Theological Views of Evil

In our modest attempt to deepen our understanding of good and evil, we must begin by admitting that goodness and evil are abstract concepts that are not absolute. Our eternal anguish connected to living with horrendous evil and accepting that it exists derives from humanity’s fundamental need to control our world. The sobering realization for mankind is that evil was inserted into the world by human disobeyance of Gods admonishment to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

We begin by admitting that goodness tends to be behavior that is morally positive and evil is behavior that is morally negative. John Stuart Mill’s theory of utilitarianism declared that good is that which provides the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For example, the psychologist Eric Fromm offers the following on good and evil:

Good is all that serves life, evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, and all that enhances life. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it to pieces. (Fromm, Creators and Destroyers)

Further, there is usually no consensus that goodness is intrinsic to human nature—meaning that goodness needs to be socialized through loving parents, the influence of religious teachings, school, etc. In theological terms, one may assert that evil is the result of an imperfect human condition, and that it is an aberration from culture specific norms.

It is unlikely that humanity will ever truly understand or resolve the conflict regarding why an all loving, merciful G-d permits evil. One must concede that although G-d is all loving and powerful, it is not implied that He can do the unimaginable. As much as each of us would like to rewind life and undo past tragedies or unfavorable life events, G-d cannot undo history. It would be out of character for G-d to similarly lie, sin or tempt one to sin. G-d did create humanity in His own image and scripture says that “with G-d all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26). If G-d eliminated evil from the world, He would not be able to achieve His other goals for mankind. Enabling each of us to exercise the freedom to choose to be in a personal, meaningful and loving relationship with Him would not be possible unless He endowed us with free will. If we elect to commune with G-d, we must be free to choose this personal relationship without coercion. In the end, one concludes that human individuals must be free to either love or turn away from G-d—to love or reject Him. Human beings who reject, disobey or act against the will of G-d are capable of committing evil and imposing suffering on others.

A distinction should be made between evil resulting from the actions of free individuals and evil resulting from natural disasters. Human beings are free agents in a world containing laws forbidding the violation of individual rights, and individuals disobeying laws could commit evil acts. Natural catastrophes such as earthquakes or tsunamis inflicting mass loss can be considered evil acts of nature. In some instances, both conditions occur. For example, flooding and loss of life occurs when contractors disregard building codes/regulations and construct homes that falter during a flood or earthquake.

The Christian Perspective of Evil

According to Christianity, G-d is the creator of all. It follows logically then that since evil exists, G-d inserted evil into humanity. Following His creation, G-d was satisfied, appreciating that “all that he had made was very good” (Genesis 1, 31). One can also logically deduce however, an inconsistency. If G-d is all good, He should eliminate evil from the world. It is said G-d is omnipotent, so He has the power to stop it. One can conclude that since G-d doesn’t stop evil or remove it from the world, He isn’t all good and is unable to stop evil. It is this dilemma that needs to be reconciled in each of us.

For Christians, evil originated from the world of angels who were created by G-d and who were endowed with a free will. The angel Lucifer was one of G-ds cherubs who was indifferent to G-ds demands. In the book of the prophet Ezekiel is a parable about Lucifer:

You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of G-d, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings (Ezekiel, 28, 15-17).

G-d transforms Lucifer into Satan, along with the other angels who rebelled against G-d, and expelled them from heaven. It is said that Lucifer’s fall resulted from his desire to be independent of G-d, to disobey and rebel against G-d. Lucifer was a free agent with choice, and since he chose to turn against G-d, it represents the origin of evil. One then deduces from this parable that evil was not created by G-d, but by Satan exercising his free will for the purpose of disobeying G-d. G-d expected his creation to exercise free will to deepen obedience and love for Him. For G-d to be pleased with his creation, He needs to see that humanity chooses to love Him and fulfill his expectations by freely choosing to do so.

In addition, the Apostle Peter warned Christians about Satan, admonishing them to:

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5,8).

Although it is understood that Satan introduces evil into the world, it is propagated in the world by human beings through sin. Human beings sin because they have not used the freedom of choice granted them by G-d toward ends that are good. Humanity can resist the impulse to transgress and commit evil, but we do not and evil occurs. Further, if G-d extinguished evil individuals from the world, they would not receive the opportunity to repent and reconcile their relationship with G-d. In Ezekiel (33,11) G-d refuses to witness “the death of the wicked” and wants “that they turn from their ways and live.” If G-d extinguished evil, He would contradict his professed eternal love for His creation, mankind.

In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus expresses G-d’s attitude toward evil (Matthew 13, 24-43):

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed seeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?” “An enemy did this,” he replied. The servants asked him, “Do you want us to go and pull them up?” “No,” he answered, “because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn”

The commentary on this parable shows that G-d permits the weed to grow next to the wheat, and at the proper time, when the weed can be distinguished from the wheat, it will be pulled out of the ground. In relation to human beings, weeds represent the evil doers who are given the opportunity to change their ways and become wheat. Converting from weed to wheat requires the evil doer to repent and return to G-d.