

ARE WE REALLY ABLE TO SEE IF GOOD IS DRAWN OUT OF EVIL? WHAT ABOUT GOD?

Good seems to come out of evil. People are bad at judging that. And some maybe the clergy are worse than others. You may get seriously ill and almost die and afterwards you feel like a different person for your experience seemed to teach you the value of life. But that is not necessarily good coming from evil. It is good coming after evil. You were the kind of person who was going to respond positively to having recovered. The experience of evil is not enough to account for how you responded. The memory can fade and change so the evil of the experience is forgotten in many ways.

The question if good really comes from evil and if we can see it is related to the evidential argument from evil. This argument does not say evil shows there is no loving God but shows that there probably is none. So it says there is evidence that there is no loving God but this does not amount to proving anything.

People like to feel that good comes out of evil because,

It is hopeful.

It makes them feel that their helping anybody or themselves is good for the evil will come apart anyway to some extent and good will appear.

It makes them feel less bad about their failures in helping others.

It facilitates the idea of a God who brings good out of evil.

It is what people want them to say. If you say your terrible serious illness made you a better person you will be praised and not condemned if you say you were the kind of person that was going to meet that challenge and be bigger than the sickness. So there is pressure to lie.

It panders to how we want the possible goods we experience to be highly representative of all possible goods.

If we cannot imagine the good God is working for and how good the possibilities are that he offers, people say that shows that God is right not to intervene when evil happens for he is working for something better. It functions as an answer to those who say they cannot think of a reason why God should allow evil. The answer is that there could be reasons we have not thought of or nobody has.

[The problem with that is that intervention implies God is stepping back. The Christian view is that he in fact is intervening but not in the way we think is best.]

This accuses us of being very limited in what we think is best and this amounts to us finding it hard to know what to do when faced with a moral decision. Thus we do not know if any good reasons why God may allow suffering may be right. It works the other way too. We do not know if he is wrong.

So if there is a God then we have no real idea about good so we cannot judge him for allowing suffering and evil to happen. This leads to moral scepticism and moral paralysis where what we think is good we may as well think is bad. Some try to use this to show that God may exist and love us which is extraordinary. Clearly, a God who is so unhelpful with our moral sense is not a God who loves us. He just leaves us paralysed and condemns us as sinners for it. If evil is terrible the ultimate evil is making evil your God like that.

Objections to such scepticism and moral paralysis exist.

One is that to say that things seeming good and people seeming good is not a reliable way to decide what is good or best is too cynical. It is horrible morally speaking to wonder if the virtuous father or mother really is as good as they seem.

The fact remains that merciless logic does in fact say that something that is bad but seems good will work to seem good so you never know. The fact remains that the problem is not with the person seeming to be good or seeming to be happy but with other factors.

The fact remains that we all have met people who seem happy and good who were far from either. The problem is with assuming that of people across the board. The fact remains though that the clever people who fake goodness and happiness do show that the really good ones and the really happy ones may only seem to be so. It is evidence based. So the fact remains there are many happy and good people who leave us questioning how happy and good they really are. We only

know of a few genuine cases but what about the huge majority - the rest? If only a few people can be seen to be really happy and good that actually shows doubting the validity and reality of the seeming goodness is right not wrong. We are talking about probability here

You can make it about benefits not people as well. The good is the enemy of the best and that is not anybody's fault. It is a fact that a good person who is so happy may thereby be walking into what nature has prepared for them – a downfall. Good can lead to less good or evil. It is not a judgement on the person but on their situation and a judgement on nature. So being happy and good is not everything and no matter how real they are for you they may seem real even to you!

Two, there is the argument that you have no way of knowing if the good or bad you do will be really good or bad in the big picture. You cannot really know if the good you do is for the best for the picture is so big and the future endless. The philosopher Bergmann states that "we have no idea how likely a prima facie good state of affairs is to be evil all-things-considered [and vice versa]" (Hasker 2010:26).

Against that it is said that to argue that there is no way to weigh what might be for the best against what might be is against our experience. We do good expecting good results for we see that does in fact happen. The times that it goes wrong do not happen enough to justify arguing that doing good or evil does not matter in terms of the final picture. But if there are supernatural beings such as gods etc the argument cannot be refuted. You cannot be judged for doing evil saying that you have the feeling that some forces will make sure it was the right thing when all things are considered. You may say that it does not matter if you see if it was right as long as the higher powers do. Two is valid if you have belief in saints and gods and demons or whatever.

An objection to saying good may not be as good or justifiable as it seems is that a working knowledge would do. Then you just assume that the good is as good as it looks. But then assuming it is not is also going by working knowledge so we are back where we started! And working knowledge can justify anything. All evildoers think they have a working knowledge and are acting on it.

A final complaint is that the argument says we learn nothing important from the goods we have for the real goods are beyond our minds. Religion it must be said does argue that things like food and drink and marriage though good are nothing in comparison to God. Jesus said man does not live by bread but by the word of God.

People want to believe that the imperfect goods we have are in some way like the greatest goods. There is the problem of how any specific good you do can be like the greatest goods. So saying the good is like the best good is a generalisation. It does nothing for individual cases. It does nothing for the big individual cases that really matter.

Bergmann said that God might have made us in such a way that we cannot tell the possible goods from the goods we have. If we cannot know the best goods or the true goods then we are far from reliable when we make moral deliberations. It may even be nil.

God could not be good if he puts us in such a position.

However, believers think they see enough good after evil to decide that they trust God to be doing the right thing in letting evil happen. They may even see enough good in evil as it is happening to come to that conclusion as well. The danger is that with the doctrine that evil is not a thing but is just an abuse of good is that their main perception is that evil is not that bad or is contained at least in some ways by the good that it latches on to. That view has to be behind the expectation that more good will come. So their talk of good coming out of evil is really based on their affirming that evil is full of good in the first place. If that suggestion that evil is really not that bad except in our heads is behind it then it is an evil suggestion. No good results are really good if that is how you are supposed to think!

Anyway the discussion then may not be so much faith as perception. And perception is tricky for it can be about what you want to see and how you want to see it.

Their praise of God is one side of the coin - it implies distaste for those who are causing the evil. To praise God's role when evil happens implies a judgement against those who are causing the evil. We have a right to object to their praising God and tell them to shut up. Their praise is just an example of how they call God good for loving the evil they like and they use that evil to fight evil they don't like. Evil was always combatted by evil in our crazy world.

Believers may not be offended at what we are getting at about God so much as what it says about their own attitude to good.

CONCLUSION:

We do not deny bluntly that God is bringing good out of evil. We are making the modest claim that it is not plausible even if it is merely possible that God is.

If harm and evil burn out generally speaking, religion has no right to use that to argue, "God is bigger than evil so you should adopt this hopeful belief." That is using something bad to construct a theology on it. It is not about your theology and you have no right to use people's suffering like that.

The "God knows what he is doing in these terrible times" outlook is dubious. How good things seem to us is no reliable guide to how good they really are. Now our position will be that atheism is more reasonable than theism or belief in God. It is a weighing thing rather than a binary position.

God cannot make us without us showing something of what he is like. We have seen the dubious motives that lead people to say evil leads to good. You would need to be very exceptional and special to ask people to trust you. The motives are outnumbering any good motives and are too strong. So if we have to be bad or presumed bad in order to say that evil leads to good and add hypocritical virtue signalling to our list of faults and evils then that says something about God. He is not loving and not compassionate.