

EVIL: A REAL PROBLEM FOR EVANGELICALS

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In his contribution to *The New Mormon Challenge*, entitled “Can the Real Problem of Evil be Solved?,” Carl Mosser argues that far from resolving the problem of evil, the Mormon view of God exacerbates the problem.¹ The reasons for this conclusion are twofold: (1) The Mormon view does not resolve the problem of evil; and (2) the Mormon God cannot simply eliminate evil at will and therefore evil remains a problem even for God. The “real” problem of evil, according to Mosser is not the compatibility of God’s goodness, power and the existence of evil, but the fact that there is evil at all.

1.1 Is There a Problem of Evil? Mosser maintains that there really isn’t a problem of evil at all. First, he maintains that Alvin Plantinga has “resolved” the logical problem of evil. The logical problem of evil arises from the inconsistency between the notions that: (1) God is a perfectly good being who would create a world without any genuine evil if he could; (2) God is an all powerful being who can create a world without genuine evil, and yet (3) genuine evils exist. For this problem to arise, the notion of “genuine evil” must be grasped. A genuine evil is an act or event that the world would be better, all things considered, had it not occurred. It is an evil that is not justified because it is a necessary condition to obtain a greater good. Given this understanding of genuine evil, these propositions constitute an inconsistent triad.

So has Plantinga resolved the logical problem of evil? Plantinga has successfully answered the logical problem of evil presented by John Mackie who argued that God could create persons who always do what is right.² Plantinga has shown that if persons have libertarian free will, then God cannot create persons and bring it about that they always do what is right.³ However, Plantinga has not shown that (1), (2) and (3) are consistent. He argues that every apparent evil, for all that we know, may be justified by a greater good. Thus, Plantinga rejects (3) by claiming that we are not in a position to make “all things considered” judgments.⁴

Does this response constitute a defeat of the logical problem of evil? Hardly. First,

¹ Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser and Paul Owens, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 247-53.. (I worked from a pre-publication manuscript and therefore the page numbers may not correspond to the published book)

² John L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (April 1955), 54.

³ Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992 ed.), 164-95.

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 464- 484; and “Epistemic Probability and Evil,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 69-96. The same point is made by William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” in Snyder, 97-125.

Plantinga's response does not exonerate the "compatibilist" position that has been the majority view held by creedal Christians since the time of Augustine. Plantinga's defense assumes the libertarian view of free will which holds that free will is incompatible with an act being caused. Compatibilists believe that free will is compatible with an act being caused.⁵ Further, Plantinga has not shown that God is constrained by logic to create morally irresponsible persons such as we are if he creates *ex nihilo*. Plantinga assumes that God must create morally fallible persons if he creates them free. However, that is not true given evangelical assumptions. If God creates *ex nihilo*, then he can create any persons that it is logically possible to create. He certainly could have created more morally sensitive and rational persons than we are. Indeed, Francis Beckwith, in his contribution to *NMC*, argues that perfectly rational beings are perfectly good even though free to choose evil if they wish. If Beckwith is correct, then the fact that a person rationally chooses to always do what is right is not incompatible with libertarian free will. Given the creedal view, there is no reason that God could not have created perfectly rational persons who will always see by the light of reason that always choosing what is right is the most rational course. Thus, God had open to him the possibility of creating more intelligent and morally sensitive creatures who would bring about less evil than we do because of sheer irrationality. God is thus morally indictable for having created creatures who bring about more evil than other creatures he could have created from nothing.

Further, Plantinga explains natural evils by arguing that it is logically possible that God created devils free in a libertarian sense and with enough power to bring about earthquakes, tornadoes, diseases, cancer and so forth. But how does creating something God foreknows will freely bring about vast amounts of evil get God off the hook for natural evils? It seems that creation of devils and then granting them enough power to interfere with the natural order of things is itself an instance of evil. There is no logically necessary reason that God would have to grant devils such power to wreck havoc with the natural order and thereby to bring about vast amounts of suffering. Far from constituting a defense of the problem of evil, Plantinga has simply given a scenario that is an instance of divine culpability for natural evil.

Mosser also maintains that no one has stated a successful "evidential" problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil arises from the fact that there appear to be evils which are unjustified, that is, it appears that events occur that, all things considered, the world would be better if they did not occur. There are events that we cannot begin to fathom how they could be necessary for a greater good and our every attempt to explain them is either inadequate or morally unacceptable. For example, the evil of a little girl in Detroit who was raped multiple times and then brutally tortured and beaten by her mother's boyfriend, or the days of pain of a fawn burned in a forest fire that no one knows about seem to be instances of such inexplicable evils.

The problem with the evidential problem is that humans may well not be in a position to make "all things considered" judgments. However, we are in a position to know that we cannot begin to fathom any greater good that is accomplished by such evils. We also can see than any

⁵ James Sennett, "The Free Will Defense and Determinism," *Faith and Philosophy* 8:3 (July 1991), 340-353.

explanation we come up with is either inadequate because such evils are not necessary to accomplish the greater goods or all of our explanations are themselves morally reprehensible. Thus, the evidential problem of evil is precisely that so far as we can see there cannot be a God as described in the creeds and also genuine evils. Yet there appear to be genuine evils. Thus, we are justified in concluding that so far as we can see, it appears to us that the God of the creeds cannot exist. Thus, the evidential problem of evil is not decisive, but it presents a problem for those who trust their experience as veridical. The judgment made by Stephen Parrish thus roars with deafening decisiveness against the god of the creeds: “No theology should be countenanced as possibly true, much less considered true, if it cannot account for what we know about the world we live in.”⁶ Thus, Plantinga has not resolved either the logical or the evidentiary problems of evil.

1.2 Does Mormonism Resolve the Problem of Evil? Mosser admits that Mormonism does in fact solve the problem of evil: “The Mormon concept of God can provide an apparently quick and easy solution to the intellectual problem of evil by denying God’s omnipotence and that he is a Creator [ex nihilo]....”⁷ However, Mosser argues, correctly in my view, that limiting God’s power buys a solution to the problem of evil at too high a price *if the sole explanation for evil is that God does not have enough power to prevent the evils that actually occur*. For example, God could certainly see what Hitler was up to and eliminate him even without omnipotence. God certainly had the power to prevent such evils because on the Mormon view he had at least the power of a human--and a human standing near Hitler could have killed him. Mosser argues that if Latter-day Saints argue that God must have had his reasons for not preventing evils which mere humans have the power to eliminate, then “they are using the same strategy for answering the problem of evil long employed by classical theists and it is difficult to see the advantage for Mormon finitism.”⁸

However, Mosser has overlooked the fact that God need not employ such strategies if he is omnipotent. Mormons do not employ “the same strategy” as creedal Christians because it makes sense on the Mormon view to say that God must create an environment conducive to the growth of the intelligences as they actually are. It makes no sense within the context of creedal Christianity to limit God in this way because he can simply create any persons he wants out of nothing. The god of the creeds could have a world that is virtually free of any evil whatsoever. He could have created persons who were already morally superior and a world without any natural evils whatsoever. He could have created already morally advanced creatures who do not require the extreme conditions we encounter in this life as a basis for growth. However, such “soul-making” strategies work within the Mormon world view precisely because God cannot create out of nothing just the persons he wanted. In Mormonism, God’s goal is to assist us to advance by confronting *genuine* challenges to aid our growth and learning. Unlike the god of creeds, on the Mormon view God did not create the intelligences or their level of advancement and moral sensitivity. He takes us as we are and lovingly works with us from there. God can have reasons to allow evils, even genuine evils, on the Mormon

⁶ *Ibid*, 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249-50.

view because he must bring about conditions conducive to the growth and advancement of persons like us. Things may occur that do not make the world, all things considered, better than it would have been had they not occurred. It is not better, all things considered, that a little girl was raped and murdered. However, the fact that such acts *can occur*, that genuine evils are *possible*, is necessary to God's plan where persons are genuinely free. If God intervened every time someone were about to bring about a genuine evil, then he would frustrate his purposes for us. For example, if knives were steel-hard when spreading butter but suddenly turned to rubber whenever a person wanted to use a knife to stab another person, the order necessary for God's plan to be accomplished would be frustrated. There would not even be the possibility of morally significant free actions in such an environment.

Thus, Mormons have strategies available to them to resolve the problem of evil that are not available to creedal Christians – even if a lack of power is not the reason for such a solution. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that on the Mormon view God has “maximal power,” or all the power that it is consistently conceivable for God to have who actually exists in relation with a real world having a real history and a real social environment that includes free persons.

1.3 Mosser's Argument Against the Mormon Solution. Mosser offers two reasons why even though Mormon doctrines “can solve the problem of how evil and a good and powerful God can co-exist,” nevertheless he feels that such a solution is bought at “two [sic] high a cost.”⁹ First, a part of the Mormon answer to evil is that “opposition is necessary in all things.” Thus, it appears that the actuality of evil is built into the structure of reality. Second, Mosser argues that a part of some Mormon theodicies is that God is limited by a “recalcitrant” chaos which he organizes into an ordered cosmos. Mosser argues that this chaos “resists his will and he is powerless to prevent some evils from occurring.” Thus, he concludes that evil will never be overcome on the Mormon view because if “evil is in part due to the inherent nature of matter, then God cannot overcome it.” He asserts that this is the “real problem of evil” because the Bible views God as decisively eliminating evil at the end of time by his omnipotent power.

Mosser argues that the notion of opposition in all things “is simply unfounded.” He disposes with this doctrine with a quote from John Kekes: “whatever is true of phenomena requiring contrasting aspects, it is not true of good and evil. It is absurd to suppose that there can be kindness only if there is cruelty, or freedom if there is tyranny.” It is true that we don't need to be unkind to be kind; however, it does not follow that we could know and appreciate what kindness is unless we had some idea of what it would be like for persons not to be kind. Indeed, F. R. Tennant has argued that our concept of good only has meaning when related to concepts such as temptation, courage, and compassion.¹⁰ For there to be courage there must be real challenges, for compassion the presence of pain and suffering, and for temptation the possibility of choosing evil. It is significant that Lehi's discussion of opposition in all things occurs in the context of free agency as a necessary

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* (London: Cambridge, 1930), 188-89.

condition to be agents who can choose for themselves. The point of opposition in all things is not that we must be evil to be good, but that in order to be moral agents in any significant sense we must be capable of doing both good and evil. If we were capable of only good acts, then we may be innocent, but we could not be moral agents. Thus, it is not the *actuality* of evil that is necessary, but the possibility that persons can make significant choices. There are no significant choices if we are not moral agents in the sense that we can choose both good and evil.

Thus, Mosser has misunderstood the thrust of the doctrine of opposition in all things. His argument works only if the actuality of evil is built into the world, not its possibility. However, the doctrine of opposition in all things only implies that the *possibility* of evil is necessary to a world that could function as an environment of personal growth. Moreover, Mosser himself must accept that evil is a necessary possibility within the world, for he accepts Plantinga's free will defense. The prominent feature of the free will defense is that God cannot create a world containing free creatures and guarantee that there is no evil. Even omnipotence cannot guarantee that there are both significantly free creatures and no evil.

This last point is also significant because it shows that Mosser's claimed advantage for his omnipotent God who could rid the world of evil by the exercise of omnipotence is simply impossible if God also chooses to have free creatures. Moreover, if persons remain free, then God cannot guarantee that all evil will be eliminated as Mosser claims. Indeed, I would guess that Mosser rejects the doctrine of universal salvation. If so, then he cannot consistently adopt his own argument against Mormonism, for there will always remain the evil that some persons will remain unsaved. Moreover, it seems to me that such a possibility is built into the very structure of the nature of love. If what God seeks with us is a truly loving relationship, then God cannot unilaterally guarantee by his power that we will return his love with our own reciprocating love. For love cannot be coerced, forced or intimidated by sheer power. Any love that is worthy of the name leaves the beloved free to choose whether to enter the relationship and, once in it, whether to maintain the relationship. God cannot by a blast of his almighty nostrils coerce our love. Omnipotence is simply irrelevant to what is really valuable in our relationship with God – i.e., mutual and reciprocal love that respects the dignity and freedom of the beloved. It is the very nature of love that makes libertarian free will valuable in the first place. Mosser may envision a God who exists all alone before creation without any relationships with others, but the living God is a person who seeks our love in return to his. Such love is a good so great that it justifies leaving us free despite the evil we may cause by the use of such freedom. Mosser's solution to what he calls the "real problem of evil" cannot be adopted consistently with his adherence to the free will defense.

Further, is chaos really "recalcitrant" in Mormon thought in the sense that it "resists" God's will? Hardly. God speaks, chaos hears, and obeys God's will.¹¹ Chaos is not evil in Mormon thought – it just is. The point of referring to the eternal environment in which God lives is that it is necessary that natural laws arise when matter is ordered. God cannot have water that is not H₂O, nor can he have water that supports human life but does not cause humans to drown when they fall in it.

¹¹ *Lectures on Faith* I, 22.

There is nothing inherently evil about chaos any more than there is something inherently evil about natural laws. Indeed, such laws are a necessary condition to any environment that could act as an arena of “soul-building.” If there were no regularities, we could not learn from our experience.

Further, whereas Mosser envisions the kingdom of God to be brought about by God’s unilateral power, Mormons view the kingdom of God to be brought about through our love for God. Only when we truly do the will of God freely will His kingdom reign. The kingdom is not brought about by coercive power, but by loving persuasion. The kingdom of God is not found in the sky but inside of us. If the kingdom is not drawn from our loving hearts and our willingness to do God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven, then his kingdom cannot come.

But what shall we say if Mosser were somehow correct that God could once and for all eliminate evil from the world by his omnipotence? It seems to me that God is indictable for not doing so right now if he can. If God can really do as Mosser says, if he can really create a kingdom without evil immediately by merely willing to do so, then what possible justification could such a god have for allowing the kinds of evil we experience? God could save everyone by simply willing it given Mosser’s assumptions – but he apparently desires some people to go to hell. If Mosser is correct, then God could have a world of divine goodness without any evil at all. Whence then evil? Mosser gives us a god who leaves us in the midst of evil when there is no possible justification for doing so. Is this view of god really a serious contender for the title of the God of love? Should we worship sheer power in the place of the living God?