



Exploring Philosophy - Audio

The problem of evil

Winifred

In this audio recording we are going to turn to the problem of evil. And we have here four expert philosophers: Professor Mona Siddiqui, who is a Muslim Theologian at Glasgow University. Rabbi Mark Goldsmith from the Alyth Synagogue in London. Keith Ward, who is a Professorial Research Fellow at Heythrop College University of London. He is a philosopher and a priest in the Church of England. And Dr Peter Kail, who is an atheist and Chair of the Humanist Philosophers Group.

The existence of evil is often presented as the most compelling objection to the belief in God. That is how can a world created by an all-powerful and all loving God have so much evil in it.

Well, Dr Kail as an atheist I would imagine that this is an objection that convinces you. Perhaps you are going to tell me I am wrong but I wondered whatever you think yourself, if you could begin by stating for us the problem of evil.

Dr Peter Kail

Your imagination in this case is perfectly correct. When we are talking about evil in this context I think we are talking about unnecessary sufferings and then the argument the problem is very simple. There are three propositions. One proposition is that God is all-powerful, including all knowing. And the second proposition is that God is all good. God is omnibenevolent. And the third proposition is that evils, these sufferings, do exist. We seem then to have an inconsistent threesome because assuming we do accept, as most people do, that unnecessary sufferings do exist then either cannot abolish evil. In other words he's not all-powerful or he won't. In other words he is not all-good. So we have to give up on one of those propositions and of course as an atheist I am inclined to give up indeed on two and say in fact there is no god at all.

Winifred

Keith Ward

Keith Ward

Peter of course has stated the problem exactly. I myself as a Christian, although I don't speak for all Christians, would give up God's omnipotence. The definition of omnipotence that I give up is one that most medieval Christian philosophers accepted namely that God can do

anything which can be stated without self-contradiction. So God could remove all the evil in the world and leave the world otherwise the same. I reject that idea of omnipotence. And my response to that problem, which is indeed a great problem of the existence unnecessary suffering, is that God cannot do anything about it. Then the problem for the believer is to say why do you think this? Why can't God do anything about it? My general response would be that we human beings as evolved carbon based intelligent life forms, can only exist in a universe whose general laws are what they are and they produce the sorts of beings we are with all the evils associated with it. In other words my response is some evils are necessary to our existence.

Winifred

So what is the evil necessary for?

Keith Ward

Well for example if you're going to have carbon atoms of which all organic life is made they have to be formed in the fusion of nuclear fusion of stars which causes huge explosions and if you are anywhere near a super nova an explosion of a star, you will suffer. But without that nuclear fusion, hydrogen and helium atoms would not form carbon atoms and you couldn't have life.

Winifred

Mark Goldsmith, you're Jewish and I think the thing everybody knows about the Jews is the terrible persecution at the hands of the Nazis. Does the amount of evil that the Jews have suffered in their history, never make you question that they could be God's chosen people?

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

The interpretation of chosen people you are suggesting there is not really one I think that most Jews accept. The chosen people doesn't mean that you're given an easy ride through history. And for Jews the problem of evil has again a number of different solutions. One of them is that we are simply working on too short a time scale and if you look at the whole of the time of the universe then it all comes okay in the end. That's one possibility. The other one is that God shrinks back from the world in order to create some space. The idea of free choice or in Hebrew Doctrine it's called The idea that the hiding of the face from some parts of life which enables human beings to do dreadful, dreadful things to each other. The suffering at the hands of the Nazis or the suffering of Jews when all the expulsions happened in medieval times or the destruction of the Temple, all of them meant that Judaism had to have this idea that world history was not going to make chosen-ness anything to do with having an easy ride. It does however give a Jew a sense of mission in the world to try to improve the world and to try and make a corrective to those things which are wrong in the world.

Winifred

So you've really summed up there your three reasons for believing in God despite the problem of evil is that God may have drawn back from the world in some way to give us free choice. That the problem of evil may be good for our spiritual development and that God's way is not our way.

Mona Siddiqui, is there anything you would like to add to that?

Professor Mona Siddiqui

I suppose in some ways Muslim philosophers didn't see a direct analogue with evil, evil in the Christian sense. And they sometimes dismissed the problem, dissolved it almost immediately as it came up because suffering and evil does come from God. You cannot as Keith was saying and Keith said quite rightly you cannot have an omnipotent God or omniscient God or a benevolent God and attribute to evil. But within the largely Muslim tradition largely believes that it is in his very omnipotence and his very omniscience that there is also evil. Now, one could argue that ... who later becomes Satan in the Koran is a personification of evil and has this pact with God that if you are so confident in human nature I will have a pact with you that I will turn them towards my way and you try and see if you can turn them towards your way. But I think in the end if one looks at the Koran itself man is going to face trials and tribulations throughout his whole life. And the test of faith is how you deal with that trial and tribulation. Whether you call it evil, whether you call it suffering these are all here as part of the human condition.

Dr Peter Kail

A line of thinking though which has been mentioned is to do with God's stepping back and allowing us to have free choice and free will. I think that's a very dubious argument in any case but one clear way in which it does not work is with regard to these natural evils, the earthquakes, the floods and so on. It's very, very difficult to believe that it's human free will, which has caused those gigantic earthquakes or an outrageous flood.

Winifred

Could I turn the question on its head because some people argue that would say to an atheist that the presence of good in the world so much goodness in the world, so many acts of heroism of so many people going beyond what is rational to do great self sacrifice proves that we yearn for goodness and therefore there must be a God and that God must be good.

Dr Peter Kail

It certainly shows that humanity has a feeling typically of the good but that's all perfectly compatible with living beside a natural world. There is no reason to draw the conclusion from

that that oh therefore there must be a God. I think there is an important point here because I am tempted to comment on John Stuart Mill, a great Victorian philosopher, who made the point if we did not start off with a presupposition in favour of a loving God and just looked at the evidence the evidence would in fact blacken God's name. It would in fact point to a malevolent or malicious God because of course there is so much suffering in the world it would seem natural to say that if we are going to say the world has been created it's been created by a devilish type of God.

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

But it's a natural world Peter. That seems to me very important and there is a beautiful illustration of that in one of the ... one of the Jewish duties, that's the duty called ... the duty to visit the sick and to help those who are ill which basically means the assumption is that there are going to be people who are ill. And that therefore is not an evil it's a phenomenon that is part of the natural world that's been given to us as humanity.

Dr Peter Kail

And so do you think that the sheer quantity of ills, the sheer quantity of diseases and harms and sufferings and pains, that particular quantity is compatible with there being a loving God rather than there being say for example two powerful forces, a loving God and also a malevolent demon and in fact their being roughly equally balanced

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

Well Judaism has challenged that. For a long time it works fine. It only works fine for me and I think it has worked fine for Judaism for quite – for thousands of years on the basis that we are confronted with the world that we have. We have ways that we are then to deal with it as people hence this idea of the duty to visit the sick and to help.

Professor Mona Sidiqui

I think that one of the issues I have is with the phrase "A loving God" what that means. And if a loving God in the opinion of some people means that there will not be any suffering in this world, that's not how I understand a loving God. For me however hard it is as humans suffering is very much part of the human condition. Suffering not necessarily through illness and through the injustice people do but through our own angst, through our own doubt, through our own journey through life which at points it's not about the big sufferings of the world it's just about the small dilemmas that we face.

Dr Peter Kail

But what's your view about these other sufferings then to do with these sufferings as the result of earthquakes and floods and such like?

Professor Mona Siddiqui

All of this from a very simplistic Islamic perspective would be that whether it's – these are all signs, all divine signs. You choose to interpret them –

Dr Peter Kail

Divine signs of what?

Professor Mona Siddiqui

Of – of God. I'm not a good – not necessarily a loving God which would mean that there would never be any evil or any suffering in the world but the human condition as we understand it cannot be understood outside of human suffering.

Dr Peter Kail

But does that mean that the human condition necessarily involves the suffering resulting from earthquakes, from floods –

Professor Mona Siddiqui

I think so. Yes.

Dr Peter Kail

Oh so that's why they are similar to Keith's position. And you think that your God, all-powerful, all good, is unable to change that

Professor Mona Siddiqui

This is the problem when you say all good that doesn't necessarily equate with that there will not be suffering in the world.

Dr Peter Kail

And would you hold that then if you believe in this in a heavenly life as well

Winifred

Is there going to be evil in heaven?

Professor Mona Siddiqui

We have absolutely no idea other than the stories depicted in the Scriptures as to what is going to be in heaven. I assume that heaven is going to be the reward for how you have confronted evil and suffering and retained faith so I think I would be rather alarmed to think there was a theology of evil in heaven.

Winifred

Why is – sorry – why is the suffering so unevenly distributed because we are not all tested in the same way

Professor Mona Siddiqui

We are not all tested and I would say that is a bigger test that many people feel that they are faithful. They are good. They re doing righteous work and yet they still face suffering upon suffering. And they can't make sense of it. And I don't think I have the answer to that.

Winifred

So we are back to 'your way is not my way'.

Professor Mona Siddiqui

Well we are back to try to understand that despite what we think God should be doing, despite what we think the world should look like, the world is as we find it.

Winifred

I want now to ask each of you to give us a short final statement. So having heard what we've heard, a short summary of how you reconcile or don't reconcile the problem of evil. Professor Ward

Mark Ward

Well I think there is a danger of thinking of God as a person just outside the universe, who could change it all and make it a lot better but chooses not to. Then that's an impossible view. There is also a problem for philosophers of thinking they know what the concept of God is. It's an omniscient, omnipotent being in terms they choose to define, and then you generate the problem. How could there be evil? I would reject both those starting points and say where you start with God is with the basic belief that there is a consciousness which has generated this universe for the sake of the good that is in it.

Winifred

Mark Goldsmith, a final brief thought.

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

The world is set up as it is. This is what we perceive as humanity when God created the world. Off we go. We have to apply the correctives to those parts, which God has tasked us with correcting.

Winifred

Peter Kail

Dr Peter Kail

I can see no good reason at all to believe in a God or Gods. I think it would be far, far better for us all to concentrate on our fellow beings and helping each other and I think in a way many, many religious believers are doing that and they use the language of God in order to express this concern for other human beings and indeed other creatures..

Winifred

Professor Mona Sidiqui

Professor Mona Sidiqui

I think suffering does come from God but it's there to challenge us and to see how we can carry on believing in the benevolence of God despite what we all experience.

Winifred

Thank you all very much indeed.