

## Conversation with an Atheist, Regarding the “Problem of Evil”

Some atheists raise an argument that those who believe in God, must believe that He causes evil, on the basis of causality.

Perhaps the best way to address this question is to first identify its origins. No question in philosophy or religion comes about ex nihilo (i.e. out of nothing). Rather, every question that has ever been posed by a philosopher is a product of a certain system of thought and a certain outlook on life. The word we may use here for both of these things is “concepts” (mafaheem). When a person carries certain concepts in their mind, they naturally try to apply those concepts to the reality they live in. The process of doing so is what generates the question.

Understanding this is what helps us to contextualize questions in philosophy, which in turn helps us to answer them in a proper manner. If you do not understand exactly what is meant by this, insha’Allah, it will become clearer as we proceed with our discussion.

To the best of our knowledge, the first thinker to ever articulate the “problem of evil” – that is, why does evil exist and why would God allow for it – was Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher who lived from 341 to 270 BC. The “problem” he posed regarding evil was phrased by the Scottish philosopher David Hume as follows, in his “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion”, when he stated, “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”

Now, let’s try to answer this question using the method that was described previously. That is, let’s try and understand what concepts Epicurus had in his mind.

Epicurus believed in (and is also regarded as the father of) a certain philosophy known as “atomism”. According to this philosophy, the world that we live in came about when certain material particles called “atoms” (and these are not the same as the atoms we know today in science) combined together, by mere chance. Humans and living things are too the product of these atoms coming together.

The world we occupy, according to Epicurus, as well as ourselves, are only material and when we die, the atoms we are made of disperse. Nothing remains of ourselves. We have no souls and hence, there is no afterlife.

Epicurus, believing that there was no afterlife, formulated his own theory on what he believed to be the best way to live life. Because we cease to exist upon death, the best way to live is in fulfilling our own pleasures. This was what was “good”. And because pleasure was good, pain was evil.

This is what Epicurus meant when he formulated the “problem of evil”. He differed from the other Greek schools of thought, such as the Stoics and the Aristotelians, in their views on pain, seeing it only as an unqualified evil.

Epicurus believed in the existence of many gods. That was his understanding of reality. And when he applied his concept of evil to the reality in which many gods exist, that was when he produced “the problem of evil.” And in response to his own question, Epicurus came to the conclusion that the gods allowed for evil in the world, simply because they did not care for humans and their affairs.

In order to correct Epicurus’s views, however, we must first start by asking a question: is pain really evil?

As Muslims, we have conviction in the existence of the Creator (swt), the miracle of the Quran and the Message of Muhammad (saw). We understand that everything that befalls us (whether it’s pain or pleasure, fortune or misfortune), is from Allah (swt). This is confirmed in Surah al-Nisa, verse 78, when He (swt) says, ﴿فَإِنَّ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ مِّنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ﴾ “...Say (O Prophet): “All things are from Allah”..”.

To say, however, that the pain we feel in this life (as per the decree of Allah (swt) is evil is to misunderstand the reason for pain. In Epicurus’s worldview, pain was evil because for him, the purpose of life was to pursue pleasure.

Understanding the relationship between purpose and what we consider to be good and evil is important. Purpose is what gives us our criteria for good and evil.

A simple example would be the following: if I were to go to a car dealer and ask him for “a good car,” he will first ask me what exactly I am looking for i.e. for what purpose am I buying a car? Is it to go driving off-road? In that case, a land rover would be good for me. Am I looking for something that will help me commute to work? For that, a sedan would be good for me. Or maybe my purpose for buying a car is just to own something that is aesthetic and can be shown off (and I include this example because for some philosophers, the purpose of life is the pursuit of aesthetics). In that case, something flashier like a sports car would be good for me.

In each case, the goodness of the car is determined in reference to the purpose it will be fulfilling.

Unlike Epicurus, we know from our Deen that there are not several gods, but only one God and that is Allah (swt). Furthermore, we understand that Allah (swt) created us for a singular purpose: to worship Him and attain His pleasure. In Surah Ad-Dhariyat, verse 56, Allah (swt) affirms, ﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾ **“I did not create jinn and humans except to worship Me.”**

Whether or not pain is good or bad must therefore be determined not according to Epicurus’s view of what human purpose is, but what Allah (swt) has chosen for us as our purpose.

Numerous ahadith and verses from the Qur’an speak of the trials and pains Allah (swt) decrees for His servants and how they serve us in fulfilling our purpose (that is, to worship Allah (swt) and attain His pleasure).

For one, pain is good for us is that it expiates us of our sins. The Prophet (saw) said, «مَا يُصِيبُ الْمُسْلِمَ، مِنْ نَصَبٍ وَلَا وَصَبٍ، وَلَا هَمٍّ وَلَا حُزْنٍ وَلَا أَدَى وَلَا غَمٍّ، حَتَّى الشُّوْكَةِ يُشَاكَهَا، إِلَّا كَفَّرَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ خَطِيئَاتِهِ» **“No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.”** (al-Bukhari).

Second, pain teaches us sabr (patience). In Surah al-Baqarah, verse 155 and verse 156, Allah (swt) says, ﴿وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ \* الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ﴾ **“We will certainly test you with a touch of fear and famine and loss of property, life, and crops. Give good news to those who patiently endure. (155) They say, when struck by a disaster, “Surely, to Allah we belong and to Him we will (all) return.”**”

Such is Allah (swt)’s mercy that on the Day of Judgement, those who patiently endured through their suffering and pain will find their rank in Paradise elevated. The Prophet (saw) said, «إِنَّ الرَّجُلَ لَيَتَكُونُ لَهُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْمَنْزِلَةُ فَمَا يَبْلُغُهَا بِعَمَلٍ فَلَا يَزَالُ اللَّهُ يَبْتَلِيهِ بِمَا يَكْرَهُ حَتَّى يَبْلُغَهُ إِيَّاهَا» **“Verily, a man may have a rank with Allah that he does not achieve by his good deeds. Thus, Allah continues to put him to trial with what he hates until he reaches the rank destined for him.”** [Ibn Hibban]

These are but only a few ways in which we find pain to be good for us and not the “evil” that Epicurus saw it as.

It is not a coincidence that “the problem of evil” has once again surfaced in contemporary discussions of religion and philosophy. The revival of the Epicurean school of thought took place in Europe in the 17th-century and became the basis for much of the philosophy, sciences, and institutions that developed under the banner of modernity (for more on this, there is Catherine Wilson’s book Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity).

This is why today we live in a world where many people, like Epicurus, see pain as evil.

The only way to dispel this belief is to change the worldview and concepts of the people. That is, reminding them of their true purpose in this life. Only then can people recognize the hikmah (wisdom) of Allah (swt) in ordaining for us pain and hardship. Allah (swt) said, ﴿كَتَبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالَ وَهُوَ كُرْهٌ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾ **“But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.”** [Al Baqarah 2:216].

It is the Khilafah (Caliphate) on the Method of Prophethood that will carry Dawah to the entire world, generating a great change in the worldview of humanity, by using all the means that are available to it. May that be soon, inshaaAllah.

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