

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### The price we pay

by [Martin Gardner](#)

On *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer* by Bart D. Ehrman.

*Bart D. Ehrman*

God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer.  
HarperOne, 304 pages, \$25.95

I have just finished reading *God's Problem* by Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His earlier book, *Misquoting Jesus*, made the *New York Times* bestseller list. A former fundamentalist, Ehrman graduated from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, did graduate work at Wheaton College (Billy Graham's alma mater), and obtained a doctorate at Princeton Theological Seminary. Slowly over the years, he lost his faith in Christianity. His new book explains why. It is the latest in a surprising spate of books defending atheism. The book's subtitle is *How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*.

Like all writers on the topic (theist, atheist, or pantheist), Ehrman distinguishes two main aspects of the so-called "problem of evil": 1) Evils caused by human behavior. A demented man fires an automatic into a crowd. The lives of those killed are as irrationally ended as if they had been killed by an earthquake. Hitler murders millions of Jews. Stalin murders even more without regard for race, color, or creed. 2) Evils caused by nature.

Christian theologians, going back to St. Augustine and earlier, have reasoned that God is unwilling to prevent such crimes by withholding his gift of free will. If we lacked free will, Gilbert Chesterton liked to say, there is no point in thanking someone for passing the mustard. Free will is at the heart of human consciousness. We can't have one without the other. We are not robots doing what we are wired to do by heredity and experience. But if we are free to do good or evil, so goes the argument, our very freedom makes evil behavior possible. If it were otherwise, the earth would be populated not by humans but by robotic featherless bipeds similar to the social insects—bees, wasps, and termites. This is a plausible argument, and Ehrman does a good job of presenting it even though he doesn't buy it.

Why God permits natural evil is not so easy to explain. An earthquake can end the lives of thousands. Millions in Africa may die of starvation. In Genesis we read about a flood that drowns almost the entire human race, including little babies. In that case the murderer was not nature but God himself. I once had lunch with a fundamentalist Seventh-day Adventist. When I asked him how he defended God's drowning of innocent infants he astonished me by saying that God foresaw the

future and knew that the babies would all grow up to become malevolent men and women! I was tempted to stand and shout “Touché!” It was a thought that had never occurred to me.

Why does God permit massive suffering? An old argument—it traces back to ancient Greece—goes as follows. God is either incapable of abolishing natural evil, in which case he is not omnipotent, or he can but won’t, in which case he is not good. How can a theist go between the horns of this dreadful dilemma?

Of course this is no problem for an atheist. Evils are simply the way the world is. But for a theist the problem can be agonizing. Indeed, it is probably why most atheists are atheists. There is an answer, though not one likely to persuade any atheist. Surprisingly, Ehrman only briefly mentions it in connection to Rabbi Harold Kushner’s popular 1981 book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Kushner’s “Why” rests on the belief of many theists, past and present, that there are severe limits on the powers of any sort of deity. Thomas Aquinas somewhere writes that there are many things God cannot do. One, he can’t alter the past. I doubt if anyone today thinks God could, if he liked, erase Hitler from history. Two, God cannot do things that are logically impossible. The saint’s example: God can’t create a perfect human who at the same time is a perfect horse. A mathematician can add that God can’t make a triangle with four sides, or cause 2 plus 2 to equal, say, 7.

Not only must pure mathematics be free of logical contradictions, but applied mathematics as well. If objects in the outside world maintain their identities, then two apples plus two more apples can’t result in any number of apples except four. The same is true of cows, stars, and all other things that model the number 1. It is best, Aquinas wrote, not to say there are things God can’t do, but to say there are things that can’t be done.

Let’s see how this applies to natural evils. When God created the universe, or as a theist would say, started the process of creation, he not only limited the process to a world free of contradictions, the world also had to obey unalterable laws. It is not possible, say, for planets to go around the sun in elliptical orbits, and at the same time travel in square orbits. It is necessary also that gravity remain constant. Life could not exist if gravity turned into a repulsive force that sent everything flying off into space. If the earth suddenly stopped rotating, as the Bible’s account of Joshua’s miracle suggests, the result would be equally catastrophic. Indeed, if all laws were not unbreakable the world would be far too chaotic to support life.

The fact that stable laws are essential for any conceivable universe with sentient life at once makes natural evils inevitable. If someone carelessly loses balance at the edge of a cliff and topples over, you can’t expect God to suspend gravity in the region and allow the person to float gently down. If a piece of heavy masonry dislodges from the top of a tall building, and is on its way toward the head of someone on the sidewalk, you can’t expect God to divert its path or turn it into feathers.

Suppose a man falls asleep while driving a car down a thruway. He crosses the median and smashes into another car, killing a woman and her three children. Such tragedies are the terrible price we pay for a universe with unalterable laws of velocity and momentum. If God were obliged to prevent all accidents that kill or injure, he would have to be constantly poking his fingers into millions of events around the globe. History would turn into a chaos of endless miracles.

The necessity of order in the universe can also explain why God doesn’t intervene to prevent medical horrors. Consider the Black Death that killed a third of Europe’s population. Why did God not prevent this awful plague? A possible answer, weak though it may seem, is that the existence of deadly microbes was the inevitable consequence of biological laws essential to the evolution of intelligent creatures. From this perspective, evolution was perhaps the only way God could fabricate such unlikely animals as you and me. Irrational deaths from diseases and other biological causes such as cancer are the prices we pay for evolution—for the miracle of being alive.

It is easy to see how similar arguments apply to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, lightning that starts fatal fires, and other natural evils. Laws of physics obviously apply to movements of the earth's crust that cause earthquakes. Laws of rain and lightning make inevitable the occasional starting of fires. Deaths from quakes and lightning are the prices we pay for the laws of physics without which there could be no universe. Do I *know* this is why God permits such disasters? I do not. I only put the explanation forward (it goes back to Maimonides and even earlier) as the best I have encountered in the vast literature on the topic.

The most famous defense of this explanation was the *Theodicy* written by the great German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He coined the term "compossible" for a universe free of logical contradictions and with unvarying laws. He imagined God considering all compossible universes, each with its unique set of laws. Many physicists today, especially those working on superstring theory, not only take seriously Leibniz's vision of a "multiverse" containing perhaps an infinity of compossible universes, they believe such a multiverse actually exists!

Leibniz further imagined that God selected for creation the universe with the smallest amount of unavoidable human misery. The notion that Leibniz was naively unaware of the vast amount of pain in our world makes him out to be an idiot, which of course he wasn't. He even shared with Newton the invention of calculus! Voltaire's much admired satire about Dr. Pangloss missed the whole point of Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Suffering, for Leibniz, was the price we pay for a possible universe.

Leibniz also knew that humanity is capable of eliminating most irrational suffering. We can invent clever ways to construct buildings and houses that withstand earthquakes. We can find ways to prevent deaths from floods. Science can discover cures for the ills of both body and mind. Today we have vaccines that prevent polio and smallpox. We can construct artificial limbs. Blindness can be prevented by removing cataracts. Some fine day we may even find ways to forestall famines, and eliminate epidemics and wars.

Leibniz's vision can be given a contemporary form as follows. After God selected the best compossible universe—the one with the least amount of necessary suffering—he adopted what could have been the only way to create such a universe. Somewhere in a higher space he started a quantum fluctuation that triggered what astronomer Fred Hoyle derisively called a "Big Bang." The bang generated a set of fundamental particles, fields, and laws—a fantastic mix in which you and I were there *in potentia*. The particles and fields, together with a set of laws, were such that after billions of years gravity would form galaxies, the suns and planets, and on at least one small planet life would begin and ultimately evolve such grotesque creatures as you and me. History would begin its slow and painful crawl toward a utopia in which pain would be minimized. Humans would eventually, as H. G. Wells closed his *Outline of History*, stand on the earth as on a footstool and stretch out its arms to the stars. Manifestly there is nothing new about this scenario. You find it in the writings of eminent theologians of all faiths, as well as in secular variants in which God plays no role.

Meanwhile, as the plot (God's or otherwise) unrolls, there is no denying that enormous evils, with their inevitable injustices, haunt human history. Millions still perish and suffer needlessly from earthquakes, accidents, disease, and other causes. Good persons die young while bad persons live comfortably to old age. Is there any way a caring God, whose eye is on the sparrow, can rectify such obvious injustices? The only conceivable way is to arrange for some sort of afterlife. Every theist then faces the following trilemma:

1. God is unable to provide an afterlife, in which case his power seems unduly limited.
2. God can provide an afterlife but chooses not to, in which case his goodness is tarnished.

### 3. God is both able and willing to provide an afterlife.

Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, unread today by most philosophers and even by most theologians, is a vigorous defense of the third horn. Kant did not want to disappear. True, there are intelligent persons who insist they have no desire to live again—H. G. Wells and Isaac Asimov to mention two. I think they lied. Carl Sagan, another atheist, was more honest. He said it would be wonderful if he survived death, but he saw no evidence for such a hope. Woody Allen recently said he had no desire to live on in his films: "I just don't want to die." Boswell, in his life of Samuel Johnson, tells Johnson about a conversation with David Hume. "Hume said he had no desire to live again, He lies, said Johnson, as you will quickly discover if you hold a pistol to his breast." The great Spanish poet, novelist, and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, once asked a farmer if he believed it was possible there is a God but no afterlife. The rustic responded "Then wherefore God?"

A strange question now arises: If there is an afterlife, will it be in a world with free will and science such as to permit both kinds of evil? An East Indian would almost surely answer yes. As for me, I haven't the slightest idea. How could I possibly know?

Back to *God's Problem*, the book that triggered my long-winded speculations. It is hard to imagine how a better, more persuasive volume could be written on why irrational evil implies atheism. When you read a book on the topic by an orthodox Christian, such as C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*, or his *A Grief Observed* about the death of his wife Joy from cancer, you sense Lewis's agony as he struggles to believe his own arguments. It is not only his pain that troubles Lewis, it is also his awareness of the enormous amount of suffering that continues to plague humanity. By contrast, there is little agony in Ehrman's book. There is only a huge relief over finally abandoning a youthful theism.

Ehrman's rhetoric, eloquent and powerful, differs from the rhetoric of other books on evil in that his central theme is this: Nowhere does the Bible give a satisfactory answer to why a benevolent God would allow such massive misery. A "Scripture Index" at the back of the book lists almost two hundred Old Testament verses, and more than one hundred New Testament verses.

Ehrman's detailed analysis of the Book of Job is at the heart of his treatise. He makes clear that Job is a stitched-together hybrid of two documents by different authors. The first describes scenes in the land of Uz that alternate with scenes in heaven where God and Satan argue about Job's faith. The second is a much longer section of poetry. The wealthy Job endures incredible God-caused blows that include the destruction of seven sons and three daughters, yet Job's faith in a loving God never wavers.

The moral of this much admired fantasy is simple. Irrational suffering is an impenetrable mystery. "God knows something you don't know," I once heard Oral Roberts say at a funeral in Tulsa. Who are you, the Lord shouts at Job from a whirlwind, to question the motives of the creator of the universe?

**Martin Gardner** (1914-2010) passed away in May 2010. His latest book is *When You Were a Tadpole and I Was a Fish* (Hill & Wang).

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