

## A humanist discussion of... EVIL AND SUFFERING

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### The word "evil"

Some non-religious people and humanists avoid using the word "evil" because they associate it with religious texts and rules and punishments, or assume that it derives from the word "devil". The word certainly crops up a lot in the Bible, but in fact it predates the first English translations of the Bible. "Evil" comes from the Old English "yfel" and has no etymological connection with the religious word "devil", which started life as the Old English word "deoful" (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

Others see "evil" as a word that we need to express outrage and horror at certain kinds of act, alongside words like "wicked", "terrible", "disgusting", "shameful", and so on. "Wrong" or "very very very bad" are not strong enough to describe, for example, the Holocaust or the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 - but "evil" is.

### The concept of evil

Although "evil" can be a useful word to describe actions or events - sometimes natural events - that cause great suffering, humanists still have reservations about some of the ideas lurking behind the word. No humanist could accept the concept of evil as a supernatural force, or as something caused by demons or devils, or that people are born with. People sometimes describe others as "evil" to avoid having to understand them or think about the causes and cures for evil. Humanists, people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs, think that we should try to understand what makes people to do evil deeds and cause suffering to others. There are reasons, ranging from lack of empathy with others and ignorance to the idea that "the end justifies the means". Exploring these ideas is a useful thing to do.

### "The problem of evil"

The existence of evil in the world is a particular problem if you believe in a loving, all-powerful, all-knowing god. For many, evil and suffering - for example, wars, terrorism, illness, natural disasters - are powerful arguments against the existence of such a god. As the Greek philosopher Epicurus put it about 2300 years ago: "If the gods have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not all-powerful. If they are neither able nor willing, they are neither all-powerful nor benevolent. If they are both able and willing to annihilate evil, why does it exist?"

Sometimes personal experience of great and pointless suffering - the death of a child, perhaps, or living through a war which achieves nothing - causes religious people to lose their faith.

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## **How do religions explain evil and suffering?**

There are standard religious explanations for evil and suffering. Some people believe that this life is a "vale of tears" as a test or preparation for another, better, life after death. Some say "God moves in mysterious ways", or that evil and suffering are part of a divine plan, which we must accept. Some believe that God gives us free will and it's our fault if we misuse it. Some believe that evil is a punishment for the "original sin" of Adam and Eve, which caused us all to be born "sinful". But these ideas will convince only the religious.

## **How do humanists explain evil and suffering?**

Humanists don't believe that suffering is punishment or test, because they don't think there is a god to punish or test us. Nor do they believe in an afterlife where evil will be punished and goodness rewarded. Humanists don't believe that there is a controlling deity who moves in mysterious, or any other, ways. Nor can they accept evil and suffering as part of a divine plan which they have to accept rather than fight.

Instead, they think that human beings have a degree of choice and control over their lives and must take some responsibility for the way they turn out. Some evils, for example, war, famine and poverty, are caused or made worse by human greed and folly. Others, like illness, floods, or earthquakes, may have natural causes or happen by chance, just because the world is the way it is, but they too may be caused or made worse by human actions. Often, though, those who suffer the most are not to blame.

Surely a loving god, if one existed, could have made a world in which natural disasters didn't happen, in which viruses and cancers didn't exist, and in which human beings had limited free will (just as we have limited physical and mental capacities)? This "limited free will" would mean that we were incapable of doing evil. Most people, after all, already have this kind of limited free will and don't find it a problem - they couldn't deliberately kill one person, let alone commit mass murder. Would the world be a worse place if no one could?

Humanists also object to Christian ideas about "original sin". Punishing humans for the sins of their ancestors would be by human standards extraordinarily cruel and unjust. The idea that we are born "sinful" seems to be based on an unjustifiably negative and pessimistic view of human nature, and particularly of babies. Although humanists recognise that human beings can be aggressive and selfish, they do not believe that all human beings are innately flawed and "sinful" and that suffering and evil are inevitable.

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Humanists believe that it is up to human beings to fight evil and suffering and solve the world's problems if we can. They are, as a result, sometimes accused of unrealistic optimism about human nature and human capacities. Their reply to that is that they are not entirely optimistic, though they do believe that human beings are humanity's only hope and that there has been some progress over the centuries in extending the range of our compassion and care and respect for others. The writer Philip Pullman (a humanist) put it well on Radio 4 recently when he said that he was 51% optimistic about human nature. Most humanists have a fairly balanced attitude based on the observation that on the whole humans behave quite well, sometimes even with great kindness and compassion, and that really evil actions are unusual. The fact that we call terrible acts "inhuman" shows something about our normal expectations of human beings. The philosopher A J Ayer wrote, in *The Humanist Outlook*, in 1968: "If the capacity for evil is part of human nature, so is the capacity for good."

### **How do humanists deal with evil and suffering?**

Humanists don't necessarily believe in "turning the other cheek" or just accepting evils and injustices passively - this would just increase suffering by encouraging evil actions. But most rational people acknowledge the benefits of eventually forgiving and forgetting even the most terrible of wrongs. The desire for punishment or revenge can dominate the mind of the victim to an unhealthy extent, and revenge can simply perpetuate and multiply wrongs. There will always be some suffering in the world that we cannot do much about - and we have to learn ways of coping.

Humanists do not believe that a deity will help us to end evil and suffering, but that we humans must all do what we can to alleviate and prevent them, because happiness is the ultimate good. The nineteenth century American humanist Robert Green Ingersoll summed up this philosophy in *The Gods* in 1876: "...happiness is the only good; ...the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so." So humanists believe that we should live, vote, choose jobs, relate to other people, spend and invest our money, in ways that respect other people's rights, minimise suffering, and increase happiness.

### **Questions to think about and discuss**

- Is all suffering caused by some kind of evil?
  - Can "evil" exist detached from people or actions?
  - Are there evil people, or just evil actions?
  - Would there be any disadvantages to limited free will?
  - Why do people commit evil actions? Consider some examples.
  - Do all the world religions think about evil in similar ways? How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews
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you have come across? How is it different? Can you explain the similarities and differences?

How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?

**Further reading:**

Simon Blackburn *Being Good* (Oxford, 2001)

Jonathan Glover *Humanity* (Jonathan Cape, 1999)

Mary Midgely *Wickedness* (Routledge, 1984)

Nigel Warburton *Philosophy: the Basics* (Routledge, 2nd edition 1995, especially Chapter 2 on God)

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