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## Before You Argue for God from the Existence of Evil, You Have to Prove Evil Exists

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about the need to prove evil exists before arguing for the existence of God from the existence of evil and what to say to an eleven-year-old boy who lost his dad and brother to a lightning strike that he survived.

\* Before you argue for God from the existence of evil, you have to prove the entity or force "Evil" exists.

\* What do you say to an eleven-year-old boy who lost his dad and brother to a lightning strike that he survived?

### Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag SDRask Podcast. I'm Amy Hall and I'm here with Greg Koukl. We're here to answer your questions.

So why don't we get going at that? Okay, let's do it. We are both under the weather a bit, and so we're doing our best to man up, so to speak, and do our jobs. So let's have at it.

Alright, and we both love doing this. So this will make us feel good. Alright, the first question comes from Amanda, arguing using the existence of evil doubles your problem.

Now prove evil exists. Before you send the troops into battle, bad things happen. It's not going to fly.

Prove the entity or force evil exists. Okay, I'm not sure. Is this the challenge to us that we have to prove that evil exists? Okay.

Well, I'm not exactly sure what a person who asks that question expects to hear as a proof, okay? So I'm looking right here at a ballpoint pin, and someone says to me, prove that that ballpoint pin exists. Like you said that. I'm saying, Amy, here it is.

Prove it, you say. I said, here it is. Look at it.

In other words, we have perceptual capabilities that allow us to see this thing. And that's adequate as evidence for the thing itself. And if I brought a dozen people into this room, they would all see the pin that I'm holding up unless their vision is impaired.

Okay, that's because you have a problem with the person who's seeing, not with the thing being perceived. Okay? And if your vision wasn't impaired and you kept denying that it was there, unless I could give some kind of further proof, something else to prove it besides just the perception of it, then I think people would start thinking you're being a little bit cantankerous. And your skepticism about the existence of the pin I'm holding up in front of you is unmitigated and unjustified, all right? And I remember, and this is the same thing with the problem of evil.

There is something everyone knows, no matter where they live or when they live. That's my line. I've repeated it many times.

It's a good one because it's compact and to the point. And what they know is that there's something wrong with the world. And this is what we call the problem of evil.

This is why it's such a ubiquitous complaint against the existence of God. And ubiquitous meanings everywhere. People raise this all the time.

It's a standard complaint has been for hundreds of years. It goes all the way back to the ancients actually. And if God went evil, so notice though that the complaint itself depends on the existence of evil, which itself is not in question in the complaint.

The point is this is something that everyone is completely aware of. Something is wrong with the world. There are evil.

There is evil in the world. And there are evil people in the world. And what we're aware of too is not just evil others, but evil, evil selves.

It's not just others that are bad, but we know we are bad too. Now we're less likely to be candid about that nowadays because of the way the culture is. But everybody knows, deep down in their heart, that something's a miss with them, which is why they feel guilty at different times.

They feel guilty because they are guilty. And the people who don't feel guilty are called sociopaths. Okay, this is not a good thing.

So the burden of proof, it strikes me as not upon me to demonstrate the reality or prove, if you will, the reality of something that is evident to everybody. And now, of course, a materialist can say evil is not a material thing and therefore evil can't exist. Now, but that's a statement that is being made in light of a prior commitment to materialism,

unrelated to the perception of evil.

They are aware of what we call evil, but then they're going to deny its existence because they have a presupposition that leaves no room for evil in their world view. And I think it was Bill Craig who said, why should I, why should I, how did he put it? Why should I be, be, doubt or call, why should it be called into question the existence of something that normal people can see and some individual denies? Something's wrong with them if they don't see that. That's my point here.

So I don't bear any burden at all of responsibility to prove evil exists. There are other questions that are related to that that require more conversation, but that evil exists is what prompts the other questions. And if there is no evil, then all of these questions people raise.

Why would God allow evil? Why is there evil? When's evil? Where did it come from? Why, why do we live in a world that's like that? How do we make, make sense of morality? How do we ground it? All of these things, none of them, all of these things that are bandied about by intelligent people would be nonsense. If, if there was no evil because there would be nothing to talk about. Right.

We're, we're only going to have to answer the question if the person who's asking us already thinks evil exists. So we don't have to, we don't have to prove it for them if they're asking the question. Now how, because Amanda asks at the end prove the entity or force evil exists.

Do you have thoughts on that? What's your definition of evil? Yes. Well, this is another, this is a, an important clarification because I'm not sure where she got this idea. And I'm not even sure how to take the question to be honest with you if it's tongue in cheek, if it's a, you know, role play of somebody else's challenge to her.

This is a genuine question that she has or an issue she has. Either way, it's fine. I don't mind.

But the, the, the classical understanding of evil is that it's a privation of good. It has no ontological status. It isn't a thing in itself.

It's not a stuff. You don't run into this evil stuff. And then, then you, you do evil things like a disease or something like that.

So you get, you run into a bacteria and your nose runs or something like that. And we were both familiar with that at the moment. It's not like that.

It's more like a shadow. Okay. A shadow is not has no ontological status.

It isn't a thing in itself. A shadow is a word that we use to describe where the light is

blocked. Okay.

So there's an absence of light. You can, you can have light without shadows, but you can't have shadows without light because the shadows are, are parasitic on the light. They depend on the light.

But only in virtue of the, them being a privation of light. And that's the way good since Augustine and maybe even before him in these fourth century has been characterized. Just think of the way we talk about evil on righteousness, on righteousness.

It's not righteous. It's a privation of righteousness. The Greek word in the New Testament for sin is hamartia.

And hamartia is a word that is a picture word of missing the bullseye, missing the mark. Okay. Or all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So in this language in the Bible and also in our common parlance, there's a presumption that evil is this privation. I've characterized it this way just for fun in it. In illustration, it seems to stick.

I ask people if they've ever eaten a donut hole. And I don't mean those little gut bombs you get at church, you know, I mean the whole. You read the whole.

You say you can't eat a donut hole because the donut hole is where the donut ain't. Right. But we still can talk about it in a meaningful way because the donut hole is the privation of donut in that particular location.

All right. And so this is the same thing. We talk about evil.

Evil is a privation of good. And so what this then prompts us to ask if we have such a thing of privation in there, she wants Amanda wants the definition or characterization. There it is.

Then it's fair to ask. Well, then why is good missing in certain circumstances? Why are some things less than good? How can anything be good anyway to begin with? And now we're asking the appropriate question of goodness and the grounding of goodness. And this is what is going to require, I think, going back, finding our way back to a God whose character is good and represents the foundation for goodness and a departure from that goodness is what is called evil.

And of course, people often look for a definition of the good and this is going to be harder because good is more a kind of thing where that we can recognize. And we can behold it. I see it as a kind of a primitive.

We can recognize examples of good. And we see them. And we know that these are moral virtues.

And the absence of these moral virtues are moral vices. We have language to describe real things that we're aware of all the time. And the long and short of it is if there is evil, it's a privation of good, then we have to ask what's the standard for the good.

And the only answer that's going to be really adequate is going to be a being whose character is the standard, perfectly good. And this is, of course, is exactly what Christianity teaches. So what would you say to someone who denies the existence of evil and just says, this is just our emotional reaction to what we're experiencing.

And we call it evil, but it's not evil in the sense that we understand it. Okay. Well, I would ask them, why would they say such a thing? Why would they say that this? And by the way, there was a view, a J.A. or an atheist of the 20th century, was a denied objective morality, which is a denial of evil and good.

And he said, when we make these statements, we're just emoting. And that's why it was called a motivism. So there are people who make these statements, but they're not even, I don't feel any burden of proof to counter that.

Because evil and good are so obvious to us as features of the world that it strikes and not just to us Christians, but to everyone in the whole world, no matter where they live to when they lived. And therefore, it strikes me that the burden of proof is on the individual who denies what has been obvious to mankind from time immemorial, because we have a perceptive apparatus that allows us to see it. Okay.

And incidentally, if you want to reduce morality to just any motion, like when we say something is evil, we're going, uh, yuck. I don't like that, you know, become kind of a motive thing or something we call good. You go, ooh, good.

I like that. Well, it turns out that that isn't the way morality works, because there's a whole lot of things that are good, that are inconvenient for us. And we recognize their goodness, but we don't like them.

And there's a lot of things that are evil that we realize are bad, but we enjoy them. So it doesn't even work in terms of matching up our emotions with our distinctions between virtue and vice. And I've found that even people who say they don't believe evil exists will turn around and complain about God not being just or not, you know, or doing something that they think is wrong.

And I don't know how you can do that if you say that it's just your preference, your emotional preference. Yeah, because what they would have to say is I'm just reporting my own feelings. It has nothing to do with an assessment of the God of the Bible.

It has to do with my personal tastes. Now, Richard Dawkins doesn't do that. On the one hand, he's writing a philosophical piece and he's talking about atheistic materialism and evolution.

And he's saying, we live in just exactly the kind of world you'd expect with no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference, a famous citation from Dawkins. And then again, famously in his book, *God Delusion*, he berates the God of the Bible as being immoral on a number of different counts, which prompts the question, for me, where are you getting the standard that you are measuring God as immoral by? Because you've just denied the standard when you wrote a piece that was consistent with your worldview and now you're making an objection that has no place in your worldview. So what's it going to be? But this kind of thing happens all the time because I think what people are doing is they first, they are defending turf and operating from the position of their philosophical commitments.

But when they're operating as human beings made the image of God, they can't not make moral judgments because morality is part of human nature. That's the way God has made us. Now, I don't think his judgment of God is fair, accurate, but I do think the impulse to make a judgment like that is only, it only makes sense in something like a Christian worldview, certainly not an atheist materialistic worldview.

Okay, let's go to a question from StarQuest Dude. StarQuest Dude. Now, StarQuest Dude is referencing an article that he sent a link to, but here's what he asked.

What do you say to a surviving 11-year-old boy who lost his dad and brother to a lightning strike that he survived? And in the article, people were mocking the idea of, it was trying to be comforting to the boy and it talked about God a little bit. So people were saying where was God and that sort of thing. So what would you say in terms of the problem of evil to something, someone like that? Well, of course, this is a very difficult kind of circumstance, all right.

What would I say to the boy? I wouldn't want to comfort the boy. Now, I'm not sure if the question has to do with the boy's mental or emotional state or the circumstances of the naysayers who are mocking others who talk about God here. I think it's very difficult to talk about God here, especially with a boy because you and I and other adults who have pondered these issues and understand the nature of the world and something about the nature of the God of the Bible and how he operates and what his larger, more extensive plan is, are in a position to make, in a certain sense, make sense out of this, or at least to position this event in a way that is part of a coherent Christian worldview.

Kids aren't going to understand that. Oh, God's got a plan. You can tell that to a 12-year-old who just lost his brother and his dad.

I mean, that's not the right time for that. Okay. Now, through the naysayers, where was God? Okay, you tell me what was God supposed to do.

If you're God, what would you do? Oh, I wouldn't have had them hit by lightning. Okay, so you wouldn't make a lightning work the way it works to do the good stuff it's meant to

do or electricity. Would you change the nature of electricity? No, but I just, I would keep it from hitting them.

Okay. What about a car crash? Oh, no, I keep that from happening. So if a person's drunk and then he runs in, or maybe it's just raining hard and somebody, you know, they can't see and okay, and then they have an accident.

So would you change the rain? What would you do? And part of the reason I'm mentioning this, or two reasons, actually, when, when, when people say and they use the inductive problem of evil, like maybe there can be evil in the world if there's really God, but not this much evil. There's just way too much. There's a gratuitous amount of evil.

And the question is, okay, how much isn't gratuitous? How about if we just cut the evil in the world in half, the suffering and hardship and difficulty? Well, that's not going to satisfy these people because that's still going to be too much. Okay. And the other half of this has to do with the way God has made the world.

You know, the same, I think it was Lewis who says the same fire that cooks meat burns hands. It's actually the exact same process. So if you take away one possibility burning hands, then you can't cook meat.

You know, so there is a, whenever you have a world of natural laws, there's going to be an upside and a downside to those kinds of things. And actually, if a forest burns, it's no big deal. The problem when people call that evil is if people's homes are consumed in the process.

You know, and so I think we've talked recently about so-called natural evil, and you made a point that actually no natural event has the quality of being evil. It's the consequence that these natural events have in certain circumstances on image bearers, on people, or maybe on animals and people would be concerned about that. But the point here is that we are, I don't know how to answer this, what anybody could say to answer this question.

I don't actually think it's a fair challenge. Where was God? Because that presumes that God should have been there in doing something particular, and then my question is, what's he going to do? And then what the demand is that all the whole nature of reality gets changed. And like if God was really real, no one would die.

Really? So when people die all over until they hear something like this, and they think, well, or maybe a relative dies, especially if someone is young and they lose a parent, like in this case. Oh, and then God can't exist, you know, but everybody else's parent can die. That's not a problem.

And so it just, it's, this kind of challenge doesn't take anybody anywhere. I honestly don't

see how this is a genuine challenge against God's existence or his responsibility, though I understand the emotional impact of it and how easy it is for people who are inclined to deny God to hide behind this thing as an emotional means of justifying their denial. I had the same first thought as you, Greg.

If the question is about what would you actually say to someone, to an 11 year old who survived this, I would comfort him. I wouldn't go into theological treatises at the time. I would answer whatever particular questions he had at the time in as simply and as comfortingly as I can.

But as you pointed out, they're, the answers are so complicated. And when you're emotional, they're very hard to understand. This is why, you know, leave aside a child.

This is why we all need to understand, we need to work through these questions intellectually so that when the emotions hit, you can stand on your understanding of what's going on. And that's what we all need to do. It's just very hard when you have someone that young.

So if you're asking me not, like, what would I specifically say to this boy? But how would I, how would I, kind of a rhetorical, what would you say to him? And you can tell me where I got this because I cannot remember who said this. But I think one question is, what do you tell him if there's no God? Oh, yeah. Well, this is a variation of something Bill Craig said.

Okay. That's who it was. Yes.

Regarding Bertrand Russell, who says, Bertrand Russell, the famous 20th century British atheistic philosopher, said, what are you going to say? How can you talk about God when you're kneeling at the bed of a dying child? And then Bill Craig says, well, what is the atheist Bertrand Russell going to say? Tough, lot too bad. That's just the way it is. He's got nothing to say.

There's no purpose. There's no meaning. There's no future.

There's, there's nothing. That, that has to be responded to also. So I think my answer, and it could be that you could use part of this in this situation, depending on how mature the child is or whatever.

But the answer is that we are in a fallen and painful world. And we don't always know why things happen. But what we do know is that Jesus entered into this world and suffered for us.

He knows what suffering is, and he, he suffered for a purpose. And if the, the, the cross, the, the, the killing of the son of God had a purpose, and that is the worst thing that could ever possibly happen, then I think we can trust that what we're going through also



has a purpose. Now, that's, that's the kernel of it.

But I think you can even take it farther just looking at the cross because we see God's sovereignty. We see that he, from the beginning in the garden, had a plan that he brought to fruition. He chose Abraham.

He created the nation of Israel. He gave them laws. He did, he gave all these prophecies.

He brought them all to pass to that point on the cross. And we see God's sovereignty and his wisdom. We also see his justice that he wasn't willing to let evil get swept under the rug.

He was, he gave his only son to pay for evil. That's how serious evil is. And that's how serious he takes justice.

He didn't just say, forget about it. You're just all welcome. No, he upheld justice.

So when bad things happen to us and people do evil things, we know that God sovereign, but we also know he cares about justice. We also know, because that's not enough. We also know that he, from the cross, we know that he loves us, that he's a good God, that he's gracious, that he goes to great lengths, not only to fulfill justice, but to have a gracious salvation that we don't have to earn.

So that shows an incredible love. We also see power. He raised Jesus from the dead.

So when you put all those things together, his sovereignty, his justice, his love, his power, and we apply that, those characteristics of God proven there on the cross, objectively for all to see, to our situation, we can know that there is a purpose for it. And it's for our good as much as it is for God's glory. It's so funny because just this weekend, and I'm going to give a, I think, a rather potent illustration of what you're saying here about God doing things for a purpose.

We, Oz get a set that says that he wrote a book about doubt, and an illustration he uses there is that we look at life through a keyhole. We only see a little bitty piece. We don't see the big picture.

So I'm having a conversation this weekend with a brother who is in a very productive full-time Christian work, which he's been in for 30 or 40 years now, and we had a great time. It turns out that when he was 10 years old, his mother died, and a couple weeks later, his dad being a fisherman with a big rig out there in a storm, the whole rig went under, and everybody perished. So in, within a month, he lost his mother and his father, then he gets shuffled off to a family, gets adopted, and before long, that family, that husband and wife, get divorced.

And now he's being raised by a single mom, and in the meantime, his grandmother also

died. And so because she was heartbroken, having lost her daughter and her son-in-law, his mom and dad, and he was 10 years old. But the reflection on all of this, and then the Christian, the reflection was if that had not happened in my life, this was his reflection, if that had not happened in my life, right now, I would probably be a drunken fisherman, because he was looking at the family as raised in the industry that his father was in, and he was going to follow in the footsteps, and these were the godless characteristics of a lot of people there.

He sees all of that tragedy as a hand of rescue by God to bring him out of a circumstance and into a whole new life, and he's a joy to talk with and spend time with, and the work that he's involved with is flourishing. It reminds me of the horse and the boy, he loses, and there's the same theme that you see there with the boy that has all this hardship and thinks, oh, what was me? And he realizes, and Aslin shows him, that all the particular details of his life that he all complained about were all particular things that Aslin had put into place to put him in a position to save his people, and it's great, and so this needs to be added because I think a lot of people will consider, oh, yeah, we'll God of sovereign in the abstract without realizing that there are very particular circumstances that God works out. It does help to look at whole lives of people who have been through this, and you can see how God has worked.

That really does help. I mean, not just looking at it in the Bible, because there are certainly plenty of places where we can see that in there, but the people around us who are older, who have gone through things who can tell you how things worked out, ultimately. So looking at the lives of other people you know, or you can read about, there are certainly plenty of things that can help develop this trust in God, but the bottom line is, if Christianity is true, no suffering is ever wasted or purposeless, none of it.

And that's what we have to hang on to, whereas if you don't believe there's evil or you don't believe that there is a God, there's no comfort. I like the way you change your phrase, theology, you started to say, that's what we have to hang on to, and they say, wait a minute, no, that's what we have to hang on to. That's great.

And also, remember that it's all producing for us an eternal weight of glory. And this is not the end. And that is the hope that the Bible gives us the end of the Bible is about what we have to look forward to.

And you put all these things together, and this is where the hope is. So you can mock that, but there's no hope in a materialistic world at all. Of course, it matters which one is true, obviously, but I don't know why you would mock the idea that God has a purpose for things.

The Bible is very open about the existence of evil and suffering. That's what it's a whole thing about. All right, yeah, one last thing.

People assume, this always surprises me, but people assume that Christians are Christians because they're naive about suffering. Well, once you suffer, then you'll stop being a Christian. You'll stop trusting God.

But the Bible could not take all of this more seriously. He had to send his son to die because of evil. That's the point of the whole story, people.

There's an acknowledgement of evil. There's an acknowledgement of our evil. There's an acknowledgement of suffering, and then there's a remedy for suffering, and there's a promise for the end of suffering.

That is all addressed in the Bible. There is no naivete in that. There's an acceptance of the reality, and there's a solution.

As one of my daughters' teachers said in the classical school she was going to in grade school, evil is part of our story, and the story is not over yet. And on that note, thank you, Amanda and StarQuest Dude. Thanks for your questions.

You can send us your question on X with the hashtag STRAsk, or you can go to our website at [str.org](http://str.org). Just look for our hashtag STRAsk Podcast page. Thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.