

Podcast Companion

The Problem of Evil & Suffering

Hi guys! Welcome back to the podcast companion.

As you'll most likely remember, we're just getting started in our look at suffering and evil, and how Christians can respond to their existence with their non-Christian friends.

In the last episode, we picked up on the intellectual problem of evil, and I mentioned that there is a second version of the problem of evil – the emotional problem.

In today's episode we have really focused on the difference between the emotional and intellectual, and why it matters.

So, what is the difference between the intellectual and emotional problems of evil & suffering?

One, as we discussed last week, is an objection to God's existence based on a perceived logical contradiction between evil and God's co-existence. This is the primary topic of today's episode.

The second, the emotional problem, is the moral objection to the idea that a God might allow evil and suffering. They aren't saying that God can't possibly exist based on the existence of evil & suffering, they're saying they don't *like* a God that would allow evil, or not use his omnipotence to stop the suffering in the world.

In order to give you a great example of this, and also to show you the importance of being able to pick up on the difference to then pick apart the issues, here's an interesting video for you to review:



But be pre-warned, this is William Lane Craig responding to a fairly vociferous attack on God by Stephen Fry, and you may find it a little upsetting at first. Hopefully, through what they're talking about, you'll find ways to deal with that sort of affront and be calm in the face of what is essentially slander of God.

Hopefully you're beginning to see some differences in both meaning and approach to the different issues.

So, why does this difference matter?

Well, let's consider a scenario – let's say your friend is chatting to you on FaceTime and they say that they just don't understand why God would allow all this suffering, and why He hasn't used His power to stop it from ever happening. Perhaps they then begin to question the goodness or even existence of a God that could be so heartless and unloving!

Are they expressing the emotional or intellectual problem?

The emotional!

If you were to begin talking to your friend about the *intellectual* problem, showing how the idea of God's co-existing with evil being impossible is wrong, through clever logic and argument, you'll just seem heartless!

On the flip side, it's less likely but if they were to tell you they don't see how it's logically possible God and evil can co-exist and you start talking about God's love and their value... they may feel a bit better about themselves, but it won't have answered their questions or dealt with the argument.

Now, at this point you may well ask "hang on, what's my obligation here? Why should I bother knowing this?"

Well, I won't re-preach the whole "love the Lord your God with all your *mind*" we covered before from Matthew 22:34-38.

Instead, consider this analogy which I've liberated from both John Mackey and Alister McGrath:

Mackey once spoke about a thought he had when studying in Spain in the 20's. He talks about classic Spanish homes and the balconies they often have, and juxtaposing this with the road below, writing *"by the balcony... I mean that little platform in wood or stone that protrudes from the upper window of a Spanish home. There the family may gather to gaze spectator-wise upon the [road] beneath... By the road, I mean a place where life is tensely lived, where the thought has its birth in conflict and concern, where choices are made and decisions are carried out. It is the place of action, of pilgrimage, of crusade, where concern is never absent from a wayfarer's heart. On the road a goal is sought, dangers are faced, life is poured out"*.

Basically, Mackey is painting a lovely picture to draw our attention to a bigger picture – the two perspectives we can take are of either *spectator* or *participant*. You can sit comfortably on the balcony and never have to get involved in the difficulties and concerns that occur on the road, except in a theoretical way, they will never get lost or scared, etc. You can even watch others get lost and see the path but not bother to intervene.

But which of these two perspectives is more important for us as Christians?

Let's hear Mackey again:

"Truth is found upon the road. It might even be said that when a man descends from the balcony to the road, whether of his own free will, or because he has been pitched from it by providential circumstances, does he begin to know what reality is".

Mackey here is saying that real life is lived on the road! There is value on the balcony, for sure, but the true place of Christianity is on the road, in real life, making tough decisions and living life *with* people like Jesus did.

People on the road don't know what's coming up ahead, what's round the corner, over the brow of the hill, but those on the balcony can see it all ahead but don't ever come down to experience it.

Christians need to be on the road, with the people. In my opinion, after they have spent some time on the balcony so they can have an idea of where life must go (hint: it's Jesus).

Similarly, the difference between the intellectual and emotional problem of evil & suffering is that

one is on the balcony and the other is on the road.

Some people will want to talk from balcony to balcony – consider the difficulties and suffering of life with regards to God’s possible existence. That’s the intellectual we’ll be dealing with moving forward, but the majority of people are on the road. The majority of people are in the suffering and looking at it from the bottom up, not the top down.

Having the balcony view, the intellectual argument, is exceptionally helpful in knowing where the suffering on the road is going, but actually being on the road is what is needed to be able to practically help people.

Hopefully I’ve made my point there – we should be like Jesus, know God as well as we possibly can, but make sure we’re living with people, suffering with them, in order to give them the answers they need when they need them.

As we discussed last week, the argument is two premises and a conclusion that look like this:

P1. It is logically impossible that an all-loving & all-powerful God and evil can co-exist

P2. Suffering & evil exist

C1. Therefore, God does not exist

Hopefully you’ve responded to the question of the week the past few days and have an idea of whether you think this is a good argument or not.

In my opinion, it’s fairly air tight in that the conclusion does necessarily follow if the premises are true. But are they true?

So, the more astute amongst you might have noticed that there isn’t actually an explicit contradiction here, so you might be wondering how the argument even works. Good on you! The reason the argument runs is because of some *implicit* assumptions that need to be true in order for the explicit premises to work.

Namely:

- A. If God is all powerful, then He can create any world that He wants
- B. If God is all loving, He prefers a world in which there is no suffering

In order for the argument to work, both of these assumptions need to be necessarily true. Have a think – are they true? Can God create any world He darn well pleases? Would God prefer a world in which there was no suffering?

If you’re interested in learning more in preparation for the coming weeks, here’s a (longer) more concise account of what we are discussing here and will also cover next week:

 20 min read



Suffering poses many problems for Christian faith. At one level, it poses a knotty riddle for the theologian, who has to explain why its existence does not compromise Christian faith. It may reasonably be argued that to treat suffering as a logical, philosophical or theological difficulty is to miss the real point – the emotional and pastoral issues raised for those who are suffering, and for those who care for them.

Suffering
Alister McGrath

And that’s where we will pick up next week! That’s your question for the week, by the way, or questions – can God create any world He wants, and would God prefer a world without suffering?

Right, let's look at our scripture of the week.

John 13:35 – *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”.*

Why might we be looking at this?

Well, when we consider the balcony and the road, we can relate Jesus' words here to that.

Which is more loving, where can more love be shown and Jesus be best embodied – the road or the balcony? The road.

We're called to love one another, and love in such a way that people would know that we are Christ's disciples. Can you do that on the balcony?

No, we're called to be in the mix, with the people struggling on the road. My only hope is that when this is paired with Matthew 22 as we've discussed previously, we have had enough time on the balcony to really know where the road is heading and be able to help people along the way to the end – which is Jesus.

As I've said many times, it's all about Jesus.

I hope this has whet your appetite further for our discussion on suffering & evil, and the good, loving God that works in its midst.

As always guys don't be afraid to get in the youth group chat on WhatsApp and let us know how you're doing and what you're thinking. Make sure you have your prayer requests ready for our Bible studies on Thursdays so we can make sure we're all in this together. You can also interact with some stuff on Instagram @chawnyouth.

See you next week!