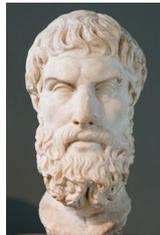


THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

There is an enormous amount of pain and suffering in the world: earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, and disease. For many people, this can make it hard to believe in the existence of an omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and benevolent (all-good) god. If such a god knows suffering exists, can prevent it, and is good, then why would he let it happen?

‘Is god willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is not benevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him god?’



EPICURUS, (341 – 270 BCE)

This is often called the problem of evil. However, many humanists call this the **problem of suffering**.

One response is to say that perhaps god is not all-powerful or all-good. But that would not be a very satisfactory response to many religious people. Another response is to say that perhaps god simply doesn't intervene in human affairs? This is the god of **deism**, a god who started the world but no longer interferes.

Some people have attempted to come up with other answers to the problem. They might say that a benevolent god may allow some suffering for the greater overall good: for example, the gift of free will or the opportunity to display courage or kindness. However, for many humanists, these explanations raise further problems. They believe the problem of suffering is solved if you don't believe in a god. Bad things happen simply because that is the way the world is, and there is no power, other than our own, to prevent them.

‘I have had some trouble in regarding evil as having been intended by infinite Goodness.’

ROBERT INGERSOLL,
American humanist

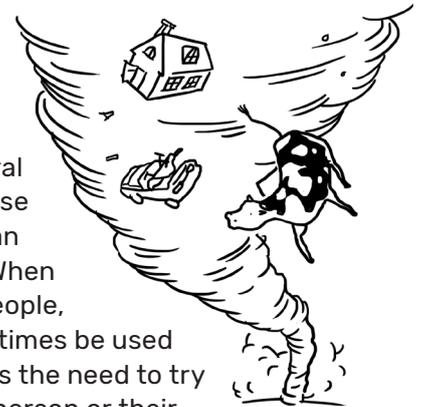


Evil and suffering are often grouped into two categories:

- **Moral evil:** This is suffering caused by human beings such as violence, crime, and war.
- **Natural evil:** These are events with natural causes including disease and natural disasters.

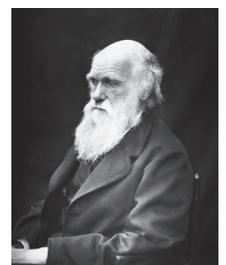
SHOULD WE USE THE WORD 'EVIL'?

Some people have reservations about using the word 'evil'. Evil implies intention, but natural disasters and disease are not caused by an intentional agent. When used to describe people, the word can sometimes be used in a way that rejects the need to try to understand the person or their behaviour. It can imply that there is nothing we could have done to prevent what they did. It can remove our responsibility to look for other causes and explore whether society might be partly to blame.



‘I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent god would have designed parasitic wasps with the express intention of feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.’

CHARLES DARWIN, (1809 – 1882)



THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE

Some argue that the problem of suffering does not prove that there is no omnipotent, benevolent god. That may be true, but for many humanists the problem is not one of logic, but one of **evidence**. They say the presence of suffering does not make a good god impossible, but that it makes the existence of such a god very unlikely.

The sheer scale of suffering throughout the history of life on Earth (including long before humans even existed) makes many people find it hard to believe it is all for some greater good. Some events appear so cruel that it is difficult to believe a benevolent god would allow them (the coronavirus pandemic; the 2004 Asian earthquake and tsunami; the Holocaust; and the suffering of children around the world through hunger, war, and disease – not to mention the violence and suffering that goes on in the natural world). Many humanists find it difficult to believe that such suffering would be necessary for a good god to achieve his or her goals.

“I think of a parasitic worm that is boring through the eye of a boy living in West Africa, a worm that’s going to make him blind. Are you telling me that the God you say is an all-merciful God, that cares for each of us individually, are you saying that God created this worm that can live in no other way than in an innocent child’s eyeball? Because that doesn’t seem to me to coincide with a God that’s full of mercy.”

**DAVID
ATTENBOROUGH**



Credit: John Cairns

THE REAL PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

The ‘problem’ of why a good god would allow suffering is not a problem for those who don’t believe in a god. Humanists seek natural explanations for why bad things happen. They look to biology and psychology to explain human behaviour and to the earth sciences to explain natural disasters.

For humanists (and for many other people) the more important question is: What can we do to prevent suffering or deal with it when it occurs? By understanding why natural disasters occur and what causes diseases, we can try to protect people from them. And through a better understanding of why human beings sometimes do terrible things, we can try to avoid the circumstances that motivate them to do so.

‘Religion diverts us from the causes of evils, and from the remedies which nature prescribes.’

BARON D’HOLBACH,
(1723 – 1789)

Humanists do not believe that all events are part of some bigger plan or that ‘everything happens for a reason’. It is up to human beings to reduce suffering where they can, and humanists will typically be cautiously optimistic about our capacity to do so. Technology and medicine have helped us to fight disasters and disease. Improvements in society can influence people’s motivations to act less selfishly or violently.

Some people say that we should accept that suffering is simply a part of life. Some humanists would have sympathy with that – it can help us to cope. However, many would also say, we should do what we can to minimise suffering wherever it is possible. We should not turn away from it, but turn towards it and, believing this is the one life we have, do what we can to reduce it.



QUESTIONS:

- Why might some people prefer not to use the word ‘evil’? Do you think it is ever appropriate?
- Is the belief that there is no god the simplest way to explain the fact that suffering exists?
- Even if the existence of suffering does not prove there is no omnipotent, benevolent god, does it make one’s existence less likely?