

The Problem of Evil in the World

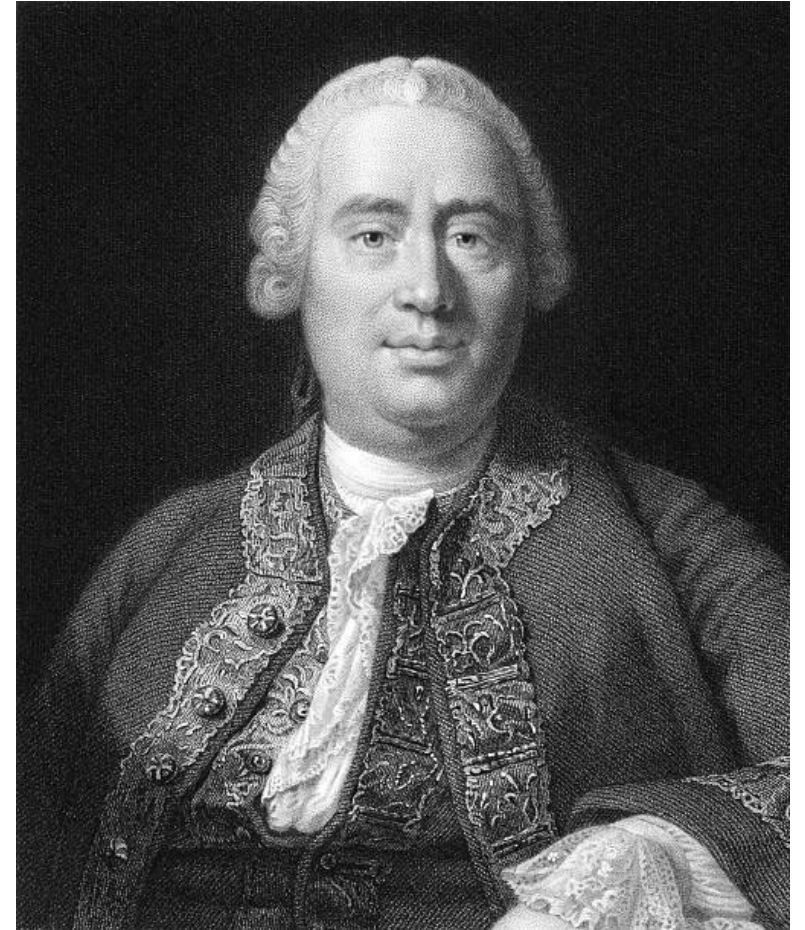
Christian Response to Suffering

The Problem Stated

David Hume (1711-1776), a Scottish philosopher and skeptic wrote:

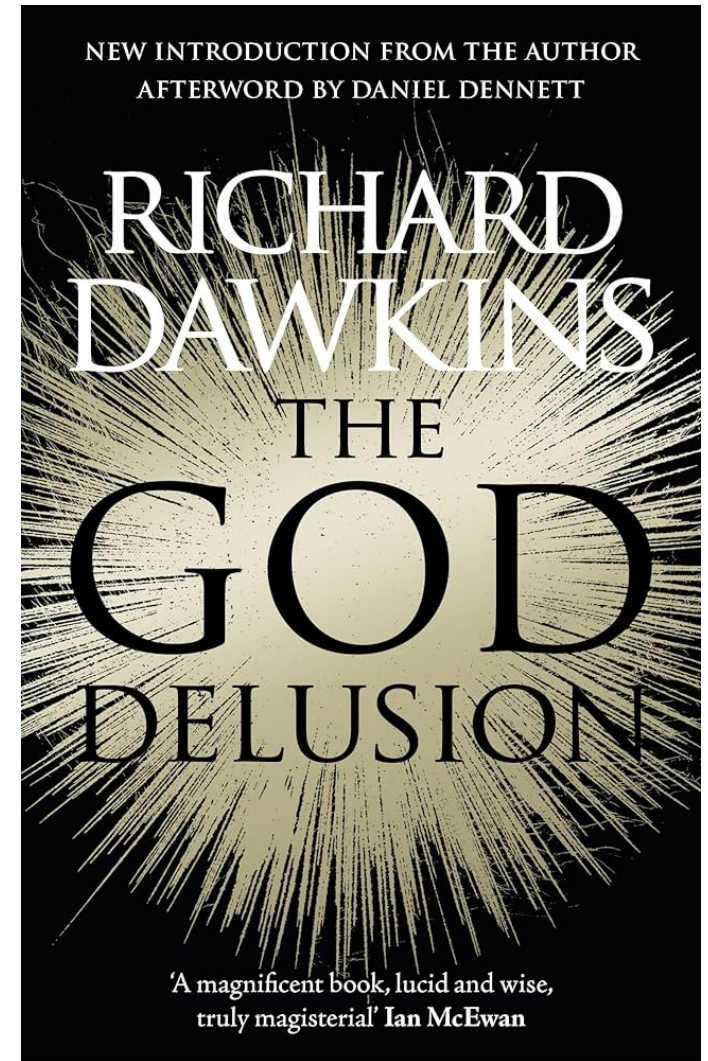
“Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?”
(Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10)

How do we hold simultaneously three concepts—God’s power, God’s goodness, and the presence of evil in the world?



The Denial of God

The first way to lessen the tension is to deny the existence of a creator God
Thus, the most common worldviews today include atheism, agnosticism, secularism, and any form of naturalism



The Denial of Evil

A second way to lessen the tension is to deny evil

Certain religions (e.g., Buddhism and Hinduism) regard evil as *maya*, an illusion of reality

Rejecting dualism (e.g., God vs evil, good and bad), they opt for a monistic way of viewing reality

The worldview is Monism—the unity of all things. Everything (including humans) is seen as ever-changing, parts of one big whole reality

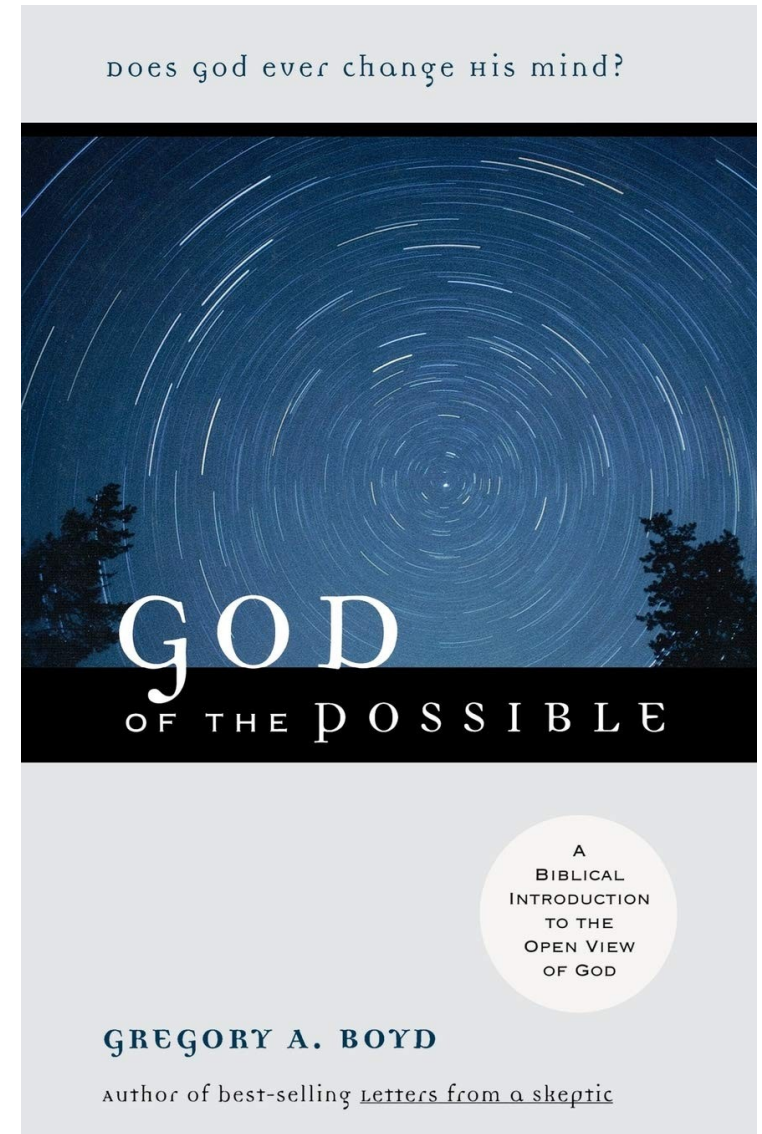
Thus, there is no personal, transcendent Buddhism. Brahman is the one reality in Hinduism



Modification of God's Omniscience

A third way to lessen the tension takes place within Christian circles, which is to limit God's omniscience

"A variation of this is found in open theism. Here we have a God who can do all things, but does not know all future events. Thus, while possessing the power to do all, he may lack the knowledge of what would be good in a given situation. He may assure us that the victory will be his, but being limited in knowledge though not in power, he may be wrong" (Erickson 2013, 388-89)

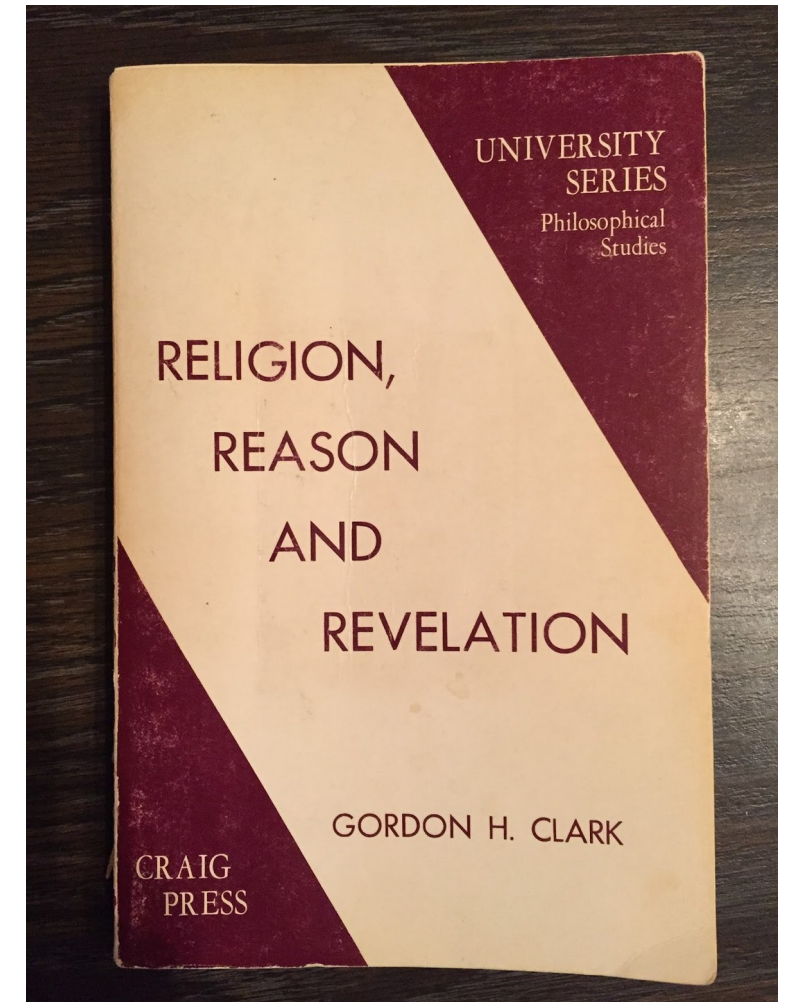


Modification of God's Goodness

A fourth way to lessen the tension is to adjust the idea of God's goodness

Calvinistic determinism rejects the notion of human free will. Gordon Clark writes, "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do it" (1961, 221)

God does not commit sin. Humans commit sin. But God is the ultimate cause of sin, not the immediate cause. God wills that it should happen



The Free-will Defense

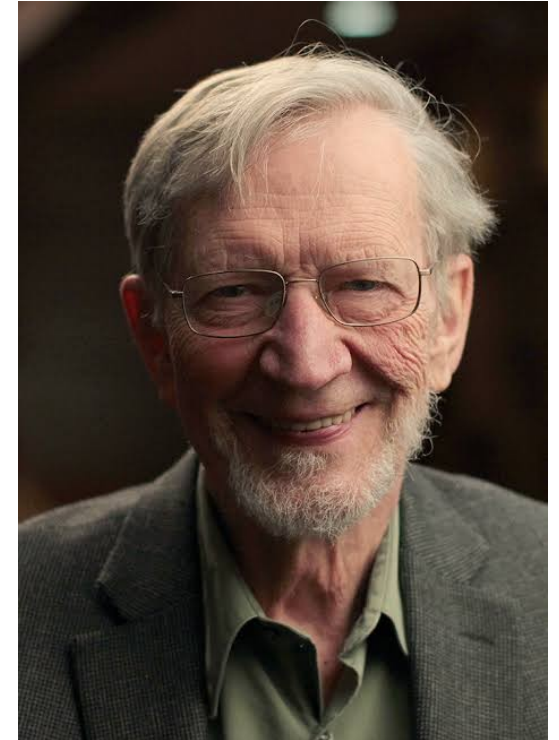
In *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974) Yale philosopher Alvin Plantinga argues that God desires to love and be loved by other beings

To make us capable of such fellowship, God gave us the freedom to choose, since love cannot be coerced

This sort of free will entails the possibility that humans would use it to go our own way in defiance of God

In creating humans with free will, humans are responsible for our evil choices

God is not the author of sin



The Free-will Defense

- Adam chose wrongly and sinned through the exercise of his free will
- God created humans with free will, but he is not the author of sin or evil
- God, freedom, and evil are simultaneously coherent realities
- Point: The concept of freedom espoused by the freewill defense is known as libertarian, contra-causal, or incompatibilistic free will
- This notion of freedom holds that genuine free human action is incompatible with causal determinism
- But what if you believe in God's sovereignty over everything?

The Question of Human Free Will

- **Libertarian free will** “means that our choices are free from the determination or constraints of human nature and free from any predetermination by God. All ‘free will theists’ hold that *libertarian freedom* is essential for moral responsibility, for if our choice is determined or caused by anything, including our own desires, they reason, it cannot properly be called a free choice. Libertarian freedom is, therefore, the freedom to act contrary to one's nature, predisposition and greatest desires. Responsibility, in this view, always means that one could have done otherwise” (Olson 2006, 20)

Where Does Sin Come from?

- Evil is the result of original sin (Gen 2:17; 3:2-3; Rom 5:12; 8:19-23)
- Evil is a part of the creation of humanity as free beings (Gen 3:6)
- Evil is the result of specific sins (Ps 51; Jos 7:24-25)
- Evil is the cause of innocent suffering (Job 1:8)

Evil within Divine Providence

- “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! ⁶I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. ⁷But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. ⁸‘Are not my commanders all kings?’ he says. ⁹‘Has not Kalno fared like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus? ¹⁰As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—¹¹ shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?’” ¹²When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, “I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes” (Isa 10:5-12)

Evil within Divine Providence

- ¹⁹ “But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:19-20)
- ²⁷ “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27-28)

Theological Compatibilism

- Compatibilism teaches that the following two propositions are both true and mutually compatible, even if we can't fully reconcile them:
 - God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility
 - Human beings are morally responsible creatures, but their moral responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty

Portrait of the Sovereign God

- “Embedded in these passages is the teaching that God is good. In his sovereignty, he stands asymmetrically behind good and evil. He stands behind good until the good is finally creditable to him. He stands behind evil in such a way, although it never escapes the boundaries of his sovereignty, the evil is always creditable only to secondary causalities” (Carson 2015)

The Doctrine of Concurrence

- “But we must remember that in all these passages it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as directly doing anything evil, but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures” (Grudem, 322-23)
- The Doctrine of Concord states—the simultaneity of first cause and second causes. God achieves his will through the genuine free will of mankind

God and Evil

- Ultimately, God has “good” intentions for his people
- ²⁸ “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:28-29)
- God can prevent evil (Gen 20:6; 31:2)
- God can permit evil (Jn 13:21-30; Acts 2:23)
- God can direct evil (Gen 50:20)
- God can limit evil (Job 1:12)

Practical Considerations

- Suffering as a form of temporal discipline (Heb 12:4-11)
- Suffering prepares us to help others (2 Cor 1:3-4)
- Suffering as a form of witness (Matt 5:16)
- Suffering makes us homesick for heaven (1 Pt 1:3-6)
- Suffering promotes humility (2 Cor 12:7-9)
- Suffering refines our faith (1 Pt 1:6-7)

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel about God's sovereignty and human free will as compatible propositions?
- Does this philosophical or theological explanation help you in your personal experience of suffering? Why or why not?