

**A Response to Stephen Law's 'Evil God Challenge'**

**By  
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**Abstract**

*In this paper I make no claims as to the existence or non-existence of such a God in relation to this problem, but rather, highlight a fundamental difficulty with a recent development in relation to it - namely, Stephen Law's Evil God Challenge.*

*Law argues that Christian responses to the problem of evil that invoke a free-will defence could be mirrored to defend the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god. There is nothing, he claims, in the free will defence, that makes belief in an all-good god any more reasonable than belief in an all-evil god. By centring my discussion around the concept of remorse as internal to our understanding of wrong done, I argue that this is not the case.*

*I demonstrate that remorse is more than a psychological accompaniment to our understanding of wrong done and, instead, suggest that it is an informing dimension of our moral landscape. One cannot have an all-knowing god incapable of feeling remorse because it would not be all-knowing; a remorseful god would not be all-evil because it would be morally placed in relation to its actions by a perspective informed by goodness.*

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The problem of evil is one of the best known foundations upon which to base arguments against the existence of the Christian God as traditionally conceived – that of a being which is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good. In this paper, I make no claims as to the existence or non-existence of such a God; rather, I wish to highlight a problem with one of the more recent positions that has emerged in relation to the problem of evil – namely, the claim made by Stephen Law that it is just as reasonable to believe in an all-knowing, all evil god as it is an all-knowing, all-good god. Law himself calls it his 'Evil God Challenge.'

The 'Evil God Challenge' tries to nullify the 'free will defence' response often given by Christians in answer to the problem of evil by showing that it can be applied just as appropriately to an all-evil god as it can an all-good god.

In order to locate Law's challenge more precisely, I will first sketch the problem of evil and the commonly made free will response to it, before articulating the challenge and developing my reply.

### **The Problem of Evil**

One of the strongest arguments against the existence of the Christian God, as traditionally conceived, runs as follows: how can one reconcile the possibility of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God with the presence of evil in the world? A God who exemplified all of these attributes would know about evil that was going to occur (because He is all-knowing), would want to stop it (because He is all-good) and would be able to stop it (because He is all-powerful). And yet there is a vast amount of suffering in the world - look no further than the Holocaust or, more recently, the beheadings carried out by terrorists in the Middle East, together with the so called 'natural evil' characterised by the massive suffering inflicted by the Japanese tsunamis of 2006.

Thus, we have a God who knew what would occur in the wake of his creations but, nonetheless, created them anyway. Surely, creating this kind of suffering and evil constitutes an immoral act (even if indirectly), making God less than all-good? Or, perhaps, God is all-powerful and all-good but not all-knowing and, therefore, wholly unaware of the suffering that his creations are causing? Or, perhaps, he is all-knowing and all-good but not all-powerful, in which case he can do little if anything about it? Whichever combination of attributes one chooses however, it seems impossible to choose all three in a way that is logically compatible with the presence of evil.

To cut a well known story short, Christians generally appeal to the notion of God-given free will to justify the presence of such evil – we need to be exposed to its many forms in order to develop our understanding of good and evil and, as such, require free will so we can choose our moral path. For just as one would be unable to appreciate a sunny day without a rainy one so, the thought goes, we would be unable to appreciate goodness without encountering evil. Some Christians argue that, even in relation to natural disasters, it is our freely taken decision whether or not to live in places prone to such disasters; thus we must be held accountable for our own suffering.

### **Stephen Law's Evil God Challenge**

In response to the claim that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God is required to provide us with free will in order to allow us to understand the difference between good and evil, Stephen Law makes the following evil god challenge – a challenge that he considers to be unanswerable.

If an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God needs to allow for the existence of evil for humankind to properly appreciate goodness, so an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god would have to allow for goodness in order for us to properly appreciate how miserable the majority of human life is. In other words, we have the problem of evil in relation to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good god and the problem of good in relation to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god. Both gods have to provide free will in order for there to be full understanding of good and evil. So the free will defence, which attempts to reconcile the tripartite Christian conception of God with the presence of evil in the world, is rendered wholly ineffective.

Law thinks that most people would find the evil-god hypothesis absurd (something he attributes to our psychology), but he wonders whether they should find it any more so than a good-god hypothesis. There is nothing, he thinks, that seems to make it more reasonable to believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good god as opposed to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god.

So what is my fundamental objection to Law's belief that the free will response made by Christians should lead us to think an all-knowing, all-evil god is no less reasonable than an all-knowing, all-good god?

### **Preliminaries**

My argument centres on the thought that remorse is necessary if we are to judge that the perpetrator of a crime fully understands the nature of the wrong he or she has committed; in other words, remorse is more than a psychological accompaniment to an understanding of wrong done.

If, as I claim, remorse is necessary for such understanding, then one can answer Law's challenge as follows.

1. One cannot have an all-knowing God incapable of being remorseful, as that would be expressive of a certain kind of ignorance regarding the meaning of the wrong done.
2. A god who is remorseful for their actions could not be all-evil because they see their actions informed from a perspective of goodness.

Note well however, that I am not claiming a remorseful god could not commit acts of evil – only that, in feeling remorse, such a god is not all-evil.

Nevertheless, there are some initial questions: how is remorse internal to a full understanding of wrong done? If someone (or something) is remorseful, how does it follow that they are not all-evil? Can full acknowledgement of evil done and evil suffered only take place in the light of remorse? What is meant by seeing 'their actions as informed from a perspective of goodness'?

To begin, think, for a moment, of the distinction a court of law draws between those who are remorseful for their crimes and those who are not. Penalties tend to be more severe for those who show no remorse than for those who do, largely because the latter can be said to have understood their crime in relation to what it means to be good and, as such, understood it from a perspective informed by goodness. Sometimes a lack of remorse in a criminal is linked to a form of mental disorder – they might be diagnosed as a psychopath, for instance. In such cases, the diagnosis of a mental disorder is related to an inability to understand a particular dimension of meaning. I will elaborate on the nature of this dimension shortly.

Of course, one might object and say that psychopaths understand very well what they do when they torture and kill someone. Consider, for instance, the Moors Murderer Ian Brady who took pleasure in the kidnap, torture and killing of young children, and then took further pleasure in writing to some of his victims' parents saying that he might divulge the locations of their children's bodies but, in the end, always deliberately failed to do so. Is it not clear that these are evil acts that show someone to know exactly what they are doing? Thus, in relation to Law's evil-god challenge, I still face the question: surely one can coherently retain the idea of an all-evil, all-knowing god by appealing to the idea that some remorseless criminals know exactly what they are doing – especially those who take pleasure in their victim's suffering? Surely, this is enough to show that someone like Ian Brady understood precisely the kind of moral wrong he was perpetrating?

To explain why this is not so and why a remorseless individual is, in a fundamental sense, ignorant of the meaning of what they do in moral terms, I now need to explore the claim that remorse is more

than a psychological accompaniment to moral understanding; not merely a psychological accompaniment (or impediment) to it as, for example, Kant would have believed.

### **Lack of Remorse and Ignorance**

Part of what characterises human life is that human beings can affect us in ways we cannot make fully answerable to reason or, perhaps more precisely, in ways we cannot fully make sense of. This is exemplified in many forms of life, but is, perhaps, most poignantly expressed in our sense of loss when we lose a loved one. That kind of need of the other (when it is authentic) is an acknowledgement of the independent reality of the individual who we love and, more generally, a form of responsiveness to others that is, as Raimond Gaita describes it, 'constitutive of that sense of individuality which we express when we say that human beings are unique and irreplaceable.' (Gaita, R. 2004, p52). The possibility of seeing human beings in such a light (that such a light exists at all) is another way of saying that we are able to understand others as intelligible objects of somebody else's love. It is, as such, a conditioning factor in the development of what we think it means to see someone as 'fully human'.

One can say about remorse what one can say about love, in terms of our sense of the full and independent reality of the other being answerable to authentic expressions of it. Ian Brady did not have such a grasp of the independent reality of his victims because he was using them, and his understanding of their capacity to suffer, for his own ends (namely, his own gratification). Someone who claimed to love another but was using them to indulge their idea of what they believed love should be like, would have similarly failed to grasp fully the independent reality of the object of his affections. Brady knew a great deal about human psychology and human capacities for suffering, but his self-absorption was a criterion for saying that he failed to acknowledge a dimension of meaning that is consistent with understanding his victims as intelligible objects of love and remorse.

Of course it is possible to recognise an action as wrong without feeling remorse (Brady did this in relation to his victims) but this is not enough to argue that remorse is merely a psychological accompaniment to our understanding of suffering. Or, put another way: that it is possible to recognise an action as wrong does not, therefore, mean that full understanding of wrong done can be achieved independently of remorse. The possibility of remorse as an intelligible response that takes place between human beings, in part conditions the way we conceive of other people and, as such, the possibility of their moral claim on us.

Naturally, one has to judge that one has done wrong in order to be remorseful, but it does not follow that it is only contingently connected to our ability to understand when we have done wrong; something that sometimes follows in the wake of such understanding.

In order to demonstrate these points and show that remorse is a form of understanding of wrong done, as opposed to merely being a psychological reaction that accompanies such understanding, I am now going to provide a series of examples and discuss each of them in turn.

### **Example 1**

Imagine that I am facing trial for murder and that I profess to have been in full command of my faculties when planning and committing the murder. Now, in court, I tell the judge that I am

sincerely sorry for what I have done but feel not a shred of remorse because, I go on to explain, remorse is merely a psychological accompaniment to wrong done and I do not want to give any false impressions. The judge would naturally consider a different sentence in the light of my lack of remorse. This may be for a number of reasons, but two stand out. The first is that – assuming soundness of mind – he or she would have to question my professed sincerity in the light of no remorse, on pain of judicial negligence. The second is that, if I am sincere, my claim clearly shows that, after all, I am not of sound mind. In this case, it is plain to see that remorse plays a substantial role in our moral assessment of others in relation to their crimes. If it were merely a psychological accompaniment to our understanding, it would not be proper for any judge to allow it to weigh in their sentencing considerations.

### **Example 2**

My second example focuses on remorse as fundamentally singular. There are many aspects of life in which we can seek consolation in fellowship. Trade unionists are a focus for it during times of mass unemployment; more generally, when we think of ourselves as mortals and remark - for instance – that “in the end, we all go the same way”, we can recognise this as a conciliatory expression related to an acknowledgement of our common mortality. No such consolation is available to us if we are genuinely remorseful. To illustrate this, I will take an example from Raimond Gaita’s book *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love, Truth and Justice*.

Imagine someone – call him N – whose route home from work takes him past destitute homeless people sleeping in the doorway of shops. They are not young homeless, but old, ruined by drink, unable ever to get a job, without family and friends. If any one of them were to die, no one would care. If N were to hear that one to whom he occasionally gave money had died that evening, he might think on it for a few minutes and then his mind would pass to other, perhaps quite trivial, things. No one would do more. Now imagine that one of the homeless people asks N for money, abuses him when he refuses to give it, and stands aggressively in his path. In a fit of temper N pushes him aside, off the kerb and, unintentionally, into the path of an oncoming car. The beggar is killed. (Gaita, R. 2000. p30)

Although the homeless man meant nothing to N in terms of being a friend, relative or loved one and – indeed – meant nothing to him other than being someone he occasionally encountered, it is wholly intelligible to believe that he is crippled by remorse for his actions. N’s remorse is a sudden recognition of the homeless man’s moral claim on him; it is an acute form of understanding of it. And it is this acknowledgement, expressed in remorse that it is he – N – and no one else who has become a murderer and is guilty. If his remorse is genuine, he cannot be consoled by the fact that, at times in the past, others have done the same thing. Were that not the case – were it the case instead, that the killer considered his victim to be merely another homeless man that no one would miss – then we could not say that he understood, in full, the wrong he had committed and the wrong that had been done to his victim. A lack of remorse is the criterion by which we can say that the moral claim of the individual has not been recognised and, as such, that N does not fully understand (the meaning of) what he has done.

It is, as such, only in authentic forms of remorse that the full independent reality of the other (if you like, the full significance of their humanity) becomes acutely visible to us.<sup>1</sup> Without such acuity we remain, in some sense, meaning-blind in relation to what we have done and, consequently, ignorant of what we have become.

### **Example 3**

My final example concerns cases in which we find it odd or unintelligible that someone may feel remorse. Suppose, for instance, a severe earthquake occurs. Some friends are socializing together in a bar when it happens. One of the group is waiting for drinks at the bar, sees that his friends are in a part of the building that is about to collapse. He tries to warn them but in the commotion they fail to hear him, so he begins to venture into the chaos to try to get them out. Unfortunately, before he could reach them, that part of the building collapses and his friends are killed. Overcome by remorse, the man who survives, subsequently tries to commit suicide because, as he explains in a note, he feels that he is the moral equivalent of a murderer.

The point I wish to make is this: there are cases when it is intelligible for someone who, overcome by what they have done, and the acknowledgement of what they have become as a result, commits suicide because they can no longer live with themselves. But, in a case such as that depicted in this example, the idea of remorse – as opposed to, say, regret or deep sadness – in relation to what occurred makes little sense. We would question the sanity of someone who claimed they were on the same moral footing as a murderer because they failed to save their friends from falling masonry caused by an earthquake.

The overall aim of this last example is to show that if remorse makes no sense in relation to a particular kind of action, then neither does it make sense to say that action was evil. Again, this shows remorse to be more than contingently attached to understanding of wrong done.

### **Conclusion: Returning to Law's Evil God Challenge**

That we recognise the possibility of loving relationships, in part (together with remorse), serves to mark out definite ways we conceive of a person's reality. If this were not so, then the love, pity and remorse that we focus irreducibly on particular individuals would be extraneous to our understanding of their moral claims on us and, more generally, the moral significance of human beings.

Thus, it becomes clear that remorseful responsiveness to one's actions is partly constitutive and expressive of a moral answerability that is interdependent with how we conceive of other human beings. However, none of this means that one has to be gripped by remorse to understand an action as wrong but it is, nevertheless, against the background of the possibility of being claimed by remorse (together with that possibility in relation to the many kinds of love) that there exists a conception of human beings to which we are morally answerable. Brady's understanding of the wrongness of his actions was of this kind – he understood that what he did was wrong because there was a moral landscape (nourished by love and remorse) against which he could judge his actions. That he was not claimed by remorse for his actions serves to demonstrate that he failed to grasp a

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<sup>1</sup> Inauthentic forms of remorse can be characterised by, for example, a desire to evade punishment from one's crimes.

fundamental dimension of meaning in relation to wrong done and wrong suffered. Something similar can be said about evil-god.

Consequently, in relation to Law's claim that when invoking the free will defence in answer to the problem of evil, it is as reasonable to believe in an all-knowing, all evil-god as it is an all-knowing, all-good god, one would also be committed to the position that the all-evil god understands his victim's individuality in ways expressed in authentic forms of love and remorse. But, as we have seen, being claimed by remorse entails accepting the moral claim of the victim, too. In doing so, evil god would have to understand them in the light of goodness, from which it follows that he cannot be all-evil. He might be evil in many ways but – in remorse – he necessarily shows that he is not completely so. If evil god fails to show remorse for his wrongs then, as I hope to have illustrated with my various examples, he fails to understand certain aspects of the significance of his victims and that, of course, means that he is not all-knowing.

In short, an all-evil god cannot, simultaneously, be all-knowing. I make no claim as to whether an all-good god can be all-knowing (for many reasons) but I have shown that, at least in terms of moral dimensions, it is more reasonable to believe in an all-good, all-knowing god than an all-knowing, all-evil one, because one cannot have an all-knowing god incapable of feeling remorse, and a remorseful god cannot be all-evil. An all-evil god would, therefore, suffer from a certain kind of ignorance that an all-good god would not. Thus, Law's challenge fails and, consequently, is answerable!

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