

1 | Mapping the Problem

Simon Blackburn, a prominent British atheist philosopher, offers a compelling analogy to stress the problem of evil and suffering:

Suppose you found yourself at school or university in a dormitory. Things are not too good. The roof leaks, there are rats about, the food is almost inedible, some students in fact starve to death. There is a closed door; behind which is the management, but the management never comes out. You get to speculate what the management must be like. Can you infer from the dormitory as you find it that the management, first, knows exactly what the conditions are like, second, cares intensely for your welfare, and third, possess unlimited resources for fixing things? The inference is crazy. You would be almost certain to infer that either the management doesn't know, doesn't care, or cannot do anything about it.¹

With his comparison, Blackburn aims to demonstrate the inconsistency in the belief in a theistic God. God is often described as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Considering the evil and suffering that exist in the world, for Blackburn, this description is absurd. It is illogical because an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-compassionate God would do something to eliminate evil and suffering in the world. As one would expect the management of the university to change the situation in the dormitory, so God should intervene to stop

¹ Simon Blackburn, *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170.

the suffering of people. Considering this challenge, this chapter explores the problem of evil and suffering. What are the concepts of evil and suffering? How do major religious traditions address the problem? What are the questions posed to traditional theism regarding evil and suffering? I begin with the definition of evil and suffering.

Theologians and philosophers have no consensus on definitions of evil and suffering. Evil is often described as something that is harmful, hurtful, undesirable, immoral, unjust, and sinful. Suffering is the outcome of evil. It is manifested in forms of sorrow, distress, physical pain, and mental illness.

Scholars have classified evil into different groups. The most common typologies are moral and natural evil. Moral evil is attributed to human beings as a result of the misuse of their free will. Some examples of moral evil are rape, child abuse, theft, genocide, murder, injustice, hatred, gossip, and dishonesty. In the case of natural evil, human agency is not involved. It is beyond human control and does not happen because of them – for example, earthquakes, floods, cancer, animal suffering, hurricanes, and birth defects.

There are also instances when moral and natural evil overlap. One example could be global warming. While it has a natural aspect, human agency is also involved. Floods can be seen as a form of natural evil; however, if people do not take the necessary measures, such events could become more destructive.

Religious Traditions on Evil and Suffering

The problem of evil and suffering is as old as human history. Why is there so much evil and suffering? Let alone bad people, why have good people, innocents, and animals faced suffering because of evil? Religions seek answers to these questions and provide explanations to their followers.

One of them is the ancient tradition of Zoroastrianism. It explains the problem of evil through its doctrine of dualism. According to this approach, there exist good and evil forces in the world, and they are at war with each other. The followers of Zoroastrianism believe that there is a wise lord (Ahura Mazda), whose army consists of angels and archangels, and an evil lord (Angra Mainyu), who is followed by demons and archdevils. All types of evil, including death, originate from the evil lord. The wise lord aims to eradicate evil and suffering in the world. The forces of good will eventually overcome evil and bring peace and prosperity to the world. While people have the freedom to choose between good and evil, they are taught to opt for good because their choices will determine the state of their lives in the hereafter. The consequence for them will be either heaven or hell.²

A similar approach to the problem of evil was articulated in Manichaeism, a tradition that dates to the third century C.E. Like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism also taught dualism. According to this doctrine, there are two natures in the universe: light and darkness. While light represents good and peace, darkness represents evil and conflict. The universe is the realm of struggle between good and evil forces, and there is not an omnipotent good power that dominates both. While God is the actor in the good realm, Satan represents the dominion of evil. Because it is part of the material world, humanity belongs to the realm of darkness; however, it has the capacity to be enlightened through the power of God. Therefore, humans are the battleground for both forces. Manichaeism's approach to evil and suffering appealed to many and spread from the Roman Empire to China.³

² For the teachings of Zoroastrianism, including its approach to the problem of evil, see S. A. Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1993), 71–97.

³ J. Kevin Coyle, *Manichaeism and Its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xiv–v. Also see “Manichaeism,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse and Columbia University, 8th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Evil and Suffering in Major Dharmic Religions

The problem of evil and suffering has also remained a key question in Hinduism, the oldest dharmic tradition. One of the most important concepts related to evil and suffering in Hinduism is karma, the doctrine of cause and effect. According to this teaching, people suffer because of their actions. Good actions bring goodness, while bad actions cause suffering. Evil and suffering cannot be explained with reference to chance or accident. People are responsible for them. Their actions determine their present as well as future conditions.⁴ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this view is the lack of a divine power in the picture. That is why some major Western intellectuals, such as Max Weber and Peter Burger, found the doctrine of karma appealing. Weber, for example, wrote that “the most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of *karma*, the so-called belief in the transmigration of souls. The world is viewed as a completely connected and self-contained cosmos of ethical retribution.”⁵ God is not involved in people’s affairs concerning evil, as they create their own destinies. People’s “fate in the successive lives of the soul” through multiple incarnations depends on their good and bad actions.⁶ In this regard, for Weber, karma provides a reasonable answer for the sufferings of those who are innocent. Relying on Weber’s approach to theodicy, Peter Berger also viewed the doctrine of karma as “the most rational” explanation among all theodicies. He noted that as part of the teaching of karma, “the individual has no one to blame for his misfortunes except himself – and conversely, he may ascribe his good fortune to nothing but his own merits.”⁷ According to this

⁴ Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 64–65.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 145.

⁶ Weber, 145.

⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 77.

interpretation, the power is in human hands. People have the sole agency over their actions as well as their destiny.

Perhaps no religion is concerned with the problem of evil and suffering as much as Buddhism. In fact, the story of Buddhism begins with this problem. Siddhartha Gautama – who came to be known as the Buddha after finding a profound answer to the question – was a prince enjoying an extravagant life in his father's palace. He was married and had a son. Getting bored with his luxurious life, the Buddha ventured out in a chariot accompanied by his charioteer a number of times. On his journey, the Buddha encountered four sights. The first three were an old man, a sick person in pain, and a dead body. When the Buddha asked his charioteer about them, he answered that these persons were going through the stages of life, and every human will go through the same phases. These three scenes of sickness, aging, and death dismantled the Buddha's joyful life. He realized that life is suffering as long as people go through these stages. In the fourth sighting, the Buddha saw an ascetic who did not have any material possessions and still looked happy and content in the midst of suffering. The ascetic inspired the Buddha and gave him hope to find an answer to suffering. He returned from the trip with a new understanding of reality. One night the Buddha left everything behind and embarked on a spiritual path of exploring a life without suffering. After the long journey of an ascetic life, and working with various teachers, the Buddha was enlightened and reached nirvana, the ideal spiritual state.

The Buddha then offered some guidelines for those who wanted to overcome suffering in life. However, he was uninterested in speculation. This is best reflected in one of the Buddhist parables. A monk was troubled by the Buddha's silence concerning the major questions of life, the nature of the world and body, and whether there is life after death. To prove how it is unnecessary to engage with metaphysical speculations, the Buddha gave an example of a man who was severely wounded by a poisoned arrow. People around him, including friends and

relatives, wanted to take the man to a physician for immediate treatment. The Buddha then asked the monk to imagine that the man did not want the arrow removed until he knew who shot it, that person's clan, his appearance, his village, and why he shot it. What would happen? If he were to wait until all these questions were answered, the man would die. What matters in this situation is to get rid of the arrow to remove the pain and suffering.⁸ That is why instead of being exhausted with speculation, the Buddha offered practical steps, the four noble truths, to deal with evil and suffering. The first step begins with the acknowledgment that there is suffering. This suffering is related not only to illness, old age, and death but also to emotional pain as well as suffering because of the impermanence of things. Being united with loved ones, for example, brings happiness; however, there is eventually separation. Impermanence is the nature of everything in this world, which leads to pain and suffering. The second noble truth is that suffering is caused by desires and attachments that are unsatisfied as well as ignorance – not knowing the nature of the things in the world. The third is that suffering can be transformed through detachment or by dismantling the disappointing desires. The fourth noble truth is that there is a path to liberating oneself from suffering. For this stage, the Buddha teaches specific ways to attain nirvana: (1) right view or understanding, (2) right resolve, (3) right speech, (4) right action, (5) right livelihood, (6) right effort, (7) right mindfulness, and (8) right concentration.⁹ They are usually categorized as moral virtues, meditation, and wisdom. What is distinctive about Buddhism and Hinduism is that neither tradition makes any connection between a divine being and the problem of evil and suffering.

⁸ Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 64.

⁹ Christa W. Anbeek, "Evil and the Transformation of Evil in Buddhism and Socially Engaged Buddhism," in *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies*, ed. Jerald D. Gort et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 104–5.

Evil and Suffering in Judaism and Christianity

Unlike the dharmic traditions, the Abrahamic religions engaged with the problem of evil and suffering in relation to a supreme being, God. God is the creator, he is the cause of all causes, he is omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient. There is nothing beyond his knowledge. Concerning God's attributes, the great Jewish philosopher and theologian Maimonides (d. 1204) wrote: "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being." God is the creator of the world and the Lord of the entire earth: "He controls the sphere with infinite and unbounded power."¹⁰

God is also the source of morality. There is no duality in the universe either. This approach created questions about God concerning evil and suffering in the universe. Many Jewish theologians attempted to reconcile evil and suffering with God's justice. Maimonides, for example, pointed out that good dominates the world and evil is minor compared to it. God's "true kindness, and beneficence, and goodness" is evident in the world.¹¹ In addition, Maimonides classified evil into three categories: evil that is caused by nature, evil that people bring upon others, and self-inflicted evil.¹² For him, natural evil is necessary for the world and an essential part of God's plan. Maimonides also contested that asking why there is evil and suffering in the world is not the right question, because being part of the material world requires evil and suffering. A better question

¹⁰ Moses Maimonides, "Yesodei haTorah: Chapter One," trans. Eliyahu Touger, Chabad.org, accessed January 12, 2022, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/904960/jewish/Yesodei-haTorah-Chapter-One.htm.

¹¹ Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (London: Routledge, 1904), 268.

¹² Maimonides, 268–70.

would be: “Why did God create us as part of this material world?” However, afflictions because of nature are still few in number:

You will, nevertheless, find that the evils of the above kind which befall man are very few and rare: for you find countries that have not been flooded or burned for thousands of years: there are thousands of men in perfect health, deformed individuals are a strange and exceptional occurrence, or say few in number if you object to the term exceptional, – they are not one-hundredth, not even one-thousandth part of those that are perfectly normal.¹³

Maimonides also indicated that the second type of evil is not very common either: “It is of rare occurrence that a man plans to kill his neighbor or to rob him of his property by night. Many persons are, however, afflicted with this kind of evil in great wars: but these are not frequent, if the whole inhabited part of the earth is taken into consideration.”¹⁴

He believed that self-inflicted evil is the root cause of most suffering in the world. This type of evil originates from people’s excessive desires for things such as food, drink, and love. People indulge in these things disproportionately, which leads to “diseases and afflictions upon body and soul alike.”¹⁵ Humans are the victims of their own desires. In this regard, the origin of evil is people themselves. This approach is echoed in the words of Carl Gustav Jung (d. 1961): “We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself. He is the great danger, and we are pitifully unaware of it. We know nothing of man, far too little. His psyche should be studied, because we are the origin of all coming evil.”¹⁶

Saadia Gaon (d. 942), another Jewish philosopher, pointed out that God loves those who suffer. Making reference to the rabbinic

¹³ Maimonides, 269.

¹⁴ Maimonides, 269.

¹⁵ Maimonides, 270.

¹⁶ Murray Stein, ed., *Encountering Jung: Jung on Evil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1.

doctrine of the sufferings of love, he maintained that God inflicts those whom he loves with unmerited sufferings in order to justify their eternal reward in the hereafter.¹⁷ Saadia observed that there are three benefits of suffering. First, suffering is a means of character building. It is a way for people to be trained and disciplined. For this aspect of suffering, Saadia gives the example of a hardworking scholar: “We know from our own experience that one who is wise does burden himself with late hours and hard work, reading books, taxing his mental powers and discernment, to understand.”¹⁸ Such a scholar would experience difficulties on the journey because of that hard work. However, no one can argue that injustice is involved. Likewise, God brings suffering upon his people to form a better character in them.¹⁹

Second, suffering may be a punishment for the sin and wrongdoing of people. This type of suffering will purify people and bring them closer to their Creator:

If a servant does commit an offense deserving punishment, part of the goodness of the All-Merciful and His watchfulness over His servants is in His causing some form of suffering to clear the transgressor’s guilt wholly or in part. In such a case that suffering is called purgative: although it is a punishment, its object is that of grace, for it deters the transgressor from repeating his offenses and purifies him of those already committed.

To elaborate his point, Saadia provides the example of a father who would make his child “swallow bitter draughts and loathsome medicine to free him from illness or set right a distempered constitution.” A skilled physician would do a similar thing to his patients.

¹⁷ Lenn E. Goodman, “Judaism and the Problem of Evil,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 198.

¹⁸ Saadiah ben Joseph al-Fayyumi, *The Book of Theodicy*, trans. Lenn E. Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 125.

¹⁹ Saadiah, 125.

In the process, the pain would be justified because it serves to “eliminate disease and harm.”²⁰ Likewise, God inflicts his people with suffering so that they can advance spiritually.

Third, suffering is a form of test and trial for the innocent. If people turn to God in the midst of their suffering and remain patient, then they will receive a great reward in the hereafter: “An upright servant, whose Lord knows that he will bear sufferings loosed upon him and hold steadfast in his uprightness, is subjected to certain sufferings, so that when he steadfastly bears them, his Lord may reward and bless him. This too is a kind of bounty and beneficence, for it brings the servant to everlasting blessedness.” For Saadia, the suffering of innocents falls within this category. This form of suffering is not unjust but rather an act of generosity and compassion. Saadia supports his point with the example of Job in the Hebrew Bible. He was tested and remained patient and faithful. As compensation, Job was “assured eternal bliss in the hereafter and granted far more than he had hoped for in this life.”²¹

The problem of evil and suffering is a major theme of Christian theology as well. Like Judaism, the Christian tradition teaches God to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. However, it also offers two distinct theological additions: a triune God and the doctrine of the original sin. In this regard, one of the most important concepts is atonement. While in the Hebrew Bible the concept is related to salvation, in Christian theology, it implies that there should be reconciliation between God and humans because of the original sin.²² This sin originates from Adam and Eve. According to Saint Augustine (d. 430), while living in a perfect world as beings with freedom of choice, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate a forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. This event is known as the Fall in Christian theology. As a result of Adam and Eve’s

²⁰ Saadiah, 125.

²¹ Saadiah, 126.

²² Paul S. Fiddes, “Christianity, Atonement and Evil,” in Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion*, 215.

disobedience, every human being is born sinful, as they inherit a sinful state. Both moral and natural evil exist in the world because of the original sin.²³ The sin also created an estrangement between humans and God. To reconcile this, God became human through Jesus Christ to redeem people's sins and forgive them. In addition, the suffering of Jesus on the cross shows that God is not indifferent to people's suffering. God's justice will eventually be revealed in the hereafter. While those who were obedient will be saved through Christ and enjoy the eternal kingdom of God, the disobedient will be condemned to eternal punishment.²⁴ Augustine also pointed out that evil is the lack (privation) of goodness. It is not an entity and does not exist. He gives the example of diseases and wounds in animals. Their existence in the body of animals is the absence of health. Once they are recovered, diseases and wounds cease to exist instead of moving somewhere else.²⁵ Another example that Augustine provides is blindness, which is the absence of sight. It is not a thing in itself. Similarly, evil is not an entity and does not exist. It is a moving away from what is created as good through the freedom of the will.²⁶

Another major theodicy came from Irenaeus, a Christian theologian who lived in the second century CE. Unlike Augustine, Irenaeus believed that while this world is the best possible world, it is still imperfect because humans have not fully developed yet. Their development and progress toward perfection require free will and the existence of evil and suffering.²⁷ The English theologian and philosopher John Hick (d. 2012) later expanded on the theodicy of

²³ Fiddes, 213.

²⁴ Chad V. Meister, *Evil: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 30–31.

²⁵ Vernon Joseph Bourke, *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 65–66.

²⁶ Chad V. Meister, "The Problem of Evil," in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles Taliaferro and Chad V. Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 160.

²⁷ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 211–15.

Irenaeus in his *Evil and the God of Love*. He pointed out that God permits evil and suffering in the world to form humans into moral beings, which will enable them to follow God's will. God did not create humans as perfect, because the perfection that is achieved through trials and tribulations is more valuable than initial perfection. Hick uses the analogy of a parent and their child. While a loving parent would like to see their child be happy, in some cases they may also like to see their child struggle because it is through challenges that the child will be able to embody values such as "moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love."²⁸ Hick's approach is known as the soul-making theodicy.

Challenges to the Theistic View of Evil and Suffering

Evil and suffering have remained not only a religious problem but also a nonreligious one. Many philosophers have pointed out that the idea of a powerful, just, and loving God cannot be reconciled with the evil and suffering that exist in the world. For many atheists, there is a logical inconsistency in believing in a theistic God because of evil and suffering.

The Logical Problem of Evil

Epicurus (d. 270 BCE), an ancient Greek philosopher, was one of the earliest advocates of the logical problem of evil. For him, the idea of a powerful, merciful, and perfectly good God who knows everything is logically inconsistent with the evil and suffering that exist in the world: "Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God

²⁸ Hick, 258.

really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?”²⁹ David Hume (d. 1776), one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment, articulated similar reasoning: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”³⁰

John Stuart Mill (d. 1873) also raised questions concerning the problem of evil and suffering. Mill did not see the manifestation of a merciful God in the world; he saw a cruel one: “Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good whichever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism can the government of nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.”³¹ To Mill, there is also no justice in the world:

If the law of all creation were justice and the creator omnipotent then, in whatever amount suffering and happiness might be dispensed to the world, each person’s share of them would be exactly proportioned to that person’s good or evil deeds; no human being would have a worse lot than another, without worse deserts; accident or favoritism would have no part in such a world, but every human life would be the playing out of a drama constructed like a perfect moral tale.³²

However, Mill concludes:

No one is able to blind himself to the fact that the world we live in is totally different from this; in so much that the necessity of redressing the balance has been deemed one of the strongest arguments for another life after death, which amounts to an admission that the order of things in this life is often an example of injustice, not justice.³³

²⁹ Quoted in Meister, *Evil*, 6.

³⁰ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Martin Bell (London: Penguin, 1991), 108–9.

³¹ John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion: Nature, the Utility of Religion, and Theism* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874), 38.

³² Mill, 37–38.

³³ Mill, 38.

The fact that many people believe in the idea of compensation in the hereafter because of their sufferings indicates that there is no justice and compassion in this world.

Charles Darwin (d. 1882) was not indifferent to the evil and suffering in the creation either. He was especially troubled by animal suffering: "Some have attempted to explain this in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement." Darwin then questions: "For what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time?"³⁴ To Darwin, the suffering of animals and the idea of a benevolent God are incompatible.

The logical problem of evil became widely known with the work of Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie (d. 1981). Mackie maintains that the problem of evil provides sufficient evidence against the existence of a theistic God. His argument can be summarized as follows:

- God is omnipotent.
- God is omniscient.
- God is omnibenevolent.
- Evil exists.

Mackie maintains that some of these premises could be true, but it is impossible to say that all of them are accurate at the same time because they are logically inconsistent. If God is omnipotent, he is able to prevent evil and suffering that exist in the world; if God is omniscient, he knows how to eliminate the evil and suffering; if God is omnibenevolent, then he is also willing to remove evil and suffering from the world. A compassionate God would care about the sufferings of people. Despite all these attributes, evil and

³⁴ Nora Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809–1882* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 90.

suffering exist. The conclusion is that a god with these attributes does not exist. Mackie also disagrees with the idea of free will as an explanation for the problem of evil. God could create beings who could always choose good. If this is a possibility, why did God not create individuals who would not choose to do evil? The freedom that these creatures enjoy should not have come at the price of the evil and suffering that exist in the world.³⁵

One of the most profound responses to Mackie's challenge came from Alvin Plantinga, an American philosopher and theologian who was awarded the Templeton Prize in 2017 for his work in defense of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Plantinga describes his objection as the "free will defense." In his *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga maintains that the idea of a theistic God and the fact that evil exists in the world are compatible given the concept of free will. First, a world in which there are beings "who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all."³⁶ Second, if God is the creator of free beings, one cannot expect him to intervene in their freedom. In this case, these mortals would not enjoy significant freedom. In other words, creating free beings who are committed to moral good would come at the expense of their capability to do evil. Some of God's creatures choose evil because of their freedom, which is the source of moral evil. However, one cannot argue that this is incompatible with God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence because God could merely prevent moral evil "only by removing the possibility of moral good."³⁷

Plantinga attempts to explain natural evil with the same reasoning. Expanding on Augustine's traditional doctrine of the original

³⁵ J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64:254 (1955): 200–12.

³⁶ Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 30.

³⁷ Plantinga, 30.

sin, Plantinga argues that natural evil can possibly be attributed to free nonhuman spirits such as Satan and his cohorts:

Satan, so the traditional doctrine goes, is a mighty nonhuman spirit who, along with many other angels, was created long before God created man. Unlike most of his colleagues, Satan rebelled against God and since has been wreaking whatever havoc he can. The result of this is natural evil. So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of nonhuman spirits.³⁸

Plantinga then points out that it is possible to argue that:

[N]atural evil is due to the free actions of nonhuman persons; there is a balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of these nonhuman persons; and it was not within the power of God to create a world that contains a more favorable balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of nonhuman persons it contains.³⁹

It is often believed that Plantinga provided the most challenging response to the logical problem of evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

Many atheists not only find the theistic view of God and the existence of evil incompatible; they also point to the evidential problem of evil and suffering. One of the key arguments of theism has been that evil and suffering often lead to a greater good. However, according to atheistic views, it is impossible to justify evil and suffering since so much of it is unnecessary. Disproportionate evil often leads to more destruction, not the greater good. One of the proponents of this argument is William L. Rowe (d. 2015). To support his position, Rowe provides two compelling cases of animal

³⁸ Plantinga, 58.

³⁹ Plantinga, 58.

and human suffering. For animal suffering, Rowe gives the example of a baby deer trapped in a forest fire caused by lightning. It is “horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.”⁴⁰ The other example is even more horrifying. It is the story of a five-year-old girl in Flint, Michigan, who was raped and brutally killed on New Year’s Day in 1986.⁴¹

According to Rowe, if there were a being who is all-powerful and all-good at the same time, he would not permit the suffering of this innocent child and the deer. If this being could not prevent their suffering for the sake of a greater good, that means this being is not all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. That also means such a being does not exist.⁴² Expanding on Rowe’s evidential problem of evil, Paul Draper concludes that the God presented by the theists does not exist. Draper points out that a better approach would be to think that if there is a God, it appears that he is indifferent to the suffering of creatures. This is more plausible than the theistic view of God because there is disproportionate evil and suffering in the world that cannot be explained by the idea of a greater good.⁴³

One of the most vivid pictures of unjustified evil is presented by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (d. 1881) in his *The Brothers Karamazov* through the arguments of its major character, Ivan. Dostoyevsky addresses the suffering of innocent children. In one example, Ivan illustrates two examples. One of them is the story of a five-year-old girl who is severely tortured by her parents:

They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty – shut

⁴⁰ William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16:4 (1979): 337.

⁴¹ William L. Rowe, “Evil and Theodicy,” *Philosophical Topics* 16:2 (1988): 119.

⁴² Rowe, 120–26.

⁴³ For Paul Draper’s view on the evidential problem of evil, see Paul Draper, “God, Evil, and the Nature of Light,” in Meister and Moser, *Cambridge Companion*, 65–84; and Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” *Nous* 23:3 (1989): 331–50.

her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night (as though a child of five sleeping its angelic, sound sleep could be trained to wake and ask), they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child's groans!⁴⁴

The other story is of a general who tortured an eight-year-old boy. The general loved dogs. One day while playing, a serf boy threw a rock that hurt the paw of the general's favorite hound. Learning that his hound had become lame because of the boy, he ordered the child to be taken from his mother and locked up all night. Dostoyevsky describes this tragic event as follows: "Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child." The general then orders the child to be brought up and undressed: "The child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry. ... 'Make him run,' commands the general. 'Run! run!' shout the dog-boys. The boy runs. ... 'At him!' yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes!"⁴⁵

Given the amount of evil and suffering in the world, Ivan opposes some of the traditional theodicies. First, he raises questions about the original sin and the suffering of children. How can their suffering be justified because of the original sin? Why should they suffer because of their fathers' sin? He points out that "the innocent must not suffer for another's sin, especially such innocents."⁴⁶ Second, Ivan complains that despite the innocent children's prayer to God to protect

⁴⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 287.

⁴⁵ Dostoyevsky, 288.

⁴⁶ Dostoyevsky, 282.

them, there is no explanation as to why God did not protect them. Third, it is often told that evil and good are the cost of being created on the earth. Ivan then asks why the creation should have an enormous cost. Fourth, Ivan challenges the idea of having justice and compensation in the hereafter. He cries for justice on the earth, “not in some remote infinite time and space.”⁴⁷ The eternal harmony that religion promises comes with a great price, and it should not be built on the suffering of innocent children. Ivan remarks that he would hasten to return a ticket to an eternal peaceful place called the hereafter. Ivan then poses a question to his religious brother, Alyosha:

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.⁴⁸

He implies that no one would like to be the creator of a world where innocents suffer for other people’s happiness.

Evil and suffering is the major theme of Albert Camus’s (d. 1960) *The Plague* as well. The novel relates the story of a deadly plague that breaks out in the French Algerian city of Oran. Many residents of the town die, and people live in isolation for months. It is a painful situation for them. The novel highlights the fragility of life, which is constantly subject to suffering, death, and destruction. But it also underlines that there is no meaning in evil and the suffering of the people. Their suffering is unnecessary. Camus articulates this view mainly through his major character Bernard Rieux, the medical doctor of the town working to treat people. In many ways, his role is similar to Dostoyevsky’s Ivan. Dr. Rieux disputes the idea of a powerful God who can cure people. In response to the question of

⁴⁷ Dostoyevsky, 289.

⁴⁸ Dostoyevsky, 291.

whether he believes in the Christian God, Rieux responds that if he believed in “an all-powerful God,” he “would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him.”⁴⁹ For Rieux, there is no meaning behind death. The best response is to fight it: “But, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.”⁵⁰ Even if God exists, he is silent and indifferent to the suffering of people. So why should we wait for an answer for our suffering from such God? Like Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, Rieux brings up the suffering of innocents. He is disturbed and angered by the suffering of a child whom he tried to do everything to treat. It is difficult for Rieux to bear the last moments of the child’s life. Fr. Paneloux, the priest of the town, is also present at the time. There is a dialogue between the two. Fr. Paneloux asks Dr. Rieux, “Why was there that anger in your voice just now? What we’d been seeing was as unbearable to me as it was to you.” Rieux answers, “I know. I’m sorry. But weariness is a kind of madness. And there are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt.” Fr. Paneloux then responds, “I understand, that sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.”⁵¹ Dr. Rieux reacts, “No, Father. I’ve a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.”⁵² Dr. Rieux does not believe that he should blindly accept the suffering of innocent children, leave the matter to God, and think of it as a divine act. One can trace the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) on Camus. In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche points to the meaninglessness and absurdity of evil and suffering. He believes that looking at

⁴⁹ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 116.

⁵⁰ Camus, 117–18.

⁵¹ Camus, 196.

⁵² Camus, 196–97.

the problem of evil from a theistic perspective prevents people from being creative and making progress to change their situation.⁵³

One of the most interesting challenges to the problem of evil and suffering came from William R. Jones (d. 2012), an African American philosopher. Jones grew up in the Baptist Church. He later joined the Unitarian and Universalists and became an ordained minister. Jones specialized in liberation theology and religious humanism. He taught religion at Yale Divinity School and Florida State University for many years.

Known as a secular humanist, Jones devoted most of his work to the suffering of black people in America. However, he found the black theology of his time to be problematic. In line with the traditional Christian theology, black theologians supported the idea of a God who is good and on the side of the black people who suffer. These black theologians preached that “the harder the cross, the brighter the crown.” Jones calls their approach “Whiteanity.”⁵⁴ For them, this life is the realm of test and suffering, and black people should be patient in their suffering because God will eventually reward them with a “brighter crown” in the hereafter.⁵⁵

Jones considers this approach as an obstacle to making the situation of black people better. If God was omnibenevolent and involved in human history, one cannot help but think of him as a white racist – or in the case of the Holocaust, an anti-Semite. This is because the suffering of some ethnic groups, especially black people, is enormously disproportionate. Jones also questions the viewpoint of a greater good in evil and suffering. In the case of black suffering, it is difficult to support this argument: “Suffering unto death, for instance, negates any interpretation of pedagogical suffering; i.e., we learn from a burn to avoid fire. This makes no sense if the learning method destroys

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 68–120 and 145–57.

⁵⁴ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), vii.

⁵⁵ Jones, ix.

the learner.”⁵⁶ For Jones, there is no greater good in the suffering of black people because the suffering often destroys them.

Instead of a God who is omnibenevolent and involved in human history, Jones offers a humanocentric theism and secular humanism: “The essential feature of both is the advocacy of the functional ultimacy of man. Man must act as if he were the ultimate valuator or the ultimate agent in human history or both. Thus God’s responsibility for the crimes and errors of human history is reduced if not effectively eliminated.”⁵⁷ From this perspective, humans are the creators of their actions and history, and they have a responsibility to change their own situation. The humanocentric approach is also a proposal against quietism. Black people often accepted their suffering and remained silent in the hope of a better life in the hereafter:

The oppressed, in part, are oppressed precisely because they buy, or are indoctrinated to accept, a set of beliefs that negate those attitudes and actions necessary for liberation. Accordingly, the purpose and first step of a theology of liberation is to effect a radical conversion of the mind of the oppressed, to free his/her mind from those destructive and enslaving beliefs that stifle the movement toward liberation.⁵⁸

Jones maintains that his humanocentric method aims to motivate black people to be active and fight against the injustices they face.⁵⁹

The question of evil and suffering has generated a remarkable collection of literature. Followers of religious traditions, atheism, and agnosticism have engaged with the issue creatively. However, the notion of God in relation to the world remains the main theme of their discussions. This is the subject of Chapter 2, from an Islamic theological perspective.

⁵⁶ Jones, 22.

⁵⁷ Jones, xxvii.

⁵⁸ Jones, 41.

⁵⁹ In his book *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2014), Sherman A. Jackson draws on the work of Jones. Jackson puts Islamic perspectives of theodicy in conversation with Jones’s idea of “humanocentric theism” and attempts to make space for a protest-oriented approach in Islamic theology of theodicy.