

THE
ATHEIST'S
FATAL
FLAW

EXPOSING CONFLICTING BELIEFS



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This book is affectionately dedicated to my faithful wife of over fifty years, whose excellent help has vastly improved this and numerous other manuscripts.

Norman Geisler

This book is dedicated to my beautiful wife. You are such a gift from God to me and to our daughters. Thank you for marrying me!

Daniel McCoy

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Introduction

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.

—George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*¹

One night, my (Daniel's) three-year-old daughter, Beth, complained to my wife and me as we put her to bed: "I need a snack; my tummy is very full." My wife and I laughed at the contradiction. It was merely a semantic contradiction, fixable by tweaking the words. The aim of this book is the diagnosis of other, far more serious contradictions. If I had lectured my daughter about how her statement was a contradiction and about the perils of violating the laws of logic, she would all the while be thinking about snacks and wondering when I would stop talking so she could have some. In contrast, we hope to show that our diagnosis should not be ignored by the thinking atheist. Before proceeding, it will be helpful to define the terms that will be used in this diagnosis. In so doing, we set out in general terms the arguments we investigate in much more detail, and in the atheist's own words, in the chapters that follow.

God-in-the-Dock Arguments

The first term we define is *God-in-the-dock* (GITD) *argument*. We have taken the phrase from a C. S. Lewis essay,² and as an adjective *God-in-the-dock* will stand for the family of atheistic arguments that place God on trial for having contradicted his own nature. These arguments designate a particular action or inaction by God as incompatible with his perfect nature. We define his nature according to his infinite holiness, power, knowledge, and love. Each atheistic argument considered is a GITD argument, so each might be framed in such a way:

If God were truly moral, he would not [action].

God does [action].

Thus, God is not truly moral.

Of course, if God is not truly moral, then a moral God does not exist. Thus, more pointedly, the infinitely moral God of Christianity does not exist. It is true that some of the arguments that follow can be construed in ways other than GITD. For example, one might say, “The kind of totalitarian submission called for by the Christian God is evidence that Christianity was concocted by opportunists.” However, we are concerned with the version of the argument that says, for example, “If God were a truly loving God, he would not demand our submission.”

Note that because these are GITD arguments, it is only fair to remain within the Christian framework throughout the critique. It is trickery to argue, for example, “It is immoral of God to judge us for ‘sins,’ since we were never sinners because there was never a God to sin against in the first place.” No, if you are arguing that it is immoral of God to do such and such, then you must not caricature the Christian system to make it easier to knock down. If you want to argue against Christianity, let it be the real thing.

It is important to prevent this illicit caricaturing early in the game because of a tempting tactic that might arise throughout. The atheist who argues that God does not do enough to fix the problem of moral evil often claims that the kind of morality God foists on humankind is actually immoral and thus makes the problem of moral evil worse. We are told that this immoral morality includes nasty prescriptions to faith, worship, and so on to which no dignified human should stoop. Yet if God exists, are not such prescriptions perfectly understandable, even inevitable? You cannot ask God for a godless morality. This book will not venture outside of GITD arguments against the coherence of Christianity, with the agreement that the atheist will not hop the fence mid-argument to snatch, bring back, and sneak in caricatures.

The Atheist

Throughout the book, it will be common to read statements beginning with the subject *the atheist* or *the atheists*. Please understand we never intend to speak for all atheists. When we speak of “the atheist,” we are merely referring to the atheist who holds the atheistic arguments under discussion. There may well be many atheists who do not hold to these particular arguments but instead disbelieve in God on the basis of other arguments. Similarly, we have used the generic “he” for ease of expression.

The Problem of Moral Evil

The third term in need of definition is the *problem of moral evil*. According to Richard Swinburne, “The main argument against the existence of God has always been the ‘argument from evil’—that is, from pain and malevolence. . . . Evils are traditionally divided into moral evils (ones knowingly caused or allowed to occur by humans)

and natural evils (the ones for which humans are not responsible, such as the effects of disease and earthquake).”³ What Swinburne calls “moral evils” is what we have in mind as the problem of moral evil. As Philip Quinn puts it, “*Moral evil* inheres in the wicked actions of moral agents and the bad consequences they produce. An example is torturing the innocent. When evil actions are considered theologically as offenses against God, they are regarded as sins.”⁴

Suppose the atheist recoils from such an incriminating definition of the problem of moral evil. Perhaps he disbelieves in moral agency and would loathe to call a fellow human wicked. Recall, however, our no-fence-hopping rule from the above discussion of GITD arguments. Because, according to Christianity, a free humanity is capable of misusing their freedom to commit horrendous wickedness, then to try to soften what is meant by moral evil will fall short of fairness. When the atheist advances the problem of moral evil as a GITD argument against the Christian God, he cannot step outside Christianity to define moral evil solely in terms of genetics. If God is on trial for being inconsistent in himself, it would be absurd of the jury to rule that he should be even more inconsistent. As long as the argument starts out, “If the Christian God were really . . . ,” moral evil remains defined by Christianity as having arisen from human wickedness.

The Problem of Divine Intervention

Our fourth definition involves a second GITD argument. A second problem, just as oppressive as the problem of moral evil, confronts the atheist. God is no longer the absent deliverer as under the problem of moral evil; now God has arrived as the oppressor himself. The term to be defined here is the *problem of divine intervention*. Under the problem of moral evil, we find that God is not present enough, yet in this new problem we find God to be too present. In the same breath, the atheist utters “Please” followed by “No,

thank you.” According to the problem of divine intervention, the interventions the Christian God introduces into human life are immoral. Thus, by appealing to the argument, the atheist makes clear that he does not want or need these interventions.

The problem of divine intervention is really a family of arguments. There are ten allegedly immoral interventions we will examine throughout the book. The atheists we will consult demand freedom from God in the following ten areas. God should not

1. demand submission,
2. bestow favor,
3. authorize death,
4. require faith,
5. attach guilt,
6. prescribe rules,
7. administer punishment,
8. grant pardon,
9. send to hell,
10. bring to heaven.

Thus, the atheist who initially asked for God’s intervention into the problem of moral evil does not, in the end, actually need him.

Three distinctions will help pinpoint what is meant when the atheist asks for “freedom from divine intervention.” First, “I don’t need God” is to be distinguished from similar declarations, such as, “I don’t need God to explain the origin of life,” or “I don’t need God to explain where morality comes from.” Such arguments, based on which is the better explanation, are not dealt with here. It is not God as a theoretical explanation that is in the dock here, but, in fact, God as himself. Second, we ought to distinguish between freedom from God’s interventions and freedom from the religious establishment. One finds overlap, but much atheistic ink is used condemning Christian doctrines and actions that cannot be fairly

traced back to the Founder of Christianity. What we have in mind in what follows is a call for freedom from the interventions of God himself, as described in the Old and New Testaments. Third, the idea of divine intervention sounds quite dramatic, but it ought to be kept in mind that none of these interventions are actually imposing enough as to overturn human freedom. As we see in the section “The Levels of Intervention” below, these interventions never involve the coercive manipulation of free will. Rather, these interventions should be taken as interventions that work on the willing conscience.

Human Autonomy

We have defined two GITD arguments against God’s existence—namely, the problem of moral evil and the problem of divine intervention. It should not be difficult to see why the atheist sees moral evil as a problem. For one thing, no one could deny that moral evil causes vast amounts of suffering. However, why is the second argument called the *problem* of divine intervention? If the atheist truly sees moral evil as a problem, should not the atheist restate the latter argument as the *solution* of divine intervention? This might be if divine intervention did not threaten a cherished value atheists hold called *human autonomy*. Divine intervention diminishes human autonomy, and thus itself becomes a problem even while solving another.

The word *autonomy* literally means “self-law.”⁵ One can be ruled by self or by something outside the self, such as others or God. Thus theologian Paul Tillich categorized the hierarchy of rule as autonomy (rule by self), heteronomy (rule by another), and theonomy (rule by God). Tillich scholar Michael Palmer explains, “Autonomous reason is thus independent reason, reason refusing to obey any authority, be it secular or divine, which seeks to control the way it grasps or shapes reality.”⁶ Because divine intervention would naturally confront human autonomy and because, as we

will see, most atheists seem to be zealots for autonomy, divine intervention would be seen as a problem. Now, whereas Christians and atheists alike appreciate being granted freedom (i.e., freedom to make personal choices), freedom is not identical to autonomy. True, personal freedom permits oneself to rule autonomously; freedom could even be seen to encourage autonomy if one sees God as an impediment to freedom. Yet freedom permits the reverse as well. Those who freely obey God often see themselves as freer when living out God's purposes than when they had enslaved themselves to various sins out from under his guidance.

The Levels of Intervention

Though many versions of the problem-of-evil argument suggest that God should intervene to prevent *all* cases of evil, suppose that an atheist backpedals and says, "Well, obviously, to get rid of all moral evil would obliterate human autonomy. I am not saying God should do anything as rash as that. I just think he should at least prevent the more horrendous evils, like child abuse and such." Because this distinction by degrees alters the argument, it will be helpful to propose a categorization. In descending order, let us propose three ways God could intervene in the problem of moral evil:

- A ("All")—Forcible prevention of all moral evil
- B ("Bad")—Forcible intervention into the most egregious cases of evil
- C ("Conscience")—Voluntary intervention at the mental/spiritual level

The atheist who says, "God should fix everything," and then inserts, "But God shouldn't touch anything," is contradicting himself. However, if an atheist says, "I don't want God to fix everything, just the worst things," does that dissolve the contradiction? To answer,

first, it must be clear what it is the atheist wants God not to touch. As we will see, the atheist wants freedom from God's interventions insofar as God commands things like faith, submission, and guilt, and insofar as God promises things like death, judgment, and afterlife. Although such interventions might seem restricting, they rely on *voluntary* responses. God might command, but man might refuse. God might promise, but one might distract oneself into forgetfulness. In other words, these commands and promises leave free will intact. No inch of autonomy is seized from the unwilling. Yet it is freedom from such voluntary interventions that the atheist demands. It is a demand for freedom from C-level interventions.

When the atheist says, "God should fix the problem of moral evil," which level is he requesting? There are two possibilities. The atheist to whom *all* moral evil should have been or should be prevented is asking for A-level intervention. It would seem that this would entail the abolition of true moral freedom. B-level intervention is represented by the statement, "I'm not saying God should get rid of all evil, but *at least* the worst cases of it." Yet how could God answer such a request practically? Either God designs the human up front without the ability to do significant damage, with built-in physical or mental constraints, much like chastity belts and training wheels. Or, if there be no constitutional constraints on human freedom, God intervenes at the moment prior to the urge or the act, so that, for example, as C. S. Lewis put it, "a wooden beam became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults."⁷ So the request is for either A- or B-level interventions. He could not be arguing in favor of mere C-level interventions, for, if that were the case, there would be no argument, since those types of interventions are precisely what Christianity offers. In dropping his request from A-level down to B-level interventions, the atheist is still asking God to move mountains: erasing a near infinity of free actions either at creation or throughout history through literally countless miracles.

As we will discover in the section on the problem of divine intervention, the atheist sees it as immoral of God to intervene at the C level. Yet when it comes to the problem of moral evil, the atheist demands God to intervene at either A level or B level. Admittedly, it sounds extreme to accuse the atheist of wanting God to fix everything and yet not touch anything. However, the atheist's position is even more extreme than that, for the atheist says in essence, "God is morally bound to go to such extremes to fix the problem of moral evil that he removes at least a good part of our autonomy. At the same time, it would be immoral of God to go to lesser extremes because to do so would infringe on our autonomy." You cannot demand A-level and B-level intervention and then cry "Unfair!" at mere C-level intervention that leaves autonomy basically intact.

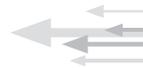
Our Thesis

Thus we arrive at a very broad outline of what is to come. From the atheists' writings, we will discover two examples of what George Orwell called *doublethink*. As we shall see, the atheist holds two contradictory beliefs in his mind simultaneously, and moreover, he does it twice. These two fundamental inconsistencies will invalidate two central atheistic arguments. The first inconsistency overturns the atheist's argument appealing to the problem of moral evil. In the argument concerning moral evil, atheists claim that an all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God cannot exist alongside moral evil. In other words, because God does not intervene to fix the problem of moral evil, he is immoral, and thus, as an essentially moral being, nonexistent. Yet, as we will see, many atheists will contradict this argument against moral evil by going on to label as immoral the very interventions God would naturally use to fix the problem of moral evil. Why are these divine interventions immoral? The reason divine intervention becomes a problem for these atheists stems

from the value they place on human autonomy. Divine intervention suppresses self-rule.

In their first inconsistency, the atheists' appeal to the problem of divine intervention seems to defeat their argument appealing to moral evil. Their second inconsistency then works to overturn their appeal to the problem of divine intervention. As we will see, the very interventions denounced at the divine, or theonomous, level are actually admitted to be necessary, even perhaps commendable, at the societal, or heteronomous, level. It turns out that these interventions are not immoral in themselves. If not immoral in themselves, why is God immoral to employ them, especially since they are the very interventions that will go to fix the problem of moral evil? Thus, those are the two inconsistencies to watch for. In order to resolve these two inconsistencies, the atheist will need to (1) drop either the argument appealing to the problem of moral evil or the arguments claiming that God's interventions to fix the problem of moral evil are immoral, and (2) stop labeling as immoral those interventions that the Christian God proposes while simultaneously claiming that their counterparts on the societal level are not immoral.

So our thesis is essentially an exposing of two fundamental inconsistencies that defeat two atheistic arguments. Thus the atheist basically crafts every argument in our book. One regiment marches under a banner that reads, "God Should Fix Everything"; another holds high the banner that says, "God Shouldn't Touch Anything." All the while, the opposite sides of each banner state the reverse: "Immoral for God, Moral for Humanity." Our aim is not a head-on rebuttal of any particular argument. Rather, our aim is to turn atheistic argument against atheistic argument until the inconsistency is recognized and one side of the argument is dropped. Inevitably, therefore, this book will be filled with quotations from atheists. In order to develop our charge of inconsistency, initially we will not have to argue, only to faithfully represent what the atheist is arguing.



The Problem of Moral Evil

It appears that even the Holocaust did not lead most Jews to doubt the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God. If having half of your people systematically delivered to the furnace does not count as evidence against the notion that an all-powerful God is looking out for your interests, it seems reasonable to assume that nothing could.

—Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*¹

Recall Richard Swinburne’s claim: “The main argument against the existence of God has always been the ‘argument from evil’—that is, from pain and malevolence.”² Yet is the argument still the ace up the sleeve, the “gotcha,” the knock-down punch today? More pointedly for this book, is the argument still made from pain *and* malevolence (i.e., natural evil *and* moral evil)? Or have the theodicies chipped away at the problem to where the “moral evil” horn has fallen off? To answer, note a television panel discussion as

recalled by Richard Dawkins: “Swinburne at one point attempted to justify the Holocaust on the grounds that it gave the Jews a wonderful opportunity to be courageous and noble. Peter Atkins splendidly growled, ‘May you rot in hell.’”³ That debate apparently remains unsettled.

On the other hand, one could be pardoned for speculating that the argument from *moral evil* had lost its potency and dropped out of fashion. How else might we explain the emergence of formulations of the problem that seem to be crafted explicitly to sidestep traditional theistic responses to the problem of specifically moral evil? For example, a theist might respond that when the capacity for moral evil is taken away, so is the capacity for moral good. So the atheist might counter with an example of suffering that could not possibly produce moral good. Take, for instance, the celebrated statement of the problem by atheist William L. Rowe: “Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn’s intense suffering is pointless.”⁴ Aside from the obvious pity involved in the statement, one could almost detect a smirk: “Try your theodicy out on this one.” In order to preclude traditional responses, the argument appropriates natural evil, not moral evil.

However, if one takes the time to read the works of recent and current leading advocates of atheism, as well as their heroes from the past, it becomes obvious that the problem of *moral evil*, not merely *natural evil*, remains a useful argument against the existence of a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the prominence of the problem of moral evil in today’s rationale for atheism. The problem of moral evil is alleged to be God’s fault in the first place, God’s problem to fix in the meantime, and God’s loss as exbelievers bear no blame for their exodus in light of the problem of moral evil. In each of these three

sections, we will first consult the past heroes of today's atheists before considering the writings of recent and current atheists themselves.

God's Fault

If God were so good, why would his grandest creation turn out so bad? In the atheist's mind, even the most intelligently crafted redemptive plans can never hope to answer this single question. God can never redeem us enough to redeem himself from the initial fault of creating sinners. As the influential atheist Bertrand Russell framed it, "If I were going to beget a child knowing that the child was going to be a homicidal maniac, I should be responsible for his crimes. If God knew in advance the sins of which man would be guilty, he was clearly responsible for all the consequences of those sins when he decided to create man."⁵ Elsewhere, Russell mused, "If [God is omnipotent], nothing contrary to his will can occur; therefore when the sinner disobeys his commands, he must have intended this to happen."⁶ Carl Sagan put it bluntly: "Why is there such a long list of things that God tells people to do? Why didn't God do it right in the first place?"⁷

As eager as today's atheists are to denounce divine actions as not merely unnecessary or unhistorical but positively evil, it is no wonder that this argument is useful today. Not only are his demands, judgments, and redemptive plans evil but, as Creator, he himself created evil. According to Dan Barker, copresident of the Freedom from Religion Foundation,

The Christian God cannot be both omniscient and omnibenevolent. If God were omniscient, then he knew when he created Adam that Adam would sin. He *knew* human beings would suffer. Regardless of whether the existence of evil can be theologically explicated, an all-knowing Creator deliberately placed humans in its path. This is at least criminal negligence, if not malice. Those who invoke "free will" forget that we all act according to a human nature that was

supposedly created by God himself. . . . At the moment of creation, an omniscient deity would have been picturing the suffering and damnation of most of his creation. This is mean-spirited. God should have had an abortion rather than bring a child into such misery.⁸

Again he writes, “If God knows in advance that there will be evil as a direct or indirect result of his actions, then he is not all-good. He is at least partly responsible for the harm.”⁹ Atheist Richard Carrier argues that God should have prepared us better for the potential of evil and, having failed to, is responsible for that evil:

Likewise, as a loving parent, I would think it a horrible failure on my part if I didn't educate my children well, and supervise them kindly, teaching them how to live safe and well, and warning them of unknown or unexpected dangers. . . . It would be felony criminal neglect. Yet that is God: An absentee mom—who lets kids get kidnapped and murdered or run over by cars, who does nothing to teach them what they need to know, who never sits down like a loving parent to have an honest chat with them, and who would let them starve if someone else didn't intervene. As this is unconscionable, almost any idea of a god that fits the actual evidence of the world is unconscionable.¹⁰

Of course, in asking God to adopt such measures, the atheist volunteers to relinquish a measure of freedom. Yet atheist George Smith proposes a setup that retains freedom but restricts consequences. God's failure to shield the innocent is analogous to an unjust judicial system:

Some men commit blatant injustices, but others do not. Some men murder, rob, and cheat, but others do not. Some men choose a policy of wanton destructiveness, but others do not. And we must remember that crimes are committed by men against other men, innocent victims, who cannot be held responsible. The minimum requirement for a civilized society is a legal system whereby the individual liberties of men are protected from the aggressive activities of

other men. We regard the recognition and protection of individual rights as a moral necessity, and we condemn governments that fail to provide a fair system of justice. How, then, are we to evaluate a God who permits widespread instances of injustice when it is easily within his power to prevent them?¹¹

Abortion, better education, protection for the innocent—atheists can envision at least these three alternatives to God's plan. Since God failed to plan better, the problem of moral evil is ultimately his fault.

God's Problem

We might forgive a man for carelessly flicking a cigarette that ignited his barn, but we cannot forgive him for folding his arms as neighbors scramble to extinguish the fire. According to the atheist, it may be immoral for God to set evil in motion, but it is unconscionable for him to smirk from afar, watching us try pathetically to fix it. It is we who are chained to the problem; it is we who are forced to fix it. The religious have no extra, supernatural help; they merely have an extra chain that jerks their heads heavenward to pray their gratitude for something they themselves accomplished. It was this divine inertness that inspired Mark Twain to write,

We hear much about His patience and forbearance and long-suffering; we hear nothing about our own, which much exceeds it. We hear much about His mercy and kindness and goodness. . . . There being no instances of it. . . .

. . . The pulpit assures us that wherever we see suffering and sorrow, which we can relieve and do not do it, we sin, heavily. *There was never yet a case of suffering or sorrow which God could not relieve.* Does He sin, then?¹²

According to the heroes of today's atheists, a major share of this unforgivably unrelieved suffering is human evil. Russell asks,

“Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists?”¹³ Which atheist has not memorized the passage in which David Hume’s Philo quotes the ancient atomist Epicurus: “Is he 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?”¹⁴ It is worth noting Philo’s preceding statement where, clearly, not just natural evil is in mind: “Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud; by these they mutually torment each other.”¹⁵ Russell, too, lists “human sacrifices, persecutions of heretics, witch-hunts, pogroms leading up to wholesale extermination by poison gases,” and starkly concludes, “If [the world in which we live] is the outcome of deliberate purpose, the purpose must have been that of a fiend.”¹⁶ God’s nonintervention into the problem of moral evil translates into non-goodness, and on into nonexistence.

Rather than dropping the charges, today’s atheists have only found more to add. Human evil is God’s fault, and the more evil, the more of a mess awaits his cleanup. After all, there are many modern messes to pick from, as atheist Andrea M. Weisberger reminds us:

Where was the intelligent designer of the universe when 1.5 million children were turned into smoke by zealous Nazis? Where was the all powerful, all knowing, wholly good being whose very essence is radically opposed to evil, while millions of children were starved to death by Stalin, had their limbs chopped off with machetes in Rwanda, were turned into amputees by the diamond trade in Sierra Leone, and worked to death, even now, by the child slave trade that, by conservative estimates, enslaves 250 million children worldwide? Without divine justice, all of this suffering is gratuitous. How, then, can a wholly good, all-powerful God be believed to exist?¹⁷

Recalling the Oklahoma City bombing, which injured 850 people, killed 168 (19 of which were children), and orphaned 30 children,¹⁸ atheist Ian McEwan remarked, “The believers should know in their hearts by now that, even if they are right and there actually is a benign and watchful personal God, he is, as all the daily tragedies, all the dead children attest, a reluctant intervener. The rest of us, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, know that it is highly improbable that there is anyone up there at all.”¹⁹

In addition to finding new examples of evil, today’s atheists have devised novel formulations of the problem of evil, in which moral evil plays a part. It is important to realize that often even statements of the problem of evil that appear to have excluded moral evil completely cannot prevent moral evil from becoming intertwined in the argument. For example, a nation’s poverty and starvation can sometimes be directly linked to greedy dictators hoarding the nation’s wealth, even the foreign aid meant for their destitute people. Similarly, when atheist John Loftus claims in his “Darwinian Problem of Evil” that animal suffering is irreconcilable with the goodness of God, he inevitably brings in the problem of moral evil: “Human beings rule over the animal kingdom with an iron fist. Almost every kind of living creature is eaten as food by at least some of us on the planet.”²⁰ Also note Loftus’s argument against God based on his “failure to communicate.” According to Loftus, God should have been able to communicate his Word in such a clear way as to prevent the many diverse and dangerous interpretations of the Bible throughout history. Here again we find the problem of moral evil at work: “God created us with the very propensities we have for misunderstanding and violence, otherwise we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”²¹

From their writings, we can piece together three reasons today’s atheists believe God should be intervening in the problem of moral evil: God’s inaction goes against the precedent we find in the Bible, the inclination we find in ourselves, and the love we

expect from God. According to the first reason, assuming God has not developed arthritis or something, should he not intervene as in the glorious days of old? He could back then, right? Bart Ehrman's path to becoming a skeptical New Testament critic was, by his admission, from Christian fundamentalism to agnosticism via the problem of evil. He retraces the thoughts leading to his deconversion: "If God intervened to deliver the armies of Israel from its enemies, why doesn't he intervene now when the armies of sadistic tyrants savagely attack and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries?"²²

The second reason God should intervene is that nonintervention goes against the inclination we find in ourselves. God should because we would. We are neither as good nor as powerful as God, yet even we would do at least whatever we could to intervene. As one whose goodness and ability are infinite, he thus has no conceivable excuse for not intervening. According to Carrier,

It's a simple fact of direct observation that if *I* had the means and the power, and could not be harmed for my efforts, I would immediately alleviate all needless suffering in the universe. . . . And whenever men and women seemed near to violence, I would intervene and kindly endeavor to help them peacefully resolve their differences. That's what any loving person would do. Yet I cannot be more loving, more benevolent than the Christian God. Therefore, the fact that the Christian God does none of these things—in fact, nothing of any sort whatsoever—is proof positive that there is no Christian God.²³

Not only would intervention be the loving action to take, but also, according to Weisberger, such action is morally obligatory:

There is an abundance of evil in our world. If we can prevent it, then we are morally obligated to do so. How much more obligated a perfectly powerful and perfectly good God must be to do the same? The theist, who maintains that such a God exists, must explain why this abundance of evil persists and why the number of rapes, murders,

child torturers, serial killers, bombings, animal cruelties, and the like proliferate at a rate that threatens to exhaust and suffocate us.²⁴

The third reason God should intervene is that nonintervention directly contradicts the love attributed to the Christian God. The Bible may associate nonintervention with noble-sounding goals like patience or character building, but atheists perceive such nonintervention as nothing short of cruel. A candid Steven Weinberg remarked, “Remembrance of the Holocaust leaves me unsympathetic to attempts to justify the ways of God to man. If there is a God that has special plans for humans, then he has taken very great pains to hide his concern for us.”²⁵ To Carrier, it is as straightforward as “Socrates is mortal”:

Think about it. A man approaches a school with a loaded assault rifle, intent on mass slaughter. A loving person speaks to him, attempts to help him resolve his problems or to persuade him to stop, and failing that, punches him right in the kisser, and takes away his gun. And a loving person with godlike powers could simply turn his bullets into popcorn as they left the gun, or heal with a touch whatever insanity or madness (or by teaching him cure whatever ignorance) led the man to contemplate the crime. But God does nothing. Therefore, a loving God does not exist.²⁶

For atheist Sam Harris, such inaction is unthinkable, or at least it should be:

Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture, and kill her. . . . Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of six billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl’s parents believe—as you believe—that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it *good* that they believe this?

No.

The entirety of atheism is contained in this response.²⁷

Hence, “An atheist is a person who believes that the murder of a single little girl—even once in a million years—casts doubt upon the idea of a benevolent God.”²⁸ For Harris, this is the final nail in God’s coffin. The discussion is over: “The problem of vindicating an omnipotent and omniscient God in the face of evil . . . is insurmountable.”²⁹

God’s Loss

Since the problem of moral evil is God’s fault in the first place and his problem to deal with, it is no surprise that the problem remains an admittedly decisive reason many turn away from him. Not only is the problem of moral evil an argument used by atheists, but also, in many cases, it is *the* decisive argument, the blow that breaks their hold on God in the first place. Former atheist Antony Flew recalls,

One of those early reasons for my conversion to atheism was the problem of evil. . . .

I was greatly influenced by these early travels abroad [particularly to Germany] during the years before World War II. I vividly recall the banners and signs outside small towns proclaiming, “Jews not wanted here.” I remember signs outside the entrance to a public library proclaiming, “The regulations of this institution forbid the issuing of any books to Jewish borrowers.” I observed a march of ten thousand brown-shirted storm troopers through a Bavarian summer night. Our family travels exposed me to squads of the Waffen-SS in their black uniforms with skull-and-crossbones caps. Such experiences sketched the background of my youthful life and for me, as for many others, presented an inescapable challenge to the existence of an all-powerful God of love. The degree to which they influenced my thinking I cannot measure.³⁰

According to Ehrman, “The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time. It was what made me begin to think about religion when I was young, and it was what led me to question

my faith when I was older. Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith.”³¹ For Carrier, God’s inertness in the face of evil is one of four reasons he gives for why he became an atheist.³² Atheist comedian George Carlin even wove the problem into his comedy routine:

When it comes to believing in God, I really tried. I really, really tried. I tried to believe that there is a God, who created each of us in His own image and likeness, loves us very much, and keeps a close eye on things. I really tried to believe that, but I gotta tell you, the longer you live, the more you look around, the more you realize . . . something is wrong here. War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, filth, poverty, torture, crime, corruption, and the Ice Capades. Something is definitely wrong. This is not good work. If this is the best God can do, I am not impressed. Results like these do not belong on the resume of a Supreme Being. This is the kind of [stuff] you’d expect from an office temp with a bad attitude.³³

And who can forget the former pulpit partner of Billy Graham, Charles Templeton, whose book *Farewell to God* argued that one’s faith in God cannot survive exposure to rationality? In response to the question, “Was there one thing in particular that caused you to lose your faith in God?” he narrowed his eyes and replied,

It was a photograph in *Life* magazine. . . . It was a picture of a black woman in Northern Africa. They were experiencing a devastating drought. And she was holding her dead baby in her arms and looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. I looked at it and I thought, “Is it possible to believe that there is a loving Creator when all this woman needed was *rain*?”³⁴

Swastikas, torture, despots hoarding food during drought—much more than a back-breaking straw, the problem of moral evil is a back-breaking camel. For these atheists, it was soul freeing to give up trying to balance the goodness of God with the weight of evil. It is off their backs, and in their estimation, it is not their loss.

Our Greatest Enemy?

The point has been made that, in their arguments, today's atheists employ the problem of moral evil. For our purposes, that is what is necessary to proceed to the next chapter. However, the potency of the problem of moral evil is another issue. Perhaps if it can be shown that the problem of moral evil is indeed a *major* problem to atheists—and if the central contentions of this book prove sound—then our contentions will have dealt a blow to a major atheistic argument. It has already been shown that the problem of evil has persuaded many toward atheism and that *moral* evil has played a significant role in those arguments. How significant, though? Is natural evil the real culprit, with moral evil being an impish sidekick? It seems the answer is no; in fact it may be closer to the other way around. In his book on evil, *Unspeakable*, sociologist Os Guinness titled his chapter on human evil “Our Greatest Enemy.”³⁵ Though many atheists will scorn such indictments and persist in trumpeting the goodness of humanity, it seems that the atheist with eyes open would agree.

At the very least, human beings, in contrast to animals, seem to be more culpable for moral wrongdoing. As Barker puts it, “If you look at nature, you discover that there is very little crime in the plant kingdom. (Ignoring dandelions.) Is it a felony when an eagle kills a field mouse? Immorality, crime, malice and cruelty belong to the ‘higher’ forms of life.”³⁶ Thomas Hobbes spoke more forcefully: “Man is the most cunning, the strongest, and most dangerous animal.”³⁷ Stronger still was Voltaire, in a letter following the Lisbon earthquake that left sixty thousand dead: “I pity the Portuguese, like you, but men do still more harm to each other on their little molehill than nature does to them. Our wars massacre more men than are swallowed up by earthquakes.”³⁸ Voltaire was prophetic; according to Weisberger,

The type of suffering that results from the actions of moral agents perhaps dwarfs the vast amount of suffering caused by natural

disasters. An estimated 20–30 million were starved to death in Stalin’s purges, approximately 9 million were killed by Hitler’s Third Reich, and at least 3 million were murdered by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge. In the United States alone it is estimated that 60 million animals a year are sacrificed on the altar of fast food. Millions of others are tortured to provide profits for pharmaceutical mega-corporations. All of this is planned and executed by “moral” agents.³⁹

Most natural disasters and even plagues seem to grant respites. Yet historian Will Durant estimates that throughout all history there might have been only twenty-nine years in which there were no wars being fought anywhere.⁴⁰ According to Hume’s Philo, “Moral evil, in the opinion of many, is much more predominant above moral good than natural evil above natural good.”⁴¹ It seems Hume’s Philo was correct in concluding, “Man is the greatest enemy of man.”⁴² But of course the atheist goes one step more and concludes that thus man’s Creator must be a greater enemy still.