

"Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain? ...The God who created this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac... What kind of god would do that?" Discuss.

Trying to conciliate the existence of the Christian God, as depicted in the Bible, and suffering has been a timeless quest. What has been seen as an enduring conundrum has not only fueled many scholarly articles, but also placed fictional books such as 'The Shack'<sup>1</sup> at the top of bestseller lists and made Stephen Fry's interview in the Meaning of Life series<sup>2</sup> a huge hit on You Tube. Both believers and non-believers wrestle with the enigma of a loving God in a world where misery and pain caused at the hand of man or a natural disaster can be found everywhere.

The assumption made in the title statement is that the God who made this world is not only Omni-potent but also Omni-benevolent. The idea that God is 'righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works'<sup>3</sup>, yet also allows evil, which God evidently does, is an inconsistency. Humans seem to share the misconception that God's Omni-benevolence means he should seek to make life on Earth pleasant, and when this is not achieved it is proof that he is in fact not good but capricious and mean-minded. God does not seek to provide short-term happiness all the time for us on Earth. He wants "deeper good things"<sup>4</sup> for us and one of the ways in which we can achieve this is through the knowledge and free will He granted us. The free-will defence is the most common argument for God seemingly allowing the "injustice and pain" caused by other humans.

The Christian reply to the existence of moral evil stems from God's first covenant with man in the Bible. The book of Genesis introduces the concept of two trees in the garden; Tree of Knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Life. The trees are a symbolic representation of what man can achieve either by living in obedience or disobedience with God. Man gained the knowledge of both good and evil and the freedom to choose either, because God did not desire a world of superficial good. However, with the freedom to obey comes the freedom to disobey. Therefore, it can be argued that the existence of moral evil is not because of a "stupid God" but because He allowed man's free will.

Accepting this premise, Mackie suggests that if God is Omni-potent, as the Christian God is believed to be, then why not allow humans the choice, but ensure they always choose correctly: "God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right."<sup>5</sup> This, however, is a contradiction, to allow one to have the choice of good and evil yet to ensure one always chooses good is inexplicably withdrawing the choice

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Young, The Shack

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Fry on God, The Meaning of Life, You Tube

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 145:17

<sup>4</sup> Richard Swinburne, page 106

<sup>5</sup> J.L Mackie, Evil and Omnipotence, p208



between good and evil in the first place. One could also argue that in allowing free will and not intervening or saving those who have evil done to them means God is not good and, as Stephen Fry states, should not have our respect. It is worth considering the idea that the world God has created is the best world he could despite the existence of evil, perhaps a world with freedom is better than any world without, even if freedom comes at the price of pain.

When Stephen Fry gives his answer to Gay Byrne on the 'Meaning of Life' series, he states he would refuse his ticket to heaven because of the suffering evident in the world today. He gives the example of insects burrowing into the eyes of children, making them blind; he could easily have used the example of cancer or a natural disaster causing injuries and death. This touches on the perspective of suffering and injustice that makes it much harder to excuse a loving God than the moral evil done at the hands of man. The modern world has placed increasing stress on sensory pleasure and the fulfillment of a long and healthy life as being the root of happiness. By this interpretation, these acts of suffering are indeed a huge atrocity as they bring such pain and misery. As Richard Swinburne states, 'if these [sensory pleasure and sensory pain] were the only good and bad things, the occurrence of suffering would indeed be conclusive objection to the existence of God'.<sup>6</sup>

In assuming that the presence of pain on Earth means God does not want the best for us, neglects to take into account the fact that our life on Earth is only a small part of our existence if we accept God's teachings. The ultimate reward is everlasting life after death: "And this is what He promised us – eternal life"<sup>7</sup>. The title statement assumes that the suffering and pain encountered on Earth is the ultimate tragedy. However, to be a Christian means to believe Earth is not the end and is indeed not our reward: It is a challenge.

To argue God is not all good because he allows evil, is to place oneself on a level where one is claiming to understand God's master plan. The only reason we view it as an incongruity is because "we often interpret His ways from the perspective of our ways"<sup>8</sup>. Alexander Pope touches on this in his 'Essay on Man': "What can we reason, but from what we know?"<sup>9</sup> Humans are limited by what we understand in our own lives, therefore, we have no right to judge or pretend to comprehend God's plan for the whole universe from the beginning of time to the end. Pope also poses the question that perhaps what we therefore perceive as evil is not actually evil<sup>10</sup>. It is clear senseless evil and suffering does occur in the world from our perspective. To us the death of a loved one gives us much pain and mourning, but from another perspective it could be viewed as a release from any pain or suffering to come. As believers they would now be safe and rewarded in heaven. The pain comes only from our loss and therefore originates in our perspective.

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<sup>6</sup>Richard Swinburne, page 108

<sup>7</sup>1 John 2:25

<sup>8</sup>Rick Joyner, page 40

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Pope, Stanza I

<sup>10</sup>Alexander Pope, Stanza X

Within the Christian tradition it is easy to trivialise suffering with platitudes such as, God never sends you more than you can bear, or suffering makes you stronger. If this is supposed to justify what appears to be the action or lack of action from God it seems rather feeble as an argument. However, suffering is not trivialised in the Bible; in the New Testament Jesus never explains or attempts to justify it. Instead, he shoulders and experiences suffering both as he leaves those he loves on earth and in the physical pain and death he experiences on the cross. Indeed, as Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is fully aware that he will suffer: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me."<sup>11</sup> However, in rising from the dead He fulfils the promise of eternal life where, "God will wipe away every tear. There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain".<sup>12</sup>

There are no neat answers when the discussion revolves around why an all-powerful God allows bad things to happen to good people. When Stephen Fry states that he has no respect for a "capricious, mean-minded, stupid God," he is not alone. This discussion has raged for centuries and a comprehensive answer remains elusive. To accept and respect a God in a world of terrorism, sickness, violence and disasters takes faith. Ultimately, we have to trust that we have a place in the universe, and despite what may befall us, God has a bigger plan and sees the outcome. In a world of suffering and injustice one has to accept that bad things happen, but that does not mean one has to accept that the God who created the world is capricious or stupid. In order to accept that God is not a maniac we have to accept that the universe has a circle of growth and destruction and He does not stand at a distance disengaged from our experiences.

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 21:4



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