

Ethics: If God is all-powerful, loving, and just, then why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?



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This is a question almost as old as humanity. There are some questions which don't have an answer, and this is one of them – you can see why if you think of the question being on three different levels.

1. Normally when we ask a question, we expect an intelligent reply. So this question can be answered on an intellectual level. You can say that God is either not loving and just, or else isn't all-powerful. The classic Christian answer to evil is the 'free-will defence', which says that God isn't all-powerful because God has to allow us to make real choices in order to grow in moral understanding. If every time anyone tried to do something unloving, God stopped them, then we would have no choice but to do good, so how would we learn to make good decisions? A parent can guide a child, but they have to stand back and let the child choose for themselves as they grow up, and sometimes the child will make a mess of it – but otherwise they won't learn and mature. If people are free to choose, then sometimes they will choose evil rather than good.

This doesn't answer the question of 'natural evil', such as diseases and earthquakes. In ethics there's something called 'double effect' – so if someone is in pain, giving them morphine will ease their pain (a good thing) but also cause them to die more quickly (a bad thing). Christians say that often you can't have a good thing without the possibility of there also being a bad thing. So it is with pain: people who've lost the ability to feel pain then suffer, because without pain we don't know we're ill or have hurt ourselves. Earthquakes and volcanos happen because of tectonic plates moving around, but without them the world wouldn't work properly. Christians believe that God couldn't create a world without suffering, but shares that suffering with us in Jesus, and that God will make a new world ('heaven') for people who choose the way of love.

2. The second level is emotional. Once I went to pray for a man who'd just died, and his wife shouted at me, 'Why has he died? Why?' There was an intellectual answer – he'd had several heart attacks, he smoked heavily and took no exercise – but that's not what she meant. The 'why' question is about purpose – what reason is there for this? Christian faith says that, although at times it's hard, this world isn't all there is, and God has a purpose for our lives. Those who 'believe in science' have a different answer: that the world just is, it's meaningless, and we have to make our own reasons for living – in which case, why is there so much love and goodness in the world?

3. The deepest level of this question is its challenge to each of us. Those who don't believe in God can respond to suffering and evil with despair or selfishness, or with noble ideals to help others. Those who believe in God can be complacent ('those who suffer deserve it'), or sacrifice their lives for love of God and neighbour. The question of suffering and evil isn't an intellectual one, but a test of what we truly believe; each of us will have to answer this question ourselves, not in our heads, but by the way in which we live and love and die.