Thinking about the problem of evil

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Introduction

Many people who are Christians, as well as some who are thinking of becoming Christians, struggle with the "problem of evil." The problem, simply put, is if God is good, and is all powerful, then why does he allow evil to exist? Why not stamp it out immediately?

Sometimes Christians present this problem as an unsolvable mystery. While it is true that some of the aspects of this issue involve things we do not, and perhaps cannot, know, it is not the case that we simply believe a bare self-contradiction. That would not just be mysterious, it would be irrational. In this essay, I present some straightforward arguments for how to think about this problem, why it does not involve self-contradiction, and where the mystery lies.

The simple syllogism

First, let me deal with a simple caricature of this problem, which gives trouble to many people. The argument is presented as a logical argument in the following way:

1. If God is all powerful, he can stamp out all evil immediately.
2. If God is all good, he must want to stamp out all evil immediately.
3. Evil exists.
4. Therefore either God is not all powerful or he is not all good.

Where does this logic break down? Orthodox Christians agree with statement #1, usually termed God's "omnipotence." Over the centuries some Christians have called this into question, and have argued that God cannot stamp out evil. An unsophisticated version of this is given in the recent, popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People[1].* In that book, the author argues that God simply doesn't have the power to stop all evil. This view is at variance with the Bible, which teaches that God created and upholds the universe and is not constrained by it.[2] But even apart from what the Bible says, this type of argument against God's omnipotence is functionally equivalent to atheism, saying that the universe, at its core, is impersonal and governed by mechanistic laws of nature, and God is constrained by these laws just as we are. God, in this view, is just a somewhat higher being,

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[1] H.S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Anchor, 1981).
[2] E.g., Genesis 1:1, Jeremiah 32:7, Luke 1:37, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 1:11, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:3, 2:10.

like the alien "Q" in *Star Trek*, or Thor, flying through the air. Fundamentally, both he and we are subjects of an unknowing and uncaring mechanistic universe.

Other Christians have tried made more sophisticated attempts to avoid statement #1 by arguing that God is constrained to allow evil, not physically, but logically. There is some sense in this approach. Orthodox theologians have always maintained that God's omnipotence means that he is able to do anything that it is logically sensible to talk about, not that he is able to do senseless things that cannot even be defined. So, for example, asking whether God can make himself not exist, or whether he can make himself not omnipotent ("Can God make himself unable to lift a rock?") are not sensible questions, because they involve self-contradiction. They amount to asking "Can A be not-A?"—can God be and not be omnipotent? Thus we can say that God is logically "constrained" in some ways.[3]

Could God be logically constrained to allow evil? It is hard to see how. Even if we were to argue that the existence of the universe logically required the existence of evil, God would still have the option to not create the universe. Most orthodox Christians therefore don't put much stock in this type of argument.

Any sensible Christian, as well as the Bible, agrees with statement #3, that evil is real. The world of our experience is full of examples of evil, and evil is part of the central narrative of the Bible: Jesus came to redeem the world from evil. Some heterodox thinkers, such as Mary Baker Eddy, have tried to argue that evil is not real, but that is a flight of fantasy and self-deception.

The breakdown of the above syllogism, therefore, is with statement #2. One can summarize the Christian's response to this point as, "Says who?" Statement #2 is filled with theological freight. It implies the following:

a. We know what good is, to such a degree that we can evaluate God's actions and judge what God must do.
b. Among the things we know about goodness are this: that any good being must be unalterably, completely committed to not allowing evil to exist even for a short time.

Neither of these is a simple, elementary point; they involve deep issues of theology. A person who wants to make this argument cannot make it on the basis of a cursory glance at Christian belief; one must at a minimum be deeply invested in the theology of morality (what is good and evil?) and the theology of God's will (what must God do? what can he choose to do?) Then one must show that the Christian theology in these two areas demands no other possibility than (a) and (b) above.

The bottom line is that the Christian does *not* believe that a good God must be absolutely and unremittingly dedicated to not allowing evil to exist even for a moment. For some reason or other, God deems it acceptable for evil to exist—at least for a time.

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[3] See, e.g., R.C. Sproul, *If There Is a God, Why Are There Atheists?* (Bethany, 1978).

How can God allow it?

The syllogism above fails if God has some good reason to allow evil to exist for a period of time. Note that this resolution does not require us to know what that reason is. There are many things about the world and about God that we don't know, but that does not mean we are irrational. Admitting you don't know something is not irrational; it is actually a good step in the learning process to start with humility.

Some people have argued, however, that while we do not know everything, we can know with certainty that there is *no possible justification* for allowing the evil that exists in the world.

One of the most powerful ways of making this argument is to look squarely in the face of some real evil—e.g., the Holocaust, or the rape and torture of children, being eaten by cancer—and say that *this* evil is so bad that only a monster could say that it was justified to ever allow it to exist.

The Christian should never shy away from looking at real evil. The Bible doesn't. Some of us are shocked at the graphic descriptions of evil in the Bible, but it evidences a realistic look at the real world. The Christian should never be in the position of saying, "Oh, it wasn't so bad."

But the Christian does not need to say, "I know what God was thinking and why he allowed this particular evil." We can leave that an unknown mystery. All the Christian needs to argue is that it is at least plausible that there is some good purpose for allowing an evil. If there is at least some plausible reason, then the argument that there is no possible justification fails.

What are some plausible reasons? The basic Christian response can be called the "greater good" argument: a temporary evil can be tolerated if it leads to an ultimate greater good that outweighs the evil. At a low level, we are familiar with this in daily life. For example, exercising our muscles can cause temporary pain, but lead to the greater good of strength and health. As another example, our sense of pain can seem a bad thing, but it prevents us from harming ourselves without knowing it. And many of us know people who have suffered and as a result have great character and wisdom.

There are two counterarguments to this "greater good argument". One is a purely emotional argument: the examples above are too small; it may be true that some evils such as the pain of exercise lead to something good, but *this* evil is so great that no one could justify it to ever happen.

We have to be careful here. The Christian need not (and ought not) argue that great evils are justified by the same good outcomes that small evils are. We are not saying that the Holocaust is just like painful exercise, and has the same type of good outcome. God forbid. What we are saying is that we know that in at least *some* cases, there is a good

outcome to a temporary evil. Therefore it is *plausible* that there is some greater good outcome to a greater temporary evil, even if we don't know what that greater good is.

Note the importance of "temporary" here. Many of those who ponder the existence of evil don't take into account the promise of the Bible that evil does not continue forever—Jesus will judge the world and conquer evil. Our whole existence in this world of pain is a prelude to an ultimate greater good in the future kingdom of heaven. If that were not the case, and some evils continued forever, then it would indeed be hard to imagine that any good could outweigh an infinitely persisting evil. The concepts of final judgment and heaven are therefore not some peripheral doctrine for Christians, but crucial in our understanding of how God can be good. The testimony of the early church of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ is crucial evidence for this ultimate victory of God.

The emotional argument ("this evil is just too great!") therefore fails as a logical argument. There is a second argument against the "greater good" position, however. This is the "ends don't justify the means." Is the "greater good" justification a violation of this ethic? Does God use evil means to get a good end?

There are two reasons why "the ends don't justify the means" is an ethical principle. One of these is directly connected to our human limitations. Justifying a means by its end implies that we truly know that the means will lead to a good end. In some simple situations, we can indeed know this, as for example with the pain of exercise which we know well to lead to health. However, in many cases, we can't be so sure of the outcome; we can't predict the future with certainty. Therefore we must seek what C.S. Lewis called the "simple good"—something which we can see will directly lead to good.   This argument doesn't apply to God, however. God can see the future, perfectly. Therefore he is not subject to our uncertainty, and can choose complex courses through much pain which lead to ultimate good.

There is a second argument for the "ends don't justify the means" principle, however. If in using an evil means, I do evil, then I have stained my character with evil. Even if the world is a better place for it overall, I have that stain eternally. The same applies to God. If God *does* evil at any point, then he is not good.

Natural evil and moral evil

Let's take a moment to remember where we are in the debate. The orthodox Christian argues that God is able to stamp out all evil, but chooses to allow it temporarily for some adequate good reason which we may not know. Against this, it is argued that we can know with certainty that at least some evils can not have any possible good justification. One version of this argument, which I call the emotional argument, is that some evils are simply too great to imagine a good purpose for them, but this simply indicates a lack of imagination—perhaps an imagination shut down by the pain of a real life experience. I don't want to downplay anyone's painful experience, but even Job in the Bible admitted that his miserable experience gave him no right to dictate what means God could

use for his own good ends. He could not imagine why God allowed him to suffer as he did, but at the end of the story, he admitted that his knowledge was far too limited to say that there could be no possible good reason.

From a logical standpoint, then, the more serious question is this: does God, in *using* evil for some ultimate good purpose, *do* evil? Is it a logical necessity that to use evil is to do evil?

To address this, I must first take a few paragraphs to make a distinction between two types of evil: *natural evil* and *moral evil*. Natural evil is something that is physically unpleasant, possibly extremely and excruciatingly so. This could include pain and disease, hurricanes, floods, famines, parasites, etc. All these types of things can happen to us independent of any moral choices that humans make. We might make them worse by bad moral choices, but they would exist anyway.

Moral evil involves a decision by a being with moral ability. Much has been written on how to define moral evil: some hold that it is fundamentally relational, as a rebellion against God. If we use this definition, then clearly it is impossible for God to do evil. But that makes it seem as though good and evil are arbitrary: we just define whatever God does as good and not evil. But if we believe that God is eternal and unchanging in his character, we would like an absolute standard for good and evil, which we believe he follows consistently.

Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century pointed out that the good and evil are not symmetric. Good can exist in itself, while evil involves the destruction of the good. This makes defining evil much easier. "Good" is hard to define: it involves every good thing such as beauty, order, existence, life, meaning, etc. To make an exhaustive list of good would be a lengthy task. But assuming we have some intuitive sense of the good, we can define moral evil as that which seeks to destroy the good.

Here we have to be careful to use some nuance. Is evil that which destroys any good at any time? If so, then anyone who wants anything to change, ever, is evil, because a change involves some good thing ceasing to exist, being replaced by something else. As we have seen, it can be good to replace some good things with other, greater, good things. Pleasant feelings can be replaced by the temporary pain of exercise which is replaced by good health and strength.

We can therefore define moral evil as an action done with the motivation to destroy good as an end in itself; or more generally, to pursue a lesser good over a greater good as an end in itself. So, for example, a person who enjoys the pain of others as an end in itself (the sadist) is evil; so is a person who seeks the lesser good of his own local comfort as an end in itself, at the cost of suffering to others (the self-centered person, who in extreme form becomes the psychopath).

This definition intrinsically defines moral evil in terms of evil desire: a desire to relish the pain or suffering of another as an end in itself, or a lack of empathy with the pain

and suffering of others. Humans have moral ability, and Christians believe there are also spirit beings with moral ability, such as demons. Animals, and hurricanes and rainstorms and other impersonal natural forces, do not.

Many people are more bothered by natural evil than by moral evil. How can God make a world with pain, disease, and hurricanes in it? But actually, it is fairly easy to see that it is plausible that natural evils could lead to a greater good. No matter how great a pain is, if it is finite, one can always imagine a blessing which is greater. And some natural evils are only evil depending on your context: an exploding volcano is beautiful if seen from a distance; carnivores like dinosaurs, sharks and lions are cool, if one is not being attacked by them. Thus, although some natural evils like cancer cause great anguish, from a logical standpoint, they are not fundamentally problematic if people are freed from death and suffering in God's final kingdom. In fact, much of the anguish they cause comes from our sense of pointlessness, that they kill or disable without purpose. If we have confidence that there is an ultimate good purpose, that God will use them for some good end, then that aspect of their pain is removed.

But moral evil brings in a new dimension. Morally evil beings seek to make things worse for no good reason. Some local good may come to the evil being, such as wealth or pleasure, but at the expense of much greater pain to others or greater loss to the world. Thus, in the Bible, God never condemns animals or hurricanes—they just do what they do—but God condemns evil people and evil spirits. He holds them accountable as beings who make choices, who can see that some choices are loving and others are evil, and yet choose evil.

Can a good God use the existence of morally evil beings for an ultimate greater good? This brings us into the deep waters of the cause of the existence of moral evil.

What is the ultimate cause of moral evil?

Our thinking on this topic is colored by the general premise, shared by many Christians, that to cause moral evil to exist is to do moral evil. Therefore a significant number of Christians have argued that while God can use evil people for his own good ends, he did not cause their moral evil to exist in the first place.

There are two versions of this. One is the "Arminian" camp, which says that moral choices are generated apart from any causation by God, within each moral being. This is sometimes presented as God voluntarily limiting his omnipotence, to allow independent causes beyond his control, namely choices by moral beings.

Another camp includes many "Reformed" theologians, such as J.I. Packer and R.C. Sproul. These theologians would say that moral evil comes to each human as the result of the original moral choice of Adam and Eve. However, the source of the moral evil of Adam and Eve is presented as not caused by God. Reformed theologians normally also say that God is the ultimate cause of all things. Saying that that God causes all things, but the moral

evil of Adam and Eve was not caused by God, sounds like self-contradiction. J.I. Packer and R.C. Sproul sometimes use the term "antinomy"[4] to describe this position: something that sounds like a self-contradiction but presumably isn't, due to some additional knowledge we don't have.

Both of these camps seem to agree that if God caused the existence of moral evil, he would have done evil. My critique of both is that they are making a distinction without a difference. Let us assume for the moment that there is some other source of causes in the universe that God does not directly control, and this source causes evil moral decisions. Both of these camps of Christian theologians would still agree *a)* that God, being omniscient, knew before he created them that moral beings would do evil, and *b)* that God, being omnipotent, could have prevented their moral evil from happening, for example, by not making moral beings at all. If I create a situation that I know will lead to a certain outcome, that outcome happens, and I had the freedom to not make it happen, how is that different in any relevant moral sense from causing the outcome?

It is helpful here to adopt the language of the Westminster Confession (III.1) and talk of "first causes" and "second causes." A "first cause" is something that directly causes something else. For example, God's spoken command was the first cause of the creation of the world, and has been the first cause of various miracles. A "second cause" is something which may be caused by something else, but also causes something to happen. One way to distinguish between these types of causes is to ask "Who was the actor, or owner, of the deed?" I.e., who did it? It is a basic doctrine of Christianity that God is separate from his creation. Pantheism says that all the actions of created things are acts of God, but Christianity rejects this.[5] The distinction between Creator and creature means that it is proper to say "the tree fell on the ground" not "God fell on the ground," and it is proper to say "the woman chose the blue dress," not "God chose the blue dress." In other words, things within the created universe have causative power. They do not have unlimited, omnipotent power like God, but they have a realm over which they do have power and can cause things to happen.

Using this language, then, we can say that God is the ultimate, or first, cause of all things that happen. Whether one wants to say that God "caused" something to happen, or that God "allowed" it to happen, it is clear that if God is omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of everything, then nothing happens that has its origin in any place other than the world which God created, and nothing happens God could not prevent.

But in saying this, it does not follow that God is the immediate actor, or "owner," of everything that happens. Second causes are real—God has created a world with causative power of its own. This includes moral beings. Thus, while we can say "That moral being chose evil" it does not follow to say "God chose evil." God was not the actor, or owner, of the action. When a tree falls, we do not say "God fell," even if God is the ultimate cause of the

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[4] J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Intervarsity Press, 1967); R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, (Tyndale, 1994).

[5] See, e.g., Peter R. Jones, *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference* (Main Entry Editions, 2010).

tree falling. If Abraham lay with his wife, we do not say "God lay with Abraham's wife." In the same way, if a moral being sins, it is not correct to say "God sinned."

We can now apply this to the definition of evil given above. If we define evil as seeking the destruction of the good, or seeking a lesser good over a greater good, as an end in itself, then it is clear that moral beings like people can do evil, but their evil does not (at least not intrinsically) imply that God does evil. It would be evil if God, in making evil people to exist, sought to enjoy their evil forever as an end in itself. But if God makes evil people come into existence for some greater, ultimate purpose (which we may not know), then he is not doing evil.

Objections

Have I simply defined away any possibility of God doing evil? Let's look at some objections to this view of the origin of moral evil. First, is it right to define evil as I have, in terms of a goal or desire, and not just an act? Is it only evil if I seek destruction of the good as an end in itself, and not evil just to destroy the good?

The pure act of destroying a good thing can't be intrinsically evil. As discussed above, this would imply that all change is evil. If a good thing is replaced by another good thing (e.g., a caterpillar which is replaced by a butterfly), then the first good thing is eliminated, or destroyed. Is this always an evil? Also, many natural evils are part of an overall good cycle of life. When nature is in balance, carnivores prevent herbivores from overpopulating, parasites prevent carnivores from overpopulating, and so on. The system as a whole can be good and beautiful, even though it involves a cycle in which things are destroyed and recycled.

A second objection rests on our cultural assumption that if something has caused me to do evil, then I am not culpable for that evil. It is common to argue that if my parents caused me to have certain patterns of action, or if my physical body has made me have feelings of rage or irrationality, or if economic oppression has led me to have constrained choices, then I am not guilty.

Under this logic, if someone caused me to do evil, then my evil is not my own, but imputed to the person who caused me to do it. Therefore, if God is the ultimate or first cause of the evil of people, then the evil is his, not theirs.

This returns us to the concept discussed above, which is the power invested in the creation by God. The Christian view is that God has given to the creation the power to do things and to cause things to happen. Simple creations can do simple things, e.g., rocks can smash things, and animals can bite things. Moral beings have an additional causal power which may be called "creativity." A moral being can create a new thing. In the positive sense, this means that people can create artwork, imagine plans for new machines and buildings, and create language. The first example of this is Adam's naming of the animals. Genesis 2 says that God brought the animals to Adam "to see what he would call them"

(Genesis 2:19). God gave Adam the ability to make names, made Adam everything that he was, and in his omniscience knew what Adam would say even before Adam existed, but the names came from Adam.

In the negative sense, this creative ability means that moral agents can lie. Lying involves an act of imagination to create a scenario which is not real, but it involves an additional act of attempting to present the lie as the truth. At its core, every evil deed starts with a lie: to say, even to ourselves, that we want what is best, when in fact we don't. We lift up the lesser good over the greater good, making an idol of some thing we must have at the expense of other people or even ourselves in the future.

If we were to say that moral evil is not our own, but belongs to the ultimate cause of it, then we must also say that about all our positive creative acts. So, for example, if a woman writes a great play, shall we say that it is not her play, but her parents', because they raised her right? Or that the play is not human at all, because it was generated by deep feelings of joy that came from molecular interactions in her body? Or perhaps, that it was generated by the economic system of capitalism, which gave her the free time to do it?

In all kinds of cases we can see forces which influenced or shaped a creative act (including a lie), but we still recognize the ownership that a creative/moral being has over its acts of creativity. Some of the influences in this tapestry of causes may in fact be evil done by others. Someone may specifically "tempt" me, trying to evil look attractive to me. But even in that case, if I do evil, there are now two evils: the evil of the temptation and the evil I did in response. The act of temptation does not remove my ownership of my own evil.

In summary, God is the ultimate cause of all things, including evil, but is not the immediate cause, or "author" of evil. God has the power to create beings with creative ability of their own. As such, they are the "authors" of their own deeds. It is no more appropriate to say that God is author of their sins than it is to say that God, and not Shakespeare, is the author of Hamlet.

Is it a distinction without a difference to say that God is the ultimate cause but not the immediate actor or author of sin, in contrast to those who would say that God is not the cause of sin at all? On one hand, both viewpoints recognize the ownership people have of their sins. The two viewpoints have different implications, however, in how we think about God. If we say that God is not the ultimate cause of sin, we are saying that God is not the creator of all things in the universe; there are some things (e.g., sin) that have their origin apart from him. This implies that God is subject to forces outside himself, which means that there is a (presumably impersonal, but perhaps malevolent) part of the universe outside his creation. And, as discussed above, saying that God had no role in the origin of evil doesn't help at all in removing responsibility from God. Unless we want to deny God's omnipotence in addition to denying his role as sole creator, we must say that even if God did not cause evil to exist, he has the power to end it at any time. If he does not end it immediately, it must be for reasons of a greater good, which are precisely the same reasons which we must invoke if God caused the process directly.

Scriptural arguments

There are many Scripture verses which support the view that God is the ultimate cause of all things, including evil. Those who oppose this view may be able to "explain away" what seems the clear meaning of these verses, but the collection of them together presents a coherent picture.

God uses evil for good

There are many passages which support the two-level description given above, in which created moral agents intend evil but God uses their evil for a good end. One of the most well known is the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50, one of the most extended single narratives in Scripture. It ends with the "moral" in Genesis 50:20,

"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."

Here, Joseph's brothers are clearly indicted for sin, but God meant "it," that is, their evil, for an ultimate greater good. The greater good in this case is the salvation of many people from starvation. The story of Joseph can also be seen as a typological symbol for Christ: Joseph is betrayed and buried (effectively killed) for the salvation of many people. This same two-level description is used by the Apostle Peter to discuss the death of Christ—Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). A great good comes on Good Friday at the hands of evil people.

The book of Job gives another typological picture of the Christ. In chapters 1-2 we are told of a good purpose of the evil which befalls Job, both the natural evil of disease and disaster, and the moral evil of marauding Sabeans. These evils serve to glorify God by demonstrating the faithfulness of his servant Job through physical and mental trials (Job 1:8, 2:3). The interaction that God has with the evil spirit Satan is quite striking: God directly sends Satan to go out and do evil (Job 1:12, 2:6). Note that Satan cannot see the future, and incorrectly predicts that Job will curse God. Satan desires evil as an end in itself. But God can see the future and knows that Job will end up pure and holy and an amazing example of patience and faithfulness. God also knows that the suffering of Job will be temporary, and Job will be restored. As discussed above, we cannot remove the temporary nature of evils from our discussion of evil. Job is restored to blessing in this life, but for many people, restoration will happen only in heaven, when God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes...neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Much of the dialogue between Job and his friends in the main body of the book of Job revolves around this point. Job's friends want to argue that restoration always happens in this life, while Job (correctly) argues that evil people often succeed in this life, and if there is no justice after death, there is no justice at all (Job 17:13-15, 21:7-19).

The interaction of God with evil spirits is problematic for people who believe that God could never use evil for his own good purposes. But this type of interaction occurs more than once in Scripture. In 1 Kings 22:19-22 we read,

> "I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' "

This speech is given by the prophet Micaiah, and there is no reason from the text to doubt that Micaiah is an approved messenger of the Lord. In the book of Job, the initiative seems to come from the spirit Satan, but in this case, the initiative clearly comes from the Lord. Evil spirits are used by him for his own ends, in this case to bring about the downfall of an evil king.

Stories of God using evil beings and evil people for his own good ends are all through Scripture. In the story of the Exodus, the evil heart of the Pharaoh is used by God to demonstrate his power in the plagues: "For this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." (Exodus 9:16) Again, God is not shown only as responding to the evil, but actively "hardening" Pharaoh's heart (e.g. Exodus 10:1). One may argue that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in response to some earlier sins of Pharaoh in which God had no role, but we still see in this story *a)* that God takes credit for causing a sin, and *b)* that he specifically says he does this for a greater good purpose.

Luke 17:1-2 is another example of this two-level description:

> "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin."

Note first that Jesus says that sin can be *caused*, and yet still be sin. While the case here is of a sinful person causing sin through active temptation, it is still the case that a cause of sin does not remove the guilt of the one who sins, and it does not make the guilt accrue only to the one who was the cause. There are two sins in this case: the sin of the one who tempts, and the sin of the one who falls to the temptation.

Note also that Jesus underscores the sovereignty of God: evils are *sure to come*. This doesn't address the origin of the first sin—perhaps sin is sure to come now only as a consequence of some earlier sin or sins which were not sure to come. But the overall teaching of Jesus here is that a sin being pre-ordained, for whatever reason, does not remove the guilt of the one who sins. The sin of the tempter is not taken away by the pre-ordination of his sin, and as discussed in the previous paragraph, the sin of the one who falls to temptation is not taken away by the causal agency of the tempter.

The origin of evil people

Other verses indicate that God not only uses the evil deeds of people, but that the existence of evil people themselves is his will. Romans 9:19-23 says

> You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.

This passage anticipates the question: if God is the ultimate cause of the evil in people, how can he hold them guilty? The apostle Paul in this passage rejects that objection and moves exactly to where I have landed above: God uses evil people for his own good ends. Note that this passage says that the potter *makes* one vessel for dishonorable use. He does not simply find a pot which is dishonorable and find a use for it; he makes it for that use.

This passage also indicates some of the good purposes of the existence of evil people, namely *a)* to show his wrath (i.e., his perfect justice), *b)* to make known his power (this conveys a dignity on evil people: they are powerful agents who must be defeated), and *c)* to serve as an example of what those who receive mercy could have justly received. Note that, as discussed in the first section of this essay, we do not need to say that these purposes are the entire and adequate reasons for the existence of evil. There may be other good reasons which God does not tell us; Paul here is not being exhaustive, just giving examples. But the fact that there are some good purposes makes it plausible that there are sufficient good purposes in God's perfect wisdom.

Paul in this passage is directly referring to a passage in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, namely Isaiah 45:5-13:

> "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me;

> "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create [evil]; I am the LORD, who does all these things.

> "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it.

> "Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'? Woe to him who says to a father, 'What are you begetting?' or to a woman, 'With what are you in labor?'"

Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him: "Ask me of things to come; will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host.

"I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward," says the LORD of hosts.

The context of this passage is the prophecy Isaiah makes that God will use an evil foreign ruler, Cyrus, to bless the people of Israel and return them to their land. (Cyrus is called by name in a remarkably specific prophecy in 45:1, and called the "anointed", or savior, of Israel, yet is listed as an unbeliever in 45:4. Cyrus is the "you" addressed in 45:5 and the "him" in 45:13.) The passage above anticipates the objection, how can God use an evil person for his good ends? God answers directly: I create and ordain all things for my own good purposes, and I do not have to explain all my purposes to you. As in the Romans 9 passage, God is presented as a potter who makes pots for his own purposes.

In verse 7, God says "I make well being and create evil." In the ESV translation, which is the translation used above, the word "evil" is translated as "calamity"—in the above quote I have restored it to "evil" as in the King James translation, which is actually a more accurate translation of the original Hebrew. The translators of the ESV (as well as the NIV, which uses "disaster") don't use the word "evil" here because they have made a theological judgment that moral evil cannot be not in view, because they reject the idea that God could create moral evil (whether directly or indirectly). The use of this word to refer to natural evil is not unreasonable, because the Hebrew word, "ra," is generic in Hebrew just as it is in English, referring both to moral evil and to natural evils and pains. But there is no reason to artificially restrict it here to refer only to natural evil. The Hebrew word "ra" is the same word used for "evil" in Genesis 2:9 for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, long understood to refer to moral evil. "Ra" is used in many other places in the Old Testament where it clearly refers to moral evil.

In the context of Isaiah 45, God is not talking about natural calamity, he is talking about a blessing (the restoration of Israel). The only evil in view is the morally evil nature of the man who will bring about that blessing, Cyrus. One could argue that God is speaking of natural calamities merely as a balance to the blessing he is about to bring. But the whole tenor of the passage is the same as Paul's in Romans 9—what place is there for evil people in God's purposes?

Finally, note that in Isaiah 45:13 God says "I have stirred him [Cyrus] up in my righteousness." This is a dramatic statement if we know some history about Cyrus. Cyrus was a warrior who killed many people and conquered the empire of Babylon. But God says that he has "stirred him up," that is, that God is the ultimate cause behind the actions of Cyrus. And God says that he has done this in "righteousness"—Cyrus's evil does not translate to God's evil, as I have argued above. In this case, in addition to whatever ultimate

good may come from Cyrus, there is an immediate good result of Cyrus: he is the means of giving freedom to the Jewish nation.

The passage in Isaiah 45 has strong similarities to the lengthy passage in Job chapters 38-41. Throughout the whole book, Job wrestles with the problem of evil. At the end of the book, in chapters 38-41, God gives essentially the same argument as above, namely, he says "I have my own good purposes and I don't have to tell them to you; have faith that I know what I am doing, because I am the creator of all things and you are not." This is also the message of Ecclesiastes (see, in particular, Ecclesiastes 3:11). The Bible never presents a picture of God being unable to stop the existence of evil.

Proverbs 16:4 sums up this teaching very simply:

> The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

As in Romans 9, this verse says that God has "made" the wicked "for" a purpose. It does not say that, having found wicked people to exist, he merely uses them.

Counterarguments

Against all of the above teaching of Scripture, theologians who reject that God is the ultimate cause of all things, including evil, argue from just a few passages. The primary verse often quoted is James 1:13, which says

> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

This passage teaches *a)* that God never does evil (as all Christians agree, cf. 1 John 1:5), and *b)* that he does not "tempt" anyone to do evil. This is different from saying that God has no role in the cause of the existence of evil. To tempt is to entice, to present evil as good, using falsehood. God never does this. Rather, his causation of evil consists of causing a moral being to exist, with the full knowledge of what that moral being will produce within himself or herself.

Another passage is Jeremiah 32:34-35, which says,

> They set up their abominations in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination.

Here God says that it did not "enter his mind" to do this sin of infanticide. Here God is not denying that he is omniscient, that he literally did not know what they would do. Rather, he is saying that it did not enter his mind to command such a thing, in contradiction of their claims that they are doing it in his name. God never commands or entices people to do evil.

Finally, there are several places in which God grieves over the sins of people, e.g. Genesis 6:6, which says the Lord "regretted" that he had made mankind. Unless we want to deny the omniscience of God, we cannot make these passages say that God was surprised by the existence of sin. Rather, we can say that although he has a final good purpose for all things, he still is pained by the present pains of mankind and grieved by them. The physical and spiritual evils of the world are real, not imaginary, and God engages with the real world. In fact, he takes the sins and evils of this world more seriously and deeply than we do, to the point of suffering the consequences of that evil fully on the Cross.

Conclusion

Is the problem of evil a "mystery"? It depends on what we mean by mystery. If we mean, "Do Christians need to believe a self-contradiction?" then the answer is clearly no. There is no self-contradiction involved in believing that God has some ultimate good purpose for everything, including the evil that exists in the world. The Bible clearly states that this is the case (Romans 11:36 states this succinctly: *everything* is "from him" and "through him" and "to him"). There also is no self-contradiction involved in saying that God can be the ultimate cause of evil without himself doing evil, if indeed the greater good which comes from that evil is truly worth it.

There *is* an element of mystery, however, if by mystery we mean things we do not and cannot know. The separation of first and second causes, and consequently the separation of God's responsibility from ours, may seem mysterious to some people. This issue connects to the fundamental question, how can God create anything which is not himself? If what is created is generated from God, how can it be not-God? There is no self-contradiction here, but a lack of knowledge. We do not know the process by which God made the universe separate from himself. But we do know that God endowed the created order with its own causal power, and moral beings have their own creative causal power.

Similarly, while we can affirm that God has some ultimate good purpose for all things, we do not know what that purpose is in every case. The Bible gives us some hints at some good purposes, e.g., displaying God's justice, creating people with intrinsic power (one may call this "dignity" of all people, in the language of Francis Schaeffer), developing good people with the patience to endure great things, etc. But the Bible never says that this short list of purposes is the entire story. Rather, in many places (e.g. Job 38-41, Isaiah 45, Ecclesiastes 3:11) God dramatically insists that he will *not* tell us the whole story, and that we have to trust him.

To insist that I know that *this* particular evil can have *no* ultimate good purpose is a breathtakingly arrogant position. I would in that case be like the pot railing against the potter, the creature railing against the creator, to which God could say, as to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" This is true whether I am talking about natural evil or moral evil.

In the end, we may say that the greater-good argument comes down to faith: faith that God has ultimate good purposes for everything that happens. The real question of faith is not whether God exists—the Bible says that all moral beings know in their hearts that God exists (Romans 1:18-21, James 2:19). What we really have a hard time believing is that God is good. But it is not illogical to believe he is good. It is only hard to be humble enough to trust him when he will not tell us all of his purposes.