

God and Evil - The Problem Solved

(Gordon Clark)

Started: August, 2007 | Finished: December, 2007

Forward and Introduction by John Robbins

The problem of God and the existence of evil leaves us with several options:

- 1) Either God is not all good, even if he is almighty, and so he does not wish to end sin and suffering; or
- 2) God is all-good, but not almighty, and so he cannot rid the world of sin and suffering, no matter how good he is; or
- 3) God is neither all-good or all-powerful, and so neither wishes to, nor can, rid the world of evil; or
- 4) there is no god at all; or
- 5) there is more than one god, none of whom is omnipotent, and one or more of whom may be evil; or
- 6) God is impersonal, and the ascription of intelligence or purposes to it is a pathetic fallacy.

I. God and Evil

A. Historical Exposition

1. The question: "How can the existence of God be harmonized with the existence of evil?"

"In early Christian times, Lactantius reports [the prevalence of the question]. If God is good and wants to eliminate sin, but cannot, he is not omnipotent; but if God is omnipotent and can eliminate sin, but does not, he is not good. God cannot be both omnipotent and good." [page 10]

2. Other views

- a. Zoroastrianism - dualism (the universe is controlled by two conflicting deities, one good and the other evil)
- b. Plato - God is not the cause of everything, only a few things (those that are good)
- c. Aristotle - a deistic view of God - he is uninvolved in creation
- d. Augustine -

"Under Neoplatonic influence he taught that all existing things are good; evil, therefore, does not exist—it is metaphysically unreal. Being nonexistent, it can have no cause, and God therefore is not the cause of evil." [page 10]

e. Modern secular ethics

- (1) Secular ethics must address the issue even though it pays no attention to omnipotence, but it must address determinism and responsibility
- (2) Professor Baylis of Duke Univ.

If determinism is true, then a person's decisions reflect his character (his character explain his actions). Man's character may be improved and reformed—even with punishment, but retributive punishment is not justified.

- (3) Others reject God outright or conceive of him as being limited in power

f. A finite God is accepted by John Stuart Mill; William Peperell; Montague; Georgia Harkness, as well as Zoroaster and Plato

- (1) But this is an unacceptable answer as it is not compatible with Christianity

B. Free Will

1. According to Clark, Augustine dealt with this problem by adding a theory of "free will"

a. This has been the most popular theory from pagan antiquity into modern times

b. Augustine changed in his view throughout his life

(1) His early pagan years were spent as a Manichaeon

(a) Held to a dualism of good and evil

(2) Post-Conversion

(a) In his early years he held to free-will theism

"In his work on Free Will, he begins by wondering how it is possible for all souls, seeing that they commit sin, to have come from God without referring those sins back to God. . . . 'I ask whether a free will itself, but which we are proved to have a power to sin, should have been given us by him who made us. For it is clear that if we were without free will we would not sin; and in this way it is to be feared that God may be adjudged the author of our evil doing.'" [page 13]

i. The other side of the coin is that without free will we could not do good

Augustine's conclusion: "When we speak, then, of the will free to do right, we speak of the will in which man first was made." Thus it appears that no one has a free will in that sense.

(b) Augustine's "City of God" - Adam had free will in that he had the ability not to sin

i. posse non peccare (able not to sin)

ii. non posse peccare (not able to sin)

iii. non posse non peccare (not able not to sin)

Adam was the only man who ever had free will in the usual sense of the term. Augustine asked the question, moreover: "Is God himself in truth to be denied free will because he cannot sin?" Cf. Quote by John Gill on the bottom of page 14.

2. Free will does not mean "the power of contrary choice"

"The Puritan speaks of a will that is both free and determined; he refers to actions that are done freely, yet necessarily; and he concludes that the liberty of a man's will is consistent with at least some kind of necessity and determination." [page 15]

3. Clark denies that free will solves the problem of evil

"Let us assume that man's will is free; let us assume that these questions have been answered in the affirmative; it would still remain to be shown that free will solves the problem of evil. This then is the immediate inquiry. Is the theory of free will, even if true, a satisfactory explanation of evil in a world created by God? Reasons, compelling reasons, will now be given for a negative answer. Even if men were as able to choose good as evil, even if a sinner could choose Christ as easily as he could reject him, it would be totally irrelevant to the fundamental problem. Free will was put forward to relieve God of responsibility for sin. But this it does not do." [page 16]

a. Clark gives an illustration of a lifeguard on a beach

Picture a lifeguard on a beach who watches as a boy is taken under by a strong undercurrent. The boy struggles violently (a picture of man's enslavement to sin). The lifeguard has the ability to rescue the boy and he may shout some words of advice, telling the boy to exercise his free will and swim to shore. But the boy drowns as the guard watches from shore. Would the Arminian conclude that the lifeguard has escaped culpability? This illustration shows that permission of evil does not relieve the lifeguard from responsibility. This is even more evident when we consider that the lifeguard (in this case, God) created the beach and the boy. An omnipotent lifeguard could have prevented the boy from entering the beach, or He could have prevented the undertow from occurring, or he could have made the boy a better swimmer, or He could have simply rescued him directly.

(1) The idea of permission has no intelligible meaning

"It is quite within the range of possibility for a lifeguard to permit a man to drown. This permission, however, depends on the fact that the ocean's undertow is beyond the guard's control. If the guard had some giant suction device which he operated so as to engulf the boy, one would call it murder, not permission. The idea of permission is possible only where there is an independent force, either the boy's force or the ocean's force. But this is not the situation in the case of God and the universe. Nothing in the universe can be independent of the omnipotent Creator, for in him we live and move and have our being. Therefore, the idea of permission makes no sense when applied to God." [page 17]

(2) Calvin in The Institutes (III, xxiii, 8 & II, iv., 3)

Here they have recourse to the distinction between will and permission. By this they would maintain that the wicked perish because God permits it, not because he so wills. But why shall we say "permission" unless it is because God so wills? Still, it is not in itself likely that man

brought destruction upon himself through himself, by God's mere permission and without any ordaining. As if God did not establish the condition in which he wills the chief of his creatures to be! I shall not hesitate, then, simply to confess with Augustine that "the will of God is the necessity of things," and that what he has willed will of necessity come to pass."

Very often God is said to blind and harden the reprobate, to turn, incline, and impel, their hearts [e.g..Isaiah 6:10], as I have taught more fully elsewhere. The nature of this activity is by no means explained if we take refuge in foreknowledge or permission. . . . The second way, which comes much closer to the proper meaning of the words, is that to carry out his judgments through Satan as minister of his wrath, God destines men's purposes as he pleases, arouses their wills, and strengthens their endeavors. Thus Moses, when he relates that King Sihon did not give passage to the people because God had hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, immediately adds the purpose of His plan: that, as he says, "He might give him into our hands" [Deuteronomy 2:30, cf. Comm.]. Therefore, because God willed that Sihon be destroyed, He prepared his ruin through obstinacy of heart."

C. Reformation Theology

1. If free will cannot solve the problem, then we must turn to the opposite theory of determinism

"At first, determinism, instead of alleviating the situation, seems to accentuate the problem of evil by maintaining the inevitability of every event; and not only the inevitability, but also the further and more embarrassing point that it is God himself who determines or decrees every action."
[page 18]

- a. Some Calvinists shy away from the term "determinism"

- (1) However, it is a biblical concept akin to predestination

- (a) The Bible speaks of the foreordination of evil acts

- b. Could there be a middle answer?

- (1) Perhaps some acts are determined and some are not?

This "third view" is not an option - God is not semi-sovereign and man is not semi-free. If Judas could have chosen not to betray Jesus, the prophesy is in peril (and inerrancy). The same thing with all the events that led up to Christ's death (Acts 4:27-28).

2. Evidence from the earliest of the church fathers

- a. Augustus Toplady wrote his "Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England" in support of determinism and appealed to writers such as Barnabas in his "Epistle of Barnabas"

- b. Clark writes on page 19:

"The following quotation (by Barnabas) seems to reflect the idea of irresistible grace and would therefore be inconsistent with free will: 'When Christ chose his own Apostles who were to preach his gospel, he chose them when they were wickedder than all wickedness itself. . . .' According to the same author, Christ's death was necessary because it was prophesied. And there is a fairly clear statement of limited atonement: 'Let us rest assured, that the Son of God could not have suffered but for us.' To the same effect he imagines Christ answers a question with the words, 'I am to offer up my flesh as a sacrifice for the sins of the new people.' A certain Menardus, commenting on this passage, complains that Barnabas was here mistaken because Christ did not die for a new people, but for the whole world. The comment only emphasizes what Barnabas actually meant. A further negative note on free will is found in the words, 'We . . . speak as the Lord wills us to speak. For to that end he both circumcised our ears and our hearts that we might understand these things.'"

- c. Clement of Rome writes

"It being the will of God that all his beloved ones should be made partakers of repentance, he has established them firmly by his own Almighty purpose. By the word of his Majesty he has established all things. . . . Who shall say unto him, 'What have you done?' Or who shall resist the might of his power? He has done all things at what season he pleased, and in what manner he pleased; and not one of the things which have been decreed by him shall pass away. All things are open to his view, nor has anything absconded form his will and pleasure." [19-20]

- d. Ignatius writes:

"Ignatius . . . predestined ever, before time, unto the glory which is perpetual and unchangeable, united and chosen . . . by the will of the Father." [Opening verses of his letter to the Ephesians]

"Enlightened by the will of him who has willed all things." [Opening to his letter to the Romans]

"A Christian is not the workmanship of suasion, but of greatness [power]."

3. Evidence from the middle ages to the Reformation

- a. The medieval martyr Gottshalk:

Speaking of the Jews, he says, "Our Lord perceived that they were predestined to everlasting destruction, and were not purchased with the price of his blood." [20]

After 21 years of imprisonment and torture at the hands of Bishop Hincmar for his belief in double predestination, he died in A.D. 870.

b. Remigus, Archbishop of Lyons and a contemporary of Gottshalk wrote:

"Nor is it possible for any one elect person to perish, or that any of the reprobate should be saved, because of their hardness and impenitency of heart. . . . Almighty God did, from the beginning, prior to the formation of the world, and before he had made any thing, predestinate . . . some certain persons to glory, of his own gratuitous favor. . . . Other certain persons he has predestinated to perdition and of these, none can be saved." [20]

c. The Waldensians

"It is manifest that such only as are elected to glory become partakers of true faith." [a quote from the Waldensian Confession of 1508]

d. John Hus

"Predestination does make a man a member of the universal Church God wills that the predestinate shall have perpetual blessedness, and the reprobate to have eternal fire. The predestinate cannot fall from grace."

e. John of Wesalia

"God has, from everlasting, written a book, wherein he has inscribed all his elect; and whosoever is not already written there will never be written there at all. Moreover, he that is written therein will never be blotted out of it."

f. Thomas Bradwardine (teacher of Wycliffe)

g. John Wycliffe

"In what way soever God may declare his will by his after-discoveries of it in time: still, his determination, concerning the event, took place before the world was made; ergo, the event will surely follow. The necessity, therefore, of the antecedent, holds no less irrefragably for the necessity of the consequent."

h. William Tyndale

i. Dr. Peter Heylin, an Arminian historian admits that:

William Tyndale "has a flying-out against free-will" and taught that from predestination "it springeth altogether whether we shall believe or not believe, be loose from sin or not be loosed; by which

predestination our justifying and salvation are clearly taken out of our hands and put into the heads of God only."

j. Luther in the conclusion to his "Bondage of the Will:"

"For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things, that he can neither be deceived nor hindered in his prescience and predestination, and that nothing can take place but according to his will . . . then there can be no free will in man, in angel, or in any creature."

k. Richard Woodman, burned at the stake with nine other martyrs at Lewes in Sussex under the reign of bloody Mary answer his examiners:

"If we have free will, then our salvation comes of ourselves which is great blasphemy against God and his Word."

D. Rome and Trent repudiated the doctrines of grace

E. Melancthon softened Luther's views in favor of those of Erasmus

F. The Synod of Dort

G. John Gill and his work, "The Cause of God and Truth"

1. The first two parts of Gill's work examine more than 100 passages oft cited by Arminians

a. Example of Matthew 27:37 ("O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...")

(1) Gill points out:

- * That by "Jerusalem" Jesus is not referring to all the inhabitants of the city, but the leaders and rulers, esp. the Sanhedrin. These were the ones who "killed the prophets" and the context is directed toward the Pharisees and Sadducees.
- * It is worded, "I would have gathered your children, but you would not." This is the culpability of the leaders for rejecting Christ's rightful place as King.

H. Omniscience (foreknowledge)

I. Responsibility and Free Will

1. If it can be shown that man's responsibility does not presuppose free will, then theology would be freed from confusion

J. The will of God

"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 so." [27]

Note that God knew all things that would come to pass before the world was made, and yet He willed it to be so.

1. What do we mean by "will?"

a. There is God's preceptive will (as in the 10 Commandments)

But Clark thinks that "will" used in this regard is misleading and that the word "will" should only be used of God's decree, leaving the rest to be described as "precepts," or "commands."

b. There is also the secret and revealed will of God

It was God's secret will that Abraham not sacrifice his son, Isaac. But it was his revealed will, his command (for a time), that Abraham do so. This is not a contradiction. The statement "Abraham, sacrifice your son" does not contradict that statement, known only to God, "I have decreed that Abraham will not sacrifice his son."

2. Puppets

a. Westminster Confession

Man does have natural liberty. The Westminster Confession states that "God has endued the will of man with that natural liberty that is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good or evil." The phrase "absolute necessity of nature" means that man is not impelled to act as an impersonal machine.

b. John Gill

Gill points out that glorified saints will act freely to the good and it will be determined that they cannot do otherwise as sin is impossible in heaven. This shows that free is consistent with immutable determinism.

(1) Gill versus Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes believed that man was determined by chemical and natural forces (i.e. the brain). Gill opposed this. Saying that man has a natural liberty that makes him free from extrinsic or materialistic causes. The natural liberty of the will consists in freedom from physical necessity; man isn't like a planetary

body that has to move through its course of space. Man has natural liberty even though God has ordained all things from eternity.

c. Augustus Toplady's "Scheme of Christian Philosophical Necessity Asserted"

There is a distinction between a necessity of compulsion and a necessity of infallible certainty. Judas acted as the latter.

"Calvinism most assuredly holds that Judas acted voluntarily. He chose to betray Christ. He did so willingly. No question is raised as to whether or not he had a will. What the Calvinist asks is whether that will was free. . . . Could Judas have chosen otherwise? Not, could he have done otherwise, had he chosen, but, could he have chosen in opposition to God's foreordination? Acts 4:28 indicates that he could not." [31]

d. Free agency = voluntary agency

Free agency is not free will. Free will means that there is no determining factor operating on the will and that either of two incomparable actions are equally possible.

Puppets are inanimate dolls controlled by strings. Puppets make no choices. Yet, theologically, we hold that men do make choices that are free. Choice being a mental act that consciously initiates and determines further action. The ability to chose otherwise (contrary choice) has no place in that definition. Choice and necessity are not incompatible.

3. Appeal to ignorance

In order to know that our wills are unaffected by any cause we would have to know every single cause that's possible in the universe. We would have to be omniscient! There can only be an unconsciousness of determinism (ignorance), not a consciousness of free will.

K. Responsibility and Determinism

1. Calvin in the Institutes:

"How exceedingly presumptuous it is only to inquire into the cause of the divine will, which is in fact, and is justly entitled to be, the cause of everything that exists. For if it has any cause, then there must be something antecedent on which it depends; which it is impious to suppose. For the will of God is the highest rule of justice, so that what He wills must be considered just, for this very reason, because he wills it. When it is inquired therefore why the Lord did so, the answer must be, Because he would. But if you go further and ask why he so determined, you are in search of something greater and higher than the will of God, which can never be found." [Calvin, Institutes, III, xxiii, 2]

We must avoid a Platonic Dualism that makes the law higher than the law-giver. This happens when people argue, "eternal punishment is unjust." Whatever God does is just because He does it and He is the standard for all justice, not vice-versa.

L. Distortions and Cautions

1. Berkouwer

2. Causation and Secondary Causation

a. God hardly does anything apart from secondary causes

Note that David took the blame for his great sin. He didn't blame his sinful nature, or his mother, or fallen Adam, or God – even though these were in the chain of causation leading to his sin. There is a causation that isn't culpable.

3. God is the cause of sin, but not the author of it

In this sense God is the cause, the ultimate cause, of sin. God is the ultimate cause of everything. Nothing is independent of Him. Every detail of history was in His plan before creation and he willed that it should all come to pass.

a. Immediate versus Ultimate Cause

God is not the author of sin anymore than He is the author of "War and Peace." Tolstoy was the author and immediate cause of the book; God was the ultimate cause.

There are different kinds of "causes." Authorship is one type of causation, but there are other kinds, as well, such as the ultimate cause. Much as an evil nation using a nuclear weapon to kill millions would be the immediate cause (and author) of that act while The Manhattan Project of the 1940s was the ultimate cause.

b. Is God the author of sin?

No! To say so would be the same as saying that God commits sin. This is a question concerning his holiness.

"Although the betrayal of Christ was foreordained from eternity as a means of effecting the atonement, it was Judas, not God, who betrayed Christ. The secondary causes in history are not eliminated by divine causality, but rather are made certain." [39-40]

c. God is the author of all law and is therefore above all law

"God is neither responsible nor sinful, even though he is the only ultimate cause of everything. He is not sinful because in the first place whatever he does is just and right. It is just and right solely in virtue of the fact that he does it. Justice or righteousness is not a standard external to God to which God is obligated to submit. Righteousness is what God does. . . . There is no law superior to God which forbids Him to decree sinful acts. Sin presupposes a law, for sin is lawlessness. Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. But God is Ex-lex." [39-40]

(1) Creator-creature distinction

If a man tried to coerce another man to sin, that would be sin. But the relationship of man to man is different than that of God to man. God is creator, man is creature. And the relationship of man to the law is different than the relationship of God to the law. God has unlimited rights over all creation. The laws that God imposes on man do not apply to Him; they are applicable to human situations and conditions. God cannot steal, not only because whatever he does is right, but also because there is nothing for him to steal; he owns everything!

"As God cannot sin, si in the next place, God is not responsible for sin, even though he decrees it."
[40] Cf. 2 Chronicles 18:20-22 where God caused the prophets to lie.