

# I get mail . . . about earthquakes

In response to my post entitled "[Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis,](#)" I received some questions from "Rob." Here's my somewhat lengthy response.

Rob,

Thanks for your comment. The above is a blog post, and is by necessity concise. I could not address every possible question or concern, and some things were implied more than stated, or, I assumed could be concluded reasonably in what I wrote above. To your questions:

*1) Do you think this same sort of destruction of being is both possible and inevitable in the new heavens and new earth, which will be just as contingent as the first heavens and earth? If you don't think this will be the case, why?*

1) By definition, anything that is contingent is subject to the possibility of non-being. In fact, in a created universe, everything is intrinsically subject to the possibility of non-being at any given moment. The traditional Christian doctrine of creation is that if God were to cease the act of creation at any given moment, the entire universe would "blink out" like a light bulb. Even angels, who are "naturally" immortal, because immaterial, are dependent on God's continuing power to exist at all. (Angels are "naturally" immortal, because they are pure minds. Not being composed of physical parts, they cannot die should their parts be destroyed. Nonetheless, should God cease to create them, they would cease existing.)

Of course, any universally broad statement like "destruction of being is both possible and inevitable" also has to be understood in light of other premises implicit in the very

definition of contingency that would include an “unless.” Since all contingent being depends on God for its initial and continuing existence (by definition), the inevitability of destruction contains an assumed “all other factors being the same” or “unless” God wills otherwise. All contingent being always has the possibility of non-being, but, since all contingent being is given by God, there is nothing to prevent God’s continuing to give being. So, in the new heavens and the new earth, destruction of being is certainly intrinsically possible, since God alone is the source of creation, and could, if he willed, cease to create. However, destruction of being is not inevitable, if God decides either to preserve intrinsically destructible beings from harm, or to create beings in such a way that they have an intrinsically natural immortality (something like the angels). Both possibilities are logically possible. What God will do is up to him.

*2) If God could have created a world without these possibilities in the first place (which must be true if there is going to be a new heavens and new earth where there is no more pain and there are no more tears), why did he not go ahead with that in the first place?*

You are correct that God “could have” created such a possibility in the first place. But it is only your assumption that he didn’t. Our knowledge of what God has done in the universe is restricted to what he has done in the universe (or rather portion of the universe) we actually live in. The traditional Christian doctrine is that human beings are not the only rational creatures. Angels, for example, are “naturally” immortal. For all we know, God might well have created universes where other intelligent creatures exist who have something like the “naturally” immortal resurrection bodies of the new creation, something like Tolkien’s “elves.” Who knows?

However, it should also be clear that I was not addressing in my initial points what God "might have done" or "could have done," but what he actually "has done." My claim is that the goodness of God is not inconsistent with the world in which we actually exist, a world in which earthquakes and tsunamis actually exist.

As I stated: "It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates."

I perhaps should have qualified "like earth as we know it (and not how God could have created it in his infinite power)" and "like human beings as we know them (and not how God could have created them in his infinite power)", but I assumed that was obvious. A planet that did not have tectonic plates would not be a "planet like earth." Moreover, the "human beings" I was referring to are "human beings" like us, like we are now. I don't know whether a new creation and a new earth would have tectonic plates, but the kinds of human beings it would contain would certainly be different than the kind we are now.

There is an inherent logical inconsistency when a person complains that there should be no earthquakes or tsunamis. The person who makes that claim almost certainly owes his or her existence to living on a planet in which there are necessarily tectonic plates, which, when they shift, necessarily cause earthquakes. To wish there were no such things as earthquakes is almost certainly to wish that I were not here to complain about the existence of earthquakes. So the "nonsensical" implied "within the possible conditions for this actual universe in which human beings like us can actually live."

And, of course, it is also the case that the traditional Christian position is that God did create something like such a universe (with no human pain, death, or tears). The historic

Christian position is that human death is a consequence of sin. (As I stated above, the Christian claim is that the problem of evil has a moral, not ontological solution.) If human beings had never sinned, would there have still been earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably. What would have happened if there had been an earthquake in a morally perfect world? I don't know. Perhaps there would have been an infallible earthquake alert system.

I jest, but only because we are talking about a non-existing possibility. In the world in which we exist, people do bad things, and there are earthquakes. Again, the question is not about what God "might have done," but rather whether there is any incompatibility between the goodness of God and the existence of earthquakes in the world in which we (sinners) actually exist.

But some possible answers to your question might include:

a) God likes variety. Thomas Aquinas suggests that creation ranges from purely immaterial substances (God and angels) to purely material substances (minerals). In between are non-rational living material substances (plants and animals), and in between them are rational material (bodily) substances – human beings. But those "in between" rational material (embodied) substances happen to live on planets and the normal way in which those planets come into existence includes tectonic plates, and thus the very real possibility of earthquakes.

b) The decision to create human beings in a contingent and potentially destructible universe was a decision by God to create creatures that could be "historical." Again, relying on Aquinas, Thomas argues that, as immaterial creatures, angels intuitively and completely know and will whatever they know and will. Angels do not ratiolate. They simply know. Angels do not consider. They simply choose. Accordingly, the very first decision each angel makes is either to love God

before self or to love self before God. And this decision is permanent and irrevocable. Thus, it is not that fallen angels do not repent. Rather, they cannot repent.

To the contrary, because human beings are embodied creatures, their knowledge and choices are mediated through physical created objects. Humans do not know God directly and immediately as the Chief Good, but rather know directly only created goods. Humans can know God only as the giver of goods, but do not (apart from revelation) know him directly. Human choices are always between various higher and lower goods, and take place over time. In the choice of higher and lower goods, humans develop virtues (or vices) and formed virtue produces character. Ultimately, it is human orientation toward God as Chief Good that enables human choices of lesser goods, but human beings can always choose lesser goods in preference to God as their Chief Good and final end. For human beings, unlike angels, both salvation and damnation are processes, a kind of pilgrimage that takes place over time. But life as pilgrimage in this sense is something that can only take place for embodied creatures. But – such embodiment by its nature is subject to the possibility of destruction and death, unless God acts to preserve contingent being from destruction.

Because human beings will and know “historically” (over time), redemption also must take place over time, and so God redeems human beings through a historical process of redemption that begins with Israel and comes to fruition in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, because human beings are historical, redemption is also possible – in a way that it was not for angels.

In the new creation, human beings will for the first time see God directly “face to face,” and will no longer come to know God through the mediation of fellow creatures. However, once this immediate knowledge takes place, “history” will end. Human beings will no longer live in “pilgrimage” but will be

finally fixed in their choice of Good or Evil, like the angels.

The above is entirely Aquinas's speculation, but I find it plausible.

Another possibility is:

c) We don't know. My number 5) in my initial post, combined with my 15) means that God is free, he can create a number of universes, any of them will be good, and, again, there can be no possible best.

*In this case your 'no best possible world,' response doesn't make much sense, because it seems that Christianity is interested in two worlds, one in which sin and death exist, and one in which they don't. It doesn't matter that the latter world isn't the best possible world, or that God could continue to improve this world eternally (which presumably He will in the eschaton) – what makes the question sensible is the fact that we can delineate between two such possible, contingent worlds. The question remains why God chose to create the first kind.*

It is not exactly the case that Christians believe in “two worlds,” like a Platonic distinction between this world of matter and another world of disembodied spirits. Rather, Christians believe there is one world that has two stages. The current stage is something like a “dress rehearsal” for the real play that is going to follow. During the “dress rehearsal,” human beings practice their parts (they live out their lives, they live and die “natural deaths”) At some point, the Director steps in and says, “Dress rehearsal is over. This is the real thing.” There is a direct correlation between “dress rehearsal” and the new creation which is the “actual play.”

I think that fiction has often done a better job of portraying

the relation between the “dress rehearsal” and the “actual play” than has theology or literature, perhaps because fiction writers have less constricted imaginations. Dante and C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* are two of my favorite examples here.

Of course, God could simply have omitted the “dress rehearsal,” but then, we’d have to make sure we got our parts absolutely right the first time. Because, if Thomas is right, when we see God “face to face,” there is no opportunity for second choices, not because God does not allow them, but because they are not possible. “History” is only possible in a contingent universe in which we don’t have immediate awareness or intuition of God. The kind of world we live in now. Where there are earthquakes.

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## Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis



There is an atheist apologetics website that calls itself [“Why Won’t God Heal Amputees?”](#) By “atheist apologetics,” I mean the kind of thing engaged in by advocates of the New Atheism like Richard Dawkins, that is, an attempt to make an argumentative case for atheism and against religion, specifically against Christianity. The basic argument of the website is a simplistic argument against the

existence of God based on the problem of physical evil. It is a variation on the “old chestnut” “village atheist” chain of argumentation:

*If God is good, he would want to eliminate evil.*

*If God is all-powerful, he could eliminate evil.*

*But evil exists.*

*Ergo,*

*Either God is not good*

*Or*

*God is not all-powerful*

*Or*

*God does not exist.*

The website presents the argument in terms of the problem of amputees.

*If God were good, he would want to heal amputees . . . etc.*

*But God does not heal amputees.*

*Ergo*

*There is no God.*

Atheist versions of the argument from evil do not usually distinguish carefully between moral and physical “evil,” and this is a classic example. The vast majority of suffering that takes place in the world is a result of moral culpability on the part of human beings. Hitler killed 6 million Jews. Wars create amputees. Physical suffering and moral evil need to be distinguished.

Moreover, it also needs to be noted that any attempt to address the problem of evil and suffering in the world can really only opt for one of two solutions, a metaphysical solution or a moral solution. Metaphysical solutions say that “evil and suffering are just the way things are.” Moral solutions say that evil is the consequence of the moral choices of some rational being or beings. Atheism, pantheism



and all versions of monism must necessarily opt for metaphysical solutions. Dualisms (Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism) also opt for a metaphysical solution. Good and evil are in eternal and irresolvable conflict, and that is “just the way things are.”

Partially moral solutions can be found in those Eastern religions that advocate karma. At least some of the evil and suffering that exist in the world is a direct consequence of moral choices made by rational beings, either in this life or a previous life. Nonetheless, the solution is not complete, insofar as Eastern religions often try to combine karma with some kind of monist ontology. At heart, the basic problem in monist systems is still metaphysical. Since everything is ultimately Brahman, the existence of plurality, evil, and suffering is *maya*, an illusion, and so, at the end of the day, “evil and suffering are just the way things are.”

The Abrahamic religions may be unique in advocating a moral solution to the problem of evil. Evil exists because of the choices of rational beings (either human beings or spiritual beings [fallen angels]), choices for which God is not responsible. Augustine is the chief architect of what is sometimes called “the free will defense,” in his arguments against Manichaeism. I remain convinced that Augustine’s solution is still the only intelligible one, insofar as any solution that is not moral is not a solution. Any attempt to explain the existence of evil by saying that “this is just the way things are” is at bottom a throwing up of the hands in defeat.

At the same time, it is crucial to distinguish between the problem of moral evil (caused by the moral choices of rational beings) and what is sometimes called “physical evil.” Why are children born blind? Why does God not heal amputees? Or, as the question has been asked ever since the Lisbon earthquake, and frequently in recent years: [Why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?](#) The following is a preliminary

reflection not on the problem of moral evil – What about the holocaust? – but physical “evil.” Specifically, why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?

Any doctrine of creation has to include the following affirmations.

1) By definition, created being must be other than God, and a consequence of God’s free decision to create. God does not have to create at all, but if God creates a universe, that universe will necessarily have certain characteristics that must distinguish anything that is not God from God.

2) Creation is contingent, not only in the sense that it does not have to exist at all, but also in the sense that it could be radically different.

3) Creation is finite. By definition, anything that is contingent has limits.

4) Created being has an intrinsic order and intelligibility. An unintelligible and disordered creation could not be a universe in the strict sense, but would rather be a chaos, incapable of either supporting intelligent life like ourselves or of being understood by intelligent life.

5) Creation could be greater than it is, but also less than it is. By definition, any finite contingent being could be improved, to an infinite extent. By any definition, any finite contingent being could be less than it is, to an infinite extent. There is no upper or lower limit to that which is finite and contingent. To speak of a “best of all possible worlds” is nonsense. To demand that we should live in such is delusional nonsense.

6) Both contingency and intelligibility are necessary to a universe in which rational physical creatures (like ourselves) can live. A universe that was not contingent would not change, but would be static and without history. A universe

that was not intelligible would be unknowable.

7) The above characteristics are not only demanded by a Christian doctrine of creation, they are necessary to modern science. A universe that was not contingent would not need to be examined by experimental method to be known. A universe that was not intelligible could not be known by being examined. The reason why modern science developed in the West was because the Christian doctrine of creation (and only the Christian doctrine of creation) laid down the conditions by which modern science is possible.

8) In any universe that is both contingent and intelligible, destruction of being is both possible and inevitable. In universes where hard substances like rocks exist, contacts between rocks of sufficient size with organic beings (plants and animals) will result in death. In universes where animals require oxygen to live, lack of oxygen will lead to death. In cases where that destruction happens to intelligent self-aware beings, that destruction will be perceived as a disaster.

9) In a contingent and intrinsically ordered universe, there are conditions that make intelligent physical life possible. It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates. It is certainly the case that a planet that supports human beings must have water. However, where there are tectonic plates, there will inevitably be earthquakes. Where there is both water and tectonic plates, earthquakes will produce tsunamis, and if people live near shore lines, tsunamis will cause death.

10) To ask God to prevent earthquakes in order to prevent human suffering and death is likely to make a nonsensical request. It is possible that God could create a world without tectonic plates, but such a world would likely be one in which human beings like ourselves could not live.

11) To demand that any universe that God creates would be a world in which there were no possibility of suffering or death would be to demand that God create a world that is not both contingent and intrinsically intelligible, but such a world would not be a created world because contingency and intelligibility are the necessary conditions of creation.

12) To demand that God intervene whenever the conditions of creation might lead to suffering and death would be to demand that God either perform constant miracles or that God violate the conditions of a contingent and orderly creation. Questions like "Why does God not prevent earthquakes?" or "Why does God not restore the missing limbs of all amputees?" are silly questions. They do not take the conditions of creation (contingency and order) seriously.

13) In an orderly contingent world where there will inevitably be numerous threats to the lives and well being of intelligent creatures like ourselves, both pain and fear of death are good things. Pain is a warning that protects animals (both rational and non-rational) from destruction. Fear of death is a necessary motivator to keep animals and people alive.

14) The doctrine of creation also inevitably includes a doctrine of providence. Providence entails that God continues to order and preserve creation, but does so in such a manner that accords with both its contingency and inherent intelligibility. Providence is neither determinism nor deism. Providence entails that God is good to both the moral and immoral. Providence entails that God deals with evil and suffering not by doing away with them, but by producing good out of suffering and evil. Granted that God is all powerful, and God exercises providence, God can certainly heal people, and answers to prayer no doubt happen. However, to demand that God must prevent every act of physical suffering or that God restore amputated limbs is to demand that God perform constant miracles, that he override the normal operation of a contingent and ordered creation.

15) In any contingent universe, being (and life) are gifts, not owed to us by God. Whether or not human death is a consequence of sin (Christians believe that it is), that God gives life freely means that human beings can not demand it as something owed to us

16) Eschatology is a necessary part of the Christian doctrine of creation. The Christian claim is that history has a purpose and direction, and the current physical universe is not only not the only one that could possibly exist, but that it is also not the only one that will always exist. There is therefore a ground for the unlimited hope for something better that seems to be an inherent characteristic of human beings. Nonetheless, such hope is not grounds to question the real and limited goodness of the world in which we live now, complete with its earthquakes and tsunamis and amputees who are not healed.

There are, of course, some necessary pieces that to be added to the above if one is going to adopt any ultimately Christian and moral solution to the problem of evil, namely:

1) The relation between moral choices and suffering. In a world in which rational beings make moral choices, there would have to have been a first evil choice. What relation is there between the inherent possibility of physical suffering in a contingent and ordered world and actual suffering? That is, if there had been no fall into sin, would human beings still have been subject to physical suffering like that caused by earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably, in an ordered and contingent universe that contains tectonic plates and water, earthquakes and tsunamis would take place whether human beings had sinned or not.

2) Redemption: Any Christian account of the problem of evil and suffering needs to say something about the incarnation, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian solution to the problem of theodicy ultimately focuses on the

cross. At the same time, the cross is a moral solution to a moral problem.

3) Eschatology: Does the notion of a “new creation” and a “new earth” suggest some kind of alteration of current physical laws such that there would be no earthquakes or tsunamis in the “new earth”? In the “new creation,” there will be no death and “all tears will be wiped” away. Such a new creation would have to be considerably different than the one in which we live now. Given that there are no limits to the possible “greatness” of any contingent universe, such a new creation is certainly within the limits of divine possibility.

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## Notes on Predestination



We begin with the Scholastic Distinction Between *Ordo Cognoscendi* (Order of Knowing) and the *Ordo Essendi* (Order of Being): The order in which we come to know things is the opposite of the order in which they exist.

Applied to theology: The basic principle of theology is that God is *in se* who he is in his revelation. In *ordo essendi*, God exists necessarily and freely as eternal Triune identity. In *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know God through his economic

acts in history, recorded and witnessed by prophets and apostolic eyewitnesses. Knowledge of God as Triune follows knowledge of God as incarnate in Christ, which follows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We know God is and has always been Triune because God the Father raised his Son Jesus from the dead.

Scripture is the inspired prophetic and apostolic witness to the Triune God's economic revelation in history. In the *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know who God is first through this prophetic and apostolic witness. Scripture is referential in two directions: history (the economy of redemption – the economic Trinity); ontology (God *in se* – the immanent Trinity).

The primary language of Scripture is not the language of ontology, but the language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative. The proper object of Christian faith is the subject matter of revelation (the Triune God *in se*), but this knowledge is mediated to us through the biblical language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative. Our subsequent knowledge of the Triune God as the subject matter of revelation enables us to re-read Scripture in light of its economic conclusion. We know how the story begins (with the Trinity) because we know how it ends (God the Father raised Jesus from the dead).

The language of Scripture is the language of "common sense" realism (symbol, metaphor, and narrative), of realities in relation to us (*pro nobis*). The language of ontology is the language of "critical realism," of things in themselves (*in se*). In the *ordo cognoscendi*, the move from the economic to the immanent Trinity is the move from common sense to critical realism, from narrative, symbol, and metaphor, to history, and then to ontology. Phil. 2:5-11 and Nicea are not saying different things, but one speaks in the language of common sense realism (narrative and symbol); the other speaks in the language of critical realism (ontology).

What does this have to do with predestination?

The language of Scripture about election and predestination is not the language of ontology, but the language of narrative, symbol, and metaphor (economy). Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ saves; Scripture does not provide a metaphysics or ontology of salvation.

The basic biblical teaching about election and predestination: 1) Jesus Christ is the Elect One; 2) Election is in Christ – there is no election outside of Christ; 3) Some are saved (because of God's redemption in Christ); There is an elect Community (Israel and the Church) and they are chosen in Christ; 4) God has an eschatological goal for his people, chosen in Christ, that they be conformed to the image of his Son (salvation); from all eternity, God predestined his chosen people to attain this goal; 5) Some are lost (through their own fault) and thus do not attain the predestined goal.

In the history of the church, the discussion of election and predestination has been primarily concerned not so much with the question of God's election of a people in Christ, but with the question of the ontology of the salvation of the individual Christian. How is it that human beings come to have faith? Why do some believe and not others? What is the relationship between grace and human freedom?

In terms of ontology, this is simply one instance of the general problem of the relation between the Creator (eternal, necessary) and creation (dependent, contingent). Other examples in the history of theology: 1) the incarnation (Nicea, Chalcedon); 2) the sacraments; 3) sanctifying grace.

Some basic metaphysical principles:

1) The distinction between God and the world. God is not an item "in the world" and must not be conceived as such. God and the world do not "add up." God is not a competitive "other" in the world. God does not become "greater" because of creation,



but neither does creation mean that God needs to "limit himself" for created being to exist.

2) The eternal Triune God is complete in himself and has no unsatisfied needs. God creates freely out of love in order to share with creatures the goodness of the inner Trinitarian life. God is entirely gracious and always acts in accord with his character as good. God does not need us. God does not create because he has an unfulfilled need to demonstrate attributes of "justice" and "mercy."

3) God is the supreme Good (*summum bonum*), in whom there can be no evil—not because whatever is, is good, or because something becomes good merely because God wills it, but because God's nature is inherently good, and God cannot will or create evil.

4) That God is *in se* who he is in his revelation means that God's actions toward his creatures are always for their good. There is no "hidden God" behind God's revelation in Christ where he is not gracious (Barth).

5) In discussing the relation between Creator and creature, not only divine aseity and sovereignty, but also created contingency and genuine created reality, must be preserved. God creates and works through created contingencies in such a manner that they retain their integrity as created contingencies.

6) God is sovereign over his creation. God is present to each creature and each created event in that he gives existence to whatever is. If God were to cease creating and sustaining the universe for even a moment, it would collapse back into nothingness.

7) Sin exists, but God is in no way the cause of it. Sin is completely contrary to God's will. God is in no way the cause of the sinful actions of creatures. God permitted, but did not cause, the fall into sin. God does not decree or

“efficaciously permit” the fall to happen in such a way that the existence of evil in the world is inevitable. The existence of sin is an entirely contingent event, and truly might not have happened.

8) Although God is not the cause of evil, God is capable of bringing good out of evil, and does so. (This is the doctrine of providence).

9) Eternity and immutability do not mean that God does not “respond” to human actions in the sense that God’s actions never vary as a consequence of human actions. (Among other things, this would be an implication of the personalism of Trinitarian theology. The relation between God and creatures is not that of an irresistible force to a passive object, but of the Trinitarian persons who share their love with created persons who respond to grace with gratitude.) As mentioned above, the fall into sin was an entirely contingent event, and might not have happened at all. Redemption is a response to this human contingency. Any supralapsarian doctrine of redemption that would imply the necessary existence of sin is contrary to 7) above. (Is this a danger for some Barthian formulations of election?)

10) If God is in himself who he is in his revelation, then God’s promise of salvation in Christ and his command to all to repent necessarily imply unlimited atonement. That the incarnate Word assumed human nature means that Christ suffered in and redeemed the humanity that is common to all human beings. (If “what is not assumed is not redeemed” is true, its corollary is that “what is assumed, is redeemed.”) God commands all to repent because God wills the salvation of all, and Christ assumed the human nature of, and died for all human beings. The gospel can be preached as good news for all because it is. Every human being is someone who has been created in the image of God, is fallen into sin, is redeemed by Christ, and is summoned to the promise of eternal life in Christ.

11) God's gracious initiative is always prior to human response. Faith is enabled by divine grace and is thus a gift. The analogy of "double agency" (Farrer, Hunsinger) is more adequate here than models of determinism, monergism, or semi-Pelagianism, because it is more consonant with the personalism of Trinitarian theology. In grace, God moves the human will in such a manner that wherever God acts, there is more human freedom, not less. In the words of the scholastic dictum, "Grace does not destroy, but perfects nature." We speak, then, not of grace and free will, but of grace and "freed will." Thus, faith is both a divinely enabled gift, but also a vigorous human response—personalism again. Faith is not merely passive. ("Double agency" corresponds to traditional language of "sufficient" and "efficacious" grace; "operative grace," "prevenient" and "concurrent" grace, etc.)

12) Because God moves the created will according to its nature as will (double agency, not determinism), it is possible for grace to be refused. Although God does not create evil, hell is a genuine possibility. The paradox here is that the sinner's grasp at autonomy is vain, since refusal of grace leads not to freedom, but to the slavery of sin.

13) Election and reprobation are not parallel phenomena, and must not be characterized as such. Scripture speaks of a positive election of redeemed sinners to salvation in Christ, but nowhere speaks of a positive choice of particular sinners from all eternity to damnation. No "double predestination"! Redemption is entirely the work of Christ, and grace enables the elect freely to exercise faith. Damnation is a tragedy because contrary to God's will, and is entirely the fault of those who refuse the divine gift.

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# Answers to New Atheist Questions: Part 1 – Epistemology

A reader named “Dale” left the following comment in response to my sermon: “CallerID From the Source of the Universe”:

*There are two main forces in the universe. Order and chaos. Religion perceives order as good and chaos as evil. These forces have always existed in matter. It is religion that has labeled them as such. Some texts of the Bible have been in existence since 1500 BC. There have been billions of creatures that have been borne, lived, and died before the Bible came along to interpret meaning. It is the nature of matter to be the way it is. It is what it is. Being matter I must die. I go out of existence. That is difficult to accept. I had no existence before I was borne. Faith tells me that there is a transcendence existence beyond matter. Hope comes into play here to treat the anxiety of death. Call it a psychological prop that keeps us sane. Here I can assent to faith or decline to do so. If faith, the promise of glory. Decline, hell or nothing. What is my choice. Glory sounds attractive. Organized religion plays on this dilemma. This is what atheists object to when they challenge believers in this psychological game of meaning.*

I thought Dale's comment was worth responding to at some length.



Thank you for writing, Dale. Your points are worth addressing, and I will do so at some length.

First, I want to point out that, in my sermon, I deliberately avoided addressing questions of the origins of evil or suffering, and instead focused on the question of what Christian faith asserts about what it is that God does about the existence of evil and suffering. I also avoided distinguishing between what philosophers call "natural evil" (earthquakes, birth defects) and moral evil (violence, murder, betrayal, theft). I did this for several reasons. First, as a preacher in a church that uses a lectionary, I had to preach from the lectionary texts for the day, and, second, unlike a lecture, a sermon is restricted to what the speaker can say in twenty minutes or so. A more adequate attempt to address the problem would necessarily deal with the origin of evil as well the distinction between natural occurrences (like earthquakes) that threaten human well-being (and are therefore discerned as "evil"), and events that have human causes and are designated as "evil" for moral reasons. The former are more properly "tragedy" than "evil," while the latter are more properly designated as "evil." If you lost your wallet, there would be a genuine loss to which you might respond with "tough luck" (minor tragedy), but you would not generally consider the loss "evil." On the other hand, if I attempted to steal your wallet, then you would likely consider my actions "evil" even if I failed, and you would justifiably be angry with me, even if I actually had done you no harm.

More important than these distinctions, I think, is the question of response to evil, and, as I pointed out, it is one that I have yet to see any of the New Atheists address (or rather even acknowledge) with any sophistication. To the extent that the New Atheists ignore the fundamental Christian claim that God deals with evil in a particular manner, their criticism simply fails to hit its target. I note that your own comment did not address this central point either, but rather focuses on questions about the nature of the universe (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), specifically questions having to do with “natural evil,” and how we might know whether a given natural event is an evil. So I will address those questions.. Your comment covers a lot of territory and addresses several issues, so it needs to be broken down piece by piece.

*There are two main forces in the universe. Order and chaos. Religion perceives order as good and chaos as evil. These forces have always existed in matter. It is religion that has labeled them as such.*

You begin by making two assertions, the first, having to do with ontology or being, the second with epistemology or theory of knowledge. Claims about what we know and how we know, and claims about being (what is the case) are different kinds of claims and need to be assessed separately.

In order to address your first claim about ontology, it is necessary to begin with the second, about epistemology. I summarize your epistemological claims as follows:

1) Order and chaos are inherent to the structure of the universe. In themselves, they are neither good, nor evil, but simply are what they are (in itself a claim about ontology – I will address this later).

2) “Religion” has designated order as “good,” and “chaos” as evil, but these designates correspond to nothing real in the



structure of the universe. They are [psychological] projections, based upon fear and unfounded hope, and are thus illusory (more on this later, as well).

3) Unlike, "religion," atheism recognizes the universe as it is. It does not project illusory categories ("good," "evil") on the universe (implied but not asserted).

In response: I would not say that it is "religion" that has labeled "order" and "chaos" as "good" and "evil." Rather, it is human beings who have done so. Both Plato and Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder, and, although the various historical religions all in different ways do indeed attempt to address questions about the meaning of life, the problems of suffering and evil, the purpose and destiny of human beings, it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of human beings as such to want to know answers to questions like "Why are we here?," "Where did we come from?," "Why is there evil and suffering?," "What is the fundamental problem?," "What is the solution to the fundamental problem?," "How should we live?" These are the fundamental questions addressed by both religion and philosophy, and atheists engage in this activity as much as do the "religious," and the New Atheism is simply one of numerous examples in the history of thought to attempt to address these fundamental questions.

Human beings are thus fundamentally metaphysical in orientation, and metaphysics is an unavoidable human activity in the sense that human beings, whether religious or not, whether atheists or not, whether philosophers are not, will attempt to answer these questions. It may be true that some religious people have identified order with "goodness" and chaos with "evil," but this is not fundamentally (or necessarily) a "religious" affirmation. Plato's philosophy makes something like the same affirmation, and Plato was not "religious," but a philosopher. There are religions (like Christianity) that would make the formulation differently. (I hope to address this later). At the same time, the heated

rhetoric of atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens makes clear that they do not merely believe that there is "chaos" in the universe, but that the suffering that results from such chaos is a genuine evil, and this evil is a primary argument against the existence of God.

Human beings address these fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of life and the world through symbols, narratives, and intellectual constructs that provide attempts to answer the fundamental questions. Contemporary philosophy and theology tends to refer to these epistemological constructs as "world-views" or "paradigms."

One of the reasons that contemporary philosophers and theologians tend to speak in terms of "paradigms" or "world-views" has been the collapse of epistemological "foundationalism," the epistemological position of which Descartes is the prime example. Foundationalism is the position that any claim to knowledge of truth that is not self-evident must itself be based on knowledge of basic foundational truths that are self-evident, such as one's own existence or the law of non-contradiction. Any "truths" not justified by self-evident foundations are to be doubted. Foundationalism has collapsed because of its internal incoherence. Philosophers have come to realize that there are insufficient self-evident principles on which to build a coherent system, and there is lack of agreement on what the self-evident principles are. The conclusions that supposedly follow from self-evident principles are themselves subject to doubt, and, again, there is no agreement on what those conclusions are. Consequently, foundationalism's principle of methodological doubt leads inevitably to skepticism. Finally, the consequences that follow from self-evident principles lead to trivial results. Any belief that actually makes a difference in one's life and is worth committing oneself to is a belief that is inherently subject to being challenged. Finally, before one can reach the point of recognition of

self-evident principles and the conclusions that necessarily follow from them, one always has first committed oneself to non-self-evident beliefs that in themselves can be doubted. The “working-knowledge” that ordinary human beings need to navigate the world is based on “trust” to commitments that can necessarily be doubted, and such trust is socially located in communities that exist prior to the point at which we are able to doubt. Thus, St. Augustine’s dictum: “believe in order to understand” is true not only as a prescription for Christian theology, but as necessary advice for anyone to operate in the world. There is no knowledge without prior faith and commitment to things that we cannot prove. Everyone “walks by faith, and not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Foundationalism thus collapses of its own weight. It is the epistemological equivalent of attempting to lift oneself by one’s boot straps.

Given the collapse of foundationalism, it follows that atheism, just like “religion,” necessarily depends on certain prior faith commitments. Just like “religion,” if atheism is going to make a reasonable case for its positions, it must do so by embracing the plausibility of an epistemological “paradigm.” And it does so. Just like “religion,” the New Atheists “tell a story”; they use symbols and intellectual constructs to make a case that “there is no god” in the exact same way that adherents of various religions or philosophies have used stories and symbols to argue for the plausibility of their own religious or philosophical commitments for thousands of years. It’s just that the New Atheism tells a different story, and appeals to different symbols and stories to reach different conclusions. The most popular story told by the New Atheists is that of the progress of rational science and autonomous individualism over against the intolerant restrictions of irrational religion. Scientific atheism is good because it leads to more progress, more freedom, and more tolerance, while religion is evil because it is founded on irrational superstition, and results in tyranny, intolerance, obscurantism, and violence.

Such paradigms fail or succeed to the extent that they are both internally non-contradictory (consistency), and also can adequately account for and explain observed phenomena of the world around us (comprehensiveness). But they also have to have a certain aesthetic elegance, a "fittingness" that we find attractive, and "just makes sense." Paradigms that are internally inconsistent or clearly contrary to observed reality tend to collapse of their own weight, but particular paradigms can survive a great deal of both internal and external tension. For example, some Eastern religions claim that the observed physical phenomena of the world in which we live are *maya* or illusion, and that the fundamental goal of life is to escape from individual identity, which is, by implication, an illusion as well. Such a claim is, to say the least, in tension with what most Westerners would consider to be the self-evident reality of both one's own existence and the external world. (There have been Western exceptions, like the English philosopher George Berkeley, who argued for a philosophy in which matter did not exist.) However, Hinduism and Buddhism have survived for centuries in spite of fundamental affirmations that fly in the face of what most Westerners consider to be the self-evident nature of reality. At the same time, internal consistency and comprehensiveness are not alone able to preserve a paradigm. Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is the source of the contemporary use of the term "paradigm," and Kuhn's fundamental argument was that the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric scientific paradigm was not the result of either better internal consistency or comprehensiveness. Ptolemy's paradigm was as capable of accounting for the data as was Copernicus's. What led to the eventual overthrow of geocentrism in favor of heliocentrism was a kind of "aesthetic" elegance that was more simple, and thus more appealing. Similarly, a case can be made that numerous philosophical or religious systems have enough internal consistency and external comprehensiveness not to be self-evidently incoherent. Religious or philosophical systems can

survive for quite awhile despite lack of consistency or coherence, and some philosophies and religions disappear not because they are self-evidently false, but because they become old-fashioned or are simply overtaken by other paradigms.. One thinks of nineteenth century Absolute Idealism or twentieth century logical positivism as two such philosophies that were once in vogue, but now have simply fallen by the way side.

Epistemological paradigms can be as simple as the accounts of primitive mythologies (although most mythologies are not actually simple) or as sophisticated as philosophical and metaphysical constructs like those of Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel or Martin Heidegger. Epistemological paradigms are also associated with the higher religions: not only the so-called Western religions of Judaism and Christianity, but also Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. Insofar as these intellectual constructs or paradigms are attempts to think within and out of particular religious traditions, they are theologies.

These paradigms can also be atheistic. For example, one thinks of Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Neitzche in the nineteenth century, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, in the twentieth, and, more recently, post-modern atheists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, or Peter Singer. As such, the atheistic constructs are neither less nor more theoretical than the mythological, religious, or philosophical ones, and attempt to use exactly the same kinds of intellectual tools to address the same kinds of questions. They have no intrinsic superiority to the paradigms offered by theistic philosophical systems, religions, or even primitive mythologies. They simply offer one intellectual construct among others in an attempt to answer basic worldview questions.

And, as paradigms, none of them are straightforward readings of what is "simply there." The atheistic assumption that nothing exists except matter is as much an intellectual construct (a paradigm) that attempts to make sense of reality

as is the Buddhist claim that individual existence is an illusion and that the non-existing self is subject to rebirth until it escapes this illusion, or as the Christian claim that human beings have been created in the image of God, and are destined for eternal life.

So much for the epistemological claim. ("It is religion that has labeled them as such.") It is not "religion" that has "labeled them as such," but simply human beings with a desire to know, who engage in the process that Plato and Aristotle say begins in wonder. Some who engage in this process have commitments to some particular religion. Some do not. But the process is the same, whether engaged in by advocates of particular religions or advocates of none.

This does not imply that one "paradigm" is as valid as another, nor that there is no way to decide between paradigms, but it does eliminate the atheist presumption that "religion" is an implausible "interpretation" of reality – "It is religion that has labeled them as such" – while atheism is simply a recognition of what is self-evidently the case. Both offer competing paradigms, and there is no such thing as a straightforward reading of the way things just are. It may be the case that, as you write, "matter [simply] is what it is." But that is not simply and self-evidently true.

This leads to your metaphysical claims, which I hope to address later.