

## 1 The Problem of Evil in Monotheism

All of us are familiar with evil in the world. Cancer and other diseases kill and debilitate thousands of people every year. Violence is common in political hotspots around the globe. Floods, hurricanes, and a myriad of other natural disasters destroy lives and communities. As sociologist Peter Berger states in *The Sacred Canopy*, every religion must make sense of evil by positing some higher meaning or authority – in effect, covering evil under a sacred canopy of explanation (1967: 53–4). In fact, perhaps more than anything else, the way a religion navigates the question of evil reveals how it understands the meaning of life. Prehistoric and primitive religions contain their own understandings, if only implicit, of why evil exists; developed religions with more sophisticated intellectual traditions address the problem of evil explicitly.

Among the religions of the world, monotheistic religion arguably faces the most difficult challenge from evil because monotheism makes (according to its own standards) the loftiest claims about the character and purposes of the divine: that a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good created the world. Each of the three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – faces both the generic problem of evil for monotheism and problems of evil specific to its more particular beliefs. Briefly reviewing the historical context out of which monotheistic belief arose provides perspective for understanding the significance of the problem of evil for these monotheisms.

### Prehistoric and Polytheistic Religions

Evolutionary anthropologists have found that the emergence of religious instincts and behaviors followed closely upon the appearance of abstract, symbolic thought in *Homo sapiens*. Since we have no written history of early humanity, we are left with the task of reconstructing the cognitive world of early humans from both discovered artifacts and field observations of primitive tribes living today. For instance, an impressive degree of abstract and symbolic thought is demonstrated in the spectacular cave paintings in southwestern Europe dating from the Upper Paleolithic Period. Archaeological digs have also revealed burial practices that suggest some belief in life after death and signal the beginning of an early form of religion.

Animism as a tribal form of religion became an integral part of primitive human culture, probably aiding social cohesion and promoting group survival. Since preliterate and prescientific people lived close to nature, often encountering natural objects and natural forces that they did not fully understand, they explained many occurrences by ascribing a living soul or force (Latin: *anima*) to things in their environment, such as animals, plants, rivers, and mountains.

Furthermore, they believed in a mystical power or *mana* that permeates the world and thought that certain objects and persons have more *mana* than others – for example, a burial ground or the chieftain. Totems were often fashioned to resemble some animal whose power the tribe particularly admired so that they could share in its *mana*. For the primitive, the whole world was alive, and it was a wondrous yet dangerous place in which most religious behavior aimed at group cooperation and survival. Of course, the animist experienced pain, suffering, and death, but there was no assumption of a moral deity or moral universe, and there was no culture of intellectual reflection on such matters. Interaction with spiritual forces was largely for pragmatic and prudential reasons (Durkheim 1995).

During the Neolithic period, various national cultures began to conceptualize more specific spiritual beings or gods with a diversity of special powers and functions, such as care over life or the sea or death. National polytheisms, which were pervasive in the Ancient Near East, envisioned whole prehistories of the gods – that is, stories of how they came to be and how their existence supported the social order. Assyriologist Samuel Noah Kramer explains that the various polytheisms shared a common source in Sumerian religious thought (Kramer 1981). A Sumerian cuneiform clay tablet dating to the third millennium BC portrays an elaborate polytheistic perspective. Often referred to as “Eridu Genesis,” this Sumerian writing portrays a primeval sea that engendered both heaven and earth and from whose union came the god of the air, Enlil, who in turn created humankind. Other gods also evolved in Sumerian thinking, each with a particular role – for instance, Enki created humans, Ereshkigal ruled the underworld, and Ninhursag oversaw the fertility of humans and the earth.

After Sumer, polytheistic thought patterns appear in all Ancient Near Eastern civilizations – Akkadia, Babylonia, and Egypt, and the like – with pantheons of multiple gods and their various functions. Not only did the gods require obeisance, so too did earthly kings or pharaohs who claimed to be their offspring. The Sumerians, for example, believed that their deities resided in heaven. They also believed that a statue of a god was a physical embodiment of that god, which in turn generated the need for priests and attendants who would give it care and attention, including leading official prayers, making sacrifices, and laying out special feasts. Thus, a deity’s physical temple was that god’s literal residence. Relating properly to these gods was considered vitally important to individual circumstances and societal welfare. Good and evil circumstances were ultimately interpreted through the template of polytheistic understanding as caused by angry or morally defective gods or the human failure to please these gods in some way.

Some scholars indicate that the unifying thread running through all polytheisms is “the mythic mode of thought” – which is a way of looking at the world that assumes ultimate continuity of the divine, the human, and the natural. Linkage between these three realms is evident in mythic narratives in which the gods come from some primeval natural state, often chaos, and then oversee various domains of nature. Ancient humans prayed, sacrificed, and engaged in religious rituals to influence the gods to be favorable to the circumstances of their lives. In response, the gods were thought to help or hurt humans by doing something in nature, such as granting victory or defeat in battle, blessing or ruining the harvest, and the like (Frankfort *et al.* 1977).

For the ancients who lived close to nature, it is not surprising that the theme of fertility pervaded their religious outlook. Femaleness was a key symbol of fertility, making the fertility-goddess important in all polytheistic religions. Scholars have designated this as the “Isis cult” in the ancient Mediterranean world – typified by Inanna for the Sumerians, Ishtar for the Assyrians, and Isis for the Egyptians (Calame 2008). Indeed, many of life’s ultimate mysteries – regarding the origins of the world, humanity, or the gods themselves – were often explained by reference to some process akin to generative sexual activity. These mysteries display the inability of the ancient polytheisms, which were the most advanced religions in the world at the time, to conceptualize religious realities outside the framework of nature and its processes.

Since the mythic mode of thought was based on what we might call the continuity principle that assumes divine–nature–human interconnectedness, ancient polytheism was again largely prudential rather than moral because the gods were thought to be subject to human influence and manipulation. That is, humans could essentially do something within nature – bargains, magical incantations, sacrifices – to influence the gods. Of course, the gods were usually identified with various natural forces or objects, were anthropomorphized with human traits and even foibles, and were frequently arbitrary with humans, showing favor to some, disfavor to others, and indifference to most. Such were conceptual resources in the ancient world to explain the existence, aspirations, failures, and sufferings of humanity (Adogbo 2010). It was into this ancient polytheistic milieu that monotheism arose as its fierce, unrelenting opponent.

### The Appearance of Hebrew Monotheism

Monotheism – the belief in one supreme God – entered the ancient world through the patriarch Abraham. The book of Genesis, which is the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, records that Abraham,

a nomadic leader in the early second millennium BC in Mesopotamia, was called by the one true God to journey to Canaan where he was to settle and have many progeny (Gen. 12:1–3). The covenant between God and Abraham was essentially that the Hebrew people would be given their own land of great blessing. As the narrative develops, the Hebrews experience good times and bad, famine and prosperity, times of trusting God and times of falling away, but they are led and protected by God as they, in effect, pursue nationhood.

The book of Exodus records that Moses took the Hebrew people further, rising up as the great prophet who led them out of slavery in Egypt and remained their leader for four decades, dying just before they entered Canaan, the land they believed God promised to them. After the Hebrews left Egypt, they journeyed in the wilderness close to Canaan, where Moses went to the top of Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments from God, who appeared as “a bush that burns and is not consumed” (Exod. 3:2). The Ten Commandments were taken to reflect the intentions of the one true God who is holy, perfectly good, and therefore expects moral righteousness from his followers. Here is the root not simply of monotheism but of what is often called *ethical monotheism*.

Monotheistic scriptures may borrow some linguistic symbolism from surrounding polytheistic cultures, but their underlying theological message is monotheistic. Take the book of Genesis, for example. Strong monotheistic commitment is reflected in the early lines of the creation story in Genesis, which is traditionally attributed to Moses:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.  
(Gen. 1:1–5)

The words “in the beginning God created” sweep away any notion of a prehistory to God because God is positioned as the single, sovereign, eternal, personal being who brings everything else into existence.

In Genesis, creation does not result from the sexual union between primeval gods, nor from a cosmic struggle, nor from some preexisting substance. Neither does primordial nature give rise to the gods; instead, nature is simply a creature, a contingent realm that is given finite existence by an infinite creator.

For the Hebrew mind, the absolute discontinuity between the transcendent God and nature, Creator and creature, directly countered the continuity principle that shaped polytheism. Thus, while the Genesis creation story uses literary imagery

(the serpent, the forbidden fruit, etc.) that is quite familiar in the polytheistic ancient world, the conceptual themes of the Genesis creation story are distinctly monotheistic. Consider the sharp contrast with the *Enuma Elish*, the ancient Babylonian polytheistic writing in which Marduk, the god of order, kills the sea monster Tiamat, the symbol of primeval chaos. The monster's body becomes the earth and her blood becomes humanity – not an auspicious beginning to everything. Yet, in Genesis, God simply wills that the creation exists, and it comes into being; God pronounces it good, and its great value is established (Hasel 1974: 81–102).

In Christian history, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 AD carefully articulated the doctrine of creation as “creation out of nothing” (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo*), thus emphasizing this important intellectual distinctive. Monotheism asserts that God alone exists from all eternity and created everything that is not himself; everything else is creature. Imagine the offense to Egyptian polytheism – in which the sun is a god, *Ra*, the highest deity in Egypt – that was caused by the Genesis statement that God brought the sun into being as a mere creature. Of course, this point was not lost on Moses, who was brought up and educated in the courts of Pharaoh.

Monotheism, then, is an entirely revolutionary idea inserted into the ancient world – denying divine–nature–human continuity and strongly asserting ontological discontinuity. Humans cannot trick or magically coerce this one God but must relate to God on moral grounds and live up to God's good purposes for them. This amazing idea overshadows polytheistic notions of petulant, self-concerned gods who often pursued less than noble purposes and were influenced by human deception or flattery. Interestingly, monotheism even gives foundation to an enlightened idea of history as linear, denying notions of fate or divine determinism and eliminating the cyclical idea of time. Thus, for monotheism, the world becomes the context for divine–human interaction, and history becomes the unfolding story of that interaction in which there is both progress and meaning.

Turning to the creation of humans specifically, we find this line in the first chapter of Genesis: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:27). For the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans are unique creatures, with a special connection to God, because they are made “in the image of God.” At a minimum, this idea has been understood to entail that humans, while physically embodied beings, have finite characteristics reflecting God's infinite characteristics, such as rationality, will, and the capacity for interpersonal relationships. We briefly note here that the monotheistic God is infinite personal spirit and that talk of the “image of God” is usually considered to be about the intangible traits of personhood in

finite embodied persons. Furthermore, since the monotheistic God is nonphysical and nonbiological, and thus nonsexual, no human sex resembles God more than another, contrary to long-standing patriarchal misunderstandings; yet, for purposes of our discussions of God, traditional masculine pronouns are used herein without any ontological commitment that God is sexed or linguistic commitments that God is gendered.

Similarly, in Islam, a well-attested hadith declares that Allah created Adam “in his image” (Melchert 2011: 113–24), a teaching that accents the special status of humanity. Since Qur’an also clearly affirms the theme of divine transcendence, which denies that any created thing is “like” Allah (Qur’an 42:11), the status of humanity in Islam requires a bit more clarification. On this matter, Muslim thinkers explain that there cannot be any physical likeness of Allah but that human beings resemble Allah in having finite attributes that resemble Allah’s attributes, such as knowledge and will, and particularly moral capacity (Ali Shah 2012: 6).

The profound cognitive content of monotheism is embraced by all three Abrahamic faiths as crucial to their orthodox viewpoints. William A. Irwin states, “Israel’s great achievement, so apparent that mention of it is almost trite, was monotheism” (1977: 224). Monotheism thus marked a radical advance in the religious development of the human race and eventually generated further implications that had significant historical impacts – in offering important understandings of the nature of science, the nature of the human person, inherent and equal human rights, and the role of the political state (O’Connor and Oakley 1969). It is difficult to overestimate monotheism’s positive influence over many centuries in these areas.

As we shall soon see, the problem of evil gets its particular potency because of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual exceptionalism of authentic monotheism. Some religion scholars dilute the utter uniqueness of Abrahamic monotheism by employing a broader concept of monotheism. For example, “The Great Hymn to Aten” from ancient Egypt has been cited as early evidence of monotheism. However, this document, which is attributed to Pharaoh Akehnaten in the fourteenth century BC, actually reflects the attitude of henotheism – the worship of a single god while not denying the existence of other gods. The religion of Zoroastrianism, originating in Persia in the sixth century BC, is also incorrectly cited as a kind of monotheism. Zoroastrianism depicts the cosmos as involved in a great struggle between supremely Good and Evil forces. The good force, epitomized in Ahura Mazda, is the head of the universe, but the teachings about an uncreated destructive evil force, Angra Mainyu, essentially make Zoroastrianism a form of cosmic dualism.

Even Hinduism has been interpreted monotheistically, largely because of the ultimacy of Brahman, the Great Soul of the World, that is manifested in uncountably many gods such as Vishnu and Shiva. Although some religion scholars argue that the Vedic scriptures are monotheistic because they treat each deity, in turn, as supreme, this practice actually reflects the well-known attitude of kathenotheism, not that of ethical monotheism. Besides, in the Upanishads, Brahman is beyond all predication, which means that Brahman cannot be accurately termed powerful or good in ways that exclude the opposite qualities. Hinduism, then, is actually a form of pantheism (sometimes labeled “pantheism”), which is hardly a legitimate monotheism that confidently makes important assertions about God’s nature, attributes, and purposes. Leaving further debates about proto-monotheisms and quasi-monotheisms for the interested reader to pursue in another venue, we turn now to the way the problem of evil arises for ethical monotheism.

### Monotheism and Evil

Among all the religions – and types of religion – of the world, it seems that the monotheistic God is the deity whose creation would most certainly not include evil. After all, this transcendent deity is all-powerful and thus able to create whatever he wills. Indeed, this God is said to have created “out of nothing,” without resistance from some primordial material or opposition from other gods. Furthermore, the monotheistic God is wholly good and wills the best for his creation, a stark contrast to the god of pantheism that includes both good and evil, as well as to polytheistic gods that feud among themselves or display petty jealousies toward humans. Finally, since the monotheistic God is all-knowing, God would know how to create the kind of world he wills in his perfect goodness.

While nonmonotheistic religions treat evil in other ways – the other side of the divine, outside total control of the divine, and the like – monotheism accents God’s opposition to evil. This then makes the presence of evil in the world deeply problematic. The tension between these two monotheistic commitments can be readily seen:

1. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.

and

2. Evil exists in God’s created world.

Monotheism – or “theism” in its shortened form – must somehow eliminate the apparent incompatibility between these two assertions.

This study approaches the problem of evil as a philosophical problem dealing with the incompatibility – either logical or evidential – between these two propositions. However, in a larger sense, the problem of evil is not one problem but several problems, often intertwined, to be traced through the following sections. The well-known philosophical problem is discussed based on what can be known or rationally supported apart from sacred scripture or religious dogma. However, there are other dimensions of the problem of evil that require examination as well. The second problem that we will treat is the theological problem of evil, which includes additional ideas from a given theistic tradition in both forming and trying to answer the challenge of God and evil. Third, the religious problem of evil concerns why a person could or should have faith in God in light of his or her own experience of evil and suffering – in effect, exploring the question, why worship God? Fourth, the practical problem of evil focuses on the urgent need to work proactively against evil, often as the outgrowth of religious commitment. Fifth is the existential problem of evil, which pertains to how the individual makes meaning and value out of his or her life in the face of evil and suffering. Sixth, the pastoral problem of evil relates to how a religious believer might comfort or counsel others who experience evil and suffering. As our brief treatment of the problem of evil for monotheism unfolds, we engage these different dimensions, show how they intertwine, and assess the state of the discussion (for further study, see Peterson 2017).

## 2 The Problem in Culture and Philosophy

Suffering, disaster, injustice, and other forms of evil are ever present in our world, eliciting responses such as sympathy, compassion, anger, and even puzzlement. The depth of these subjective human responses leads some thinkers to underestimate the more reflective intellectual aspect of the problem. Religion scholar John Bowker writes that the problem of evil and suffering is not a rational difficulty so much as a deeply emotional one: “There is nothing theoretical or abstract about it. To talk of suffering is to talk not of an academic problem but of the sheer bloody agonies of existence, of which all men are aware and have direct experience” (1970: 2). Pragmatist philosopher William James states that the problem of evil is best treated as pertaining to our “inner attitude” – how we will face the world – and not to “systematic philosophy,” which seeks to fit evil into an overall rational system (1961: 86). These thinkers properly identify other aspects of the problem (emotional, attitudinal, and the like). They do not take the problem of evil lightly, but they do fail to acknowledge the importance of the philosophical dimension of the problem, which is



key to understanding. Indeed, not knowing how to make rational sense of evil is itself a form of suffering.

### The Problem of Evil in Great Literature

Evil is a major theme in great literature, which is capable of portraying actual evil in gripping and concrete ways. Some literature even puts the philosophical problem in sharp focus. A prime example is found in Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel *Brothers Karamazov* (1976) in the poignant reunion of Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov, two brothers long separated by the odysseys of their different lives. Ivan is a university-educated atheist, and Alyosha is an apprentice monk in the Russian Orthodox church.

Ivan challenges Alyosha's religious faith by telling stories of unthinkably inhumane evil:

By the way, a Bulgarian I met lately in Moscow . . . told me about the crimes committed by the Turks and Circassians in all parts of Bulgaria through fear of a general rising of the Slavs. They burn villages, murder, rape women and children, they nail their prisoners to the fences by the ears, leave them till morning, and in the morning they hang them – all sorts of things you can't imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beast; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. (1976: 219)

Ivan reveals that he collects such stories, particularly stories of cruelty to innocent children – the parents who locked their bed-wetting daughter in an outhouse on a cold Russian winter night, the landowner who set his hunting dogs on a stable boy, and more – and demands a rational answer from his devout brother.

Alyosha tries to assure him that everything works out for good in God's plan, resulting in a "higher harmony" that we cannot perceive. In opposition, Ivan insists that he cannot accept a system of religious belief that fails to make sense of the evils of life in terms of the categories of understanding we have:

With my pitiful, earthly, Euclidean understanding, all I know is that there are none guilty; that cause follows effect, simply and directly; that everything flows and finds its level – but that's only Euclidean nonsense, I know that, and I can't consent to live by it! (1976: 224)

Ivan's response is that unless he can make sense of God's goodness intellectually, he must reject God in moral protest. In the towering figure of Ivan, his questions and demands, the intellectual problem is powerfully represented.

Great literature in Western culture grapples not only with humanly caused evils but also with evils of pain and suffering in nature. *The Plague* by Albert

Camus and *The Lisbon Earthquake* by Voltaire only begin the list of masterpieces in this regard (Larrimore 2000; Peterson 2017). William Blake's poem "The Tyger" rhythmically describes the lethal traits of this fearful beast as created by God and then asks the question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (1956: 1060–1). The poem recognizes God's power to frame the beast but raises the concern about whether God's putative goodness would "dare" to create it.

Literature can creatively explore the problem of evil as it is felt and perceived in broader culture, yet direct philosophical treatment of the problem sheds light on literary treatments and whatever practical, religious, and existential aspects of the problem emerge. Because the philosophical problem concerns the truth, credibility, and consistency of theism, no significant progress can be made without engaging the philosophical problem.

### Definitions and Distinctions

Historically, the problem of evil has always received serious attention within the philosophy of religion, but the philosophical literature on God and evil has exploded since the 1970s. Much of this explosion is due to the general resurgence of philosophy of religion within analytic philosophy. Interestingly, the aims of analytic philosophy – such as conceptual clarity, terminological precision, and argumentative rigor – are now pursued in the problem of evil, taking the discussion in a technical direction. In Anglo-American philosophical circles, the debate over monotheism and evil has been engaged extensively by Christian philosophers and their nontheistic critics. The definitions and categories used to analyze the issues in this arena allow us to see the structure of the issues for Jewish and Islamic traditions as well.

In most discussions, the term *monotheism* (from Greek: *monos* meaning "one" and *theos* meaning "god") is shortened to *theism* (*theos*). Of course, theism is not itself a living religion but is the common conceptual core of the three living Abrahamic religions. William Rowe and other critics state that the debate is about *restricted standard theism*: the belief that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being who created the world. When any other beliefs are conjoined with restricted standard theism, some form of expanded standard theism is formed. Beliefs about Jesus as God incarnate, Allah's wise purposes, or YHWH's chosen people merely begin other beliefs that theists might want to include in the discussion. However, both theists and critics typically believe that if evil makes restricted standard theism rationally untenable, it makes all forms of expanded standard theism untenable.