one of a release of tension, getting God off the hook, or providing cognitive dissonance so we can continue with our lives and not have to think about the question again. This is fundamentally different from the way the problem of evil has been explored throughout the rest of human history.

First off, we need to change our posture when it comes to the problem of evil. There is so much that we can get out of this question, but often the insights go unnoticed because we’re focused on the wrong outcomes. The problem of evil, logically speaking, has been definitively addressed countless times.¹ It is the existential problem of evil that we as humans still wrestle with, and it is there that much good fruit has been lost, but it can be regained.

Many apologetics engagements from the atheist’s perspective tend to deal with making statements about what is morally possible for an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God or stating that suffering is pointless—even when the charge is unprovable. Such as the following cardinal point by J. L. Mackie, “If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist.”² On an existential level, these debates are a formal exercise in a “Yes He can...no He can’t...yes He can...no He can’t” sort of argument.

Apologetics serves a purpose, and this essay is not to disparage apologetic work, but the reality is that exploring these questions in their theological contexts with the *telos* being focused on orthodoxy and orthopraxy is the better way of processing these questions and continuing the great conversation. So, let us examine an example of this approach.

Engaging The Problem of Evil within Christianity and Other World Religions

¹ Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, et al.

² J. L. Mackie, “IV.—EVIL AND OMNIPOTENCE,” *Mind* LXIV, no. 254 (January 1, 1955): 200–212, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/lxiv.254.200>.

What is at stake in practice and the problem of evil? How does our understanding of the problem of evil affect our beliefs and actions? Everything. The problem of evil helps us grow in our understanding of orthodoxy and in how we live out orthopraxy.

An example of this is in the story of the Buddha. As orthodox stories go, the Buddha came out of a Hindu context, and the great spiritual journey and foundation of Buddhism was Buddha's answer to the problem of evil. The way the Buddha answered the question affected the entire universe from his perspective. Much is at stake in the problem of evil, but it is not the apologetic question of "how do we get God off the hook?" What is at stake is the essence and the *telos* of human existence. For the Christian and the Buddhist alike, the way we answer this question influences the rest of life. God will be there, regardless of how well we answer the atheist; the question we need to ask is, "How should we live?"

Buddhist Perspective on the Problem of Evil:

In a way, the entire edifice of Buddhist teachings can be seen as a response to the problem of suffering. To understand how Buddhism approaches this issue, one need only look at the life of Siddhartha Gautama, who would later become the Buddha. Encountering the undeniable realities of old age, sickness, and death - the omnipresent suffering inherent in life - he embarked on a spiritual quest to comprehend and transcend this suffering. His Enlightenment was the realization of the Four Noble Truths which pivot around the acknowledgment of suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation.

1. The Truth of Suffering

"Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."

2. The Truth of the Origin of Suffering

"It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."

3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

"It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

4. *The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering*

"It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path³; that is, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."⁴

From a Buddhist perspective, suffering is not viewed as a consequence of original sin or the actions of malevolent beings, but rather as an intrinsic aspect of existence in *samsara*—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It arises due to attachment, desire, and ignorance. The intention, or will, in Buddhism isn't an independent entity but is interwoven with these afflictions. When purified of these afflictions, the will or intention becomes a tool for enlightenment, working towards the cessation of suffering.

Karma, which means action, is a connection of behavior in the past with suffering in the present. While there may not necessarily be a one-to-one relationship between a specific action and a specific present suffering, the past evil karma will set up for the next rebirth in *samsara* and can set one up for a future life of misery. For example, it may not be the case that because I kicked an old chicken as a child that I am, in another life, suffering in the cold right now but it may be the case that because of that because of that former action I was reborn in a destitute condition and so secondarily, with regards to causation, I am now suffering in the cold. There is a great incentive in this system to right action because wrong action will bear consequences even if it takes another lifetime to experience.

We can see from the breakdown above that the Buddhist tradition answers four important questions in their worldview about suffering: What is the case, how did it come to be, what needs to change, and how can that change take place? By virtue of providing answers alone, the Buddhist tradition alone offers a more robust worldview than the modern atheist views of suffering and release from suffering. What is seen in the systematic approach to addressing the problem of evil is a concern for the primary principle of human flourishing – a recognition of a wrongness in the universe and a pathway to address that wrongness. This

³ The Noble Eightfold Path is a comprehensive guide for ethical and spiritual development, leading to enlightenment and the cessation of suffering. It is the Buddhist approach to living a balanced and purposeful life, covering the topics of wisdom, right action, and right purpose.

⁴ "SuttaCentral," SuttaCentral, n.d., <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false>.

answer arose from the situation in which Gautama found the world and his attempts to lead people to liberation. The answers to the problem of suffering were not framed as a response to a polemic argument, they were a response to an inescapable fact of life.

There are many surface similarities between the Buddhist and Christian worldviews regarding the problem of evil; however, further investigation reveals important differences regarding all four answers of nature, origin, change, and means of change. We will look at the Christian view of the problem of evil through the lens of St. Augustine and Jonathan Edwards.

Comparison with Christian Views of Augustine and Jonathan Edwards:

In many ways the Buddhist answer to the problem of evil is similar to what Christians call “The Free Will Defense” in Christian apologetics which answers the following questions. What is the origin of suffering in the world? The effects of sin; the waxing entropy of age, sickness, human evil, death. What is the origin of evil that causes suffering? The misuse of the free will with which God created humans, we desire and even crave things which are not good. What is the way to end suffering? To walk in accord with the desires and nature of God and relinquish the desires that are evil. What is the path to walking in accord with the desires and nature of God? Think, desire, speak, and act in the right manner. The Buddhist and Christian views are most different, however, when questions of foundations are asked—what is the nature of evil and the nature of the will? This is where the Christian and Buddhist traditions part ways and yet both retain their depth and inner consistency.

What is the nature of evil, according to the Christian worldview?

Two influential theologians who have influenced the way many Christians view engage with suffering both intellectually and in daily life are St. Augustine and Jonathan Edwards.

St. Augustine who wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries was a Christian theologian and philosopher whose prolific writings, notably 'Confessions' and 'City of God,' influenced Western Christianity and philosophy and continue to do so until this day. Jonathan Edwards who wrote in the eighteenth century was a prominent American preacher, theologian, and philosopher who played a central role in the First Great Awakening and is best known for his fire-and-brimstone sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' however his contributions to Christian philosophy on free will and divine sovereignty have made significant contributions to those areas of theology and philosophy. Both these theologians demonstrate how within the Christian worldview the conversation about how to act and worship in a world marred by evil and suffering has been going on for thousands of years. Both theologians appreciated versions of what is commonly called the Free Will Defense within apologetics.

The Free Will Defense, as the argument that the misuse of free will is the cause of evil, is important but requires more depth to be satisfactory—an explanation of what evil is. If the misuse of free will is the reason, then why was it misused in the first place? This is what is explored by both Augustine and Edwards.

It is worth noting that there are two ways in which the question of why can be asked in this context. The first way is asking, “Why, in the biblical story, did *Eve* and *Adam* take the fruit if they were in such a great place?” In this sense, the question is getting at the inner workings of Eve and Adam, asking rather incredulously, “What was their thought process? What was their inner struggle? What were they thinking?” This sense of the question cannot be answered because the Bible never explains the inner workings of their minds in a play-by-play narrative. So, this sense of the question is interesting, but a satisfactory answer is not possible due to the personal and internal nature of the answer and the lack of access to those inner and personal thought processes. The second way in which the question can be asked is the philosophically invigorating one, “What is it about *the nature* of free will that makes evil intentions even possible if free will was imbued by an all-good Creator?” That is what we will investigate below. What we are about to find is that the foundational content of the answer is not found in responding to an atheist's objections. Rather it is born from the pursuit of truth and understanding.

St. Augustine argued that evil is not a substance but rather a 'privation' of good. Augustine grappled deeply with the nature of evil. Augustine gets to the heart of the question and asks, “what is evil in the first place?” He says:

In the bodies of animals, disease, and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present — namely, the diseases and wounds — go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance, — the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils— that is, privations of the good which we call health — are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.⁵

This is somewhat parallel to the Buddhist idea that suffering arises from ignorance and attachment, though the theological foundations differ. Augustine believes that there is a real substance, and that substance is understood in the creative act of God to make substance from that which was not substance. One removes the “holes in the cloth” by drawing closer to God—the source of all substance. This is a fundamental distinction between Augustine and Buddhist

⁵“CHURCH FATHERS: Handbook on Faith, Hope and Love (ST. Augustine),” n.d., <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm>.

thought – Augustine believes in orthodoxy in its most literal definition, “right glory” as the answer to evil. For Augustine, there is an eternal and unchanging God, and it is rightly glorifying Him that removes evil, which is the impetus of suffering.

According to Augustine, nature is not a power struggle but a privation. This is important because since Christians believe that humans are made in the Image of God, any privation is to be met with becoming more like God. In other words, the Christian view holds that there is a permanent self that is designed to exist in goodness. In contrast with the Buddhist view of liberation and realizing there is no permanent self, the Christian view holds that the answer to liberation from evil is to become more permanent, turning more into God both ontologically and functionally.

To the Christian worldview, humans like Adam and Eve, and indeed all creatures, have an ontological privation—they are contingent beings. As Graham Cole summarized, in the Bible, “The fundamental metaphysical distinction is not that between being and becoming, or the infinite and the finite, but between the Creator and the creature. Creatures are internally related to the Creator. That is to say that, without the will of the Creator, they are not.”⁶ Due to the contingent nature of humans and the privational nature of evil we begin to see possibilities. If things act according to their nature and humans are contingent in nature, then it follows that humans are metaphysically able to deviate and make contingent choices which are privations from the good. God, the necessary being, necessarily does what is good. Humans, the contingent beings, *may* do what is good but are metaphysically contingent.

This is where Edwards brings a fine point on the connection between the metaphysical contingency of human nature and the moral contingency within “the will” which causes evil actions. He puts a fine point on Augustine’s idea by exploring the nature of *the will* and why humans choose what they choose:

We are said to be naturally unable to do a thing, when we can’t do it if we will, because what is most commonly called nature does not allow of it, or because of some impeding defect or obstacle that is extrinsic to the Will; either in the faculty of understanding, constitution of body, or external objects. Moral Inability consists not in any of these things; but either in the want of inclination; or the strength of a contrary inclination; or the want of sufficient motives in view, to induce and excite an act of the Will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary.⁷

While individuals have the natural ability (physical and mental capacity) to make different choices, their moral ability (what they are inclined or disposed to do) determines their actions. Adam and Eve provide an example of this in that while they had the natural ability to obey God in the Garden, their moral

⁶ Graham Arthur Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology, 2019).

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 1979.

inclination at the time of temptation was an impelling force to sin. There are both internal and external forces that shape the will and the inclination of the will may change with new understandings (internal processing) and/or with new circumstances (external environments).

So, in the biblical narrative of the fall we see that the serpent had an active role in providing Eve with incentives to disobey God. The words and persuasion of the serpent had an effect on the moral inclination of Eve's will. The serpent did not change the natural ability of Eve to desire or not desire the temptation. The natural ability was the same natural ability before the serpent appeared. Eve was always naturally capable of not acting on temptation. What the serpent did was introduce a new potential desire for Eve. It was Eve, with her natural ability, that not only desired the temptation but found the contrary inclination, acting out on temptation, more inducing than the inclination to obey God.

Naturally, the ability to commit an evil intention had always been present in Eve because of the nature of humanity. Even the command to not eat of the tree was not new in the serpent's address to Eve. Prior to the serpent the state of nature had continued without a temptation to sin: Adam and Eve in the garden, the tree present, the command not to eat of the tree. The only thing that changed was the introduction of contrary motives.

For both Augustine and Edwards, the orientation of the mind toward the things of God is fundamental to the undoing of evil and the elimination of suffering. Ontologically, the more we rely on necessary being and commune with that necessary being the less metaphysically contingent we become. Morally, the more we align ourselves with the rightness of the necessary goodness of God, the less we will be inclined to contrary inclinations. The will of a contingent being will act according to the nature of contingent beings.

Implications for Orthopraxy

Buddhism's answer to the problem of evil isn't just theoretical but affects every aspect of life. The Noble Eightfold Path offers concrete steps to cultivate right understanding, right intention, and right conduct to alleviate suffering. The orthopraxy here is geared towards understanding the nature of suffering and working towards its cessation.

In Christianity, particularly through the lenses of Augustine and Edwards, orthopraxy in the face of evil is rooted in faith, trust in God's plan, and the moral responsibility of humans to choose good over evil. The problem of evil is, thus, also a call to moral action and deepening one's relationship with God. The Christian praxis to the problem of evil turns out to be the biblical view of "repentance," turning toward God and turning away from that which is not of God. It is, metaphysically, a turning toward the source of substance and turning away from the absence of substance—a continuous moral act of ever inclining the heart more toward the Creator rather than inclining the heart toward chaos. In conclusion, both Buddhism and Christianity (as represented by theologians like Augustine and Edwards) recognize the profound challenge posed by the problem of evil or suffering, they approach it with different theological and philosophical underpinnings. Buddhism emphasizes an incentive to right action

due to the cause and effect of karma, escapable only by reaching enlightenment. Christianity emphasizes the inclination of the will and the importance of this inclination being toward the nature of God. Both, however, emphasize the transformative potential of understanding and confronting suffering, leading to deeper spiritual insight, ethical commitment, and, in the case of Christianity right worship of God.

Benefits of Approach

Approaching the problem of evil as an inherently human problem that transcends religious worldviews has a series of advantages over a polemic-centered approach. These advantages can be attained in other topics by refocusing the *telos* anywhere polemics were previously the center. This is a plea to return to a great conversational approach to exploring problems of theology and life.

The first benefit is the humanization of “the other” in the exploration of the problem of evil. In our polemic age, this is timely and important. When the topic of discussion, such as the problem of evil, is seen in the context of the human condition then the humanity of “the other” is not possible to ignore. The topic is subordinated to the great conversation and not the other way around. Polemics takes the great conversation and the reality of human experience and history and subordinates it to the *telos* of winning an argument or advancing a view. Recontextualizing the topic outside of polemics releases anxiety and leads to greater respect among parties.

A second benefit is that it rightfully recognizes a *telos* that is appropriate to the subject matter. When polemics are used the strongest inclination and motivation is winning the argument and advancing the view. But this is actually taking part of a conversation of thought that has been weaved through countless cultures and thousands of years and using part of that conversation to win an argument. Literacy allowed humans to communicate outside of the immediate and imminent context—allowing their contributions to the great conversation to be recorded and engaged with throughout the future and beyond their personal presence. What we see in the history of human thought and literacy is that this conversation was already happening prior to the written word since rich reflection and dialogue appear in the foundations of literacy. As a result, it can be said that these conversations have been happening so far back in history that we cannot know when they truly began. From our perspective the conversation of the problem of evil is timeless because it predates our records of thought captured in time. To take such a topic and merely try to win an argument is inappropriately trite. The *telos* of exploring the problem of evil is deeply ingrained in the human experience and the nature of God and God’s relationship to creation. The appropriate *telos* of such an exploration would be something like a better understanding of the person and work of God and the right action that out to be taken by humans.

There are more benefits that can be added by the discerning mind. But my call to action, in conclusion, is for individual humans like the reader to recontextualize polemic arguments in the context of the great conversation.

Through this change of action, we will see a more amicable marketplace of ideas in our culture and beyond.

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