Attempting to Answer Life’s Toughest Questions

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Trying to explain and understand the natural evil that we encounter in our world can be one of life's hardest concepts to grasp. As people of faith we question, why does God allow bad things to happen to us? When Bad Things Happen to Good People written by Harold S. Kushner and The Tree of Life directed by Terrence Malick attempt to answer this tough question and help us to recognize these evils, see why they are deemed evil, and understand what our response should be when facing them."
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Introduction

Trying to explain and understand the natural evil that we encounter in our world can be one of life’s hardest concepts to grasp. As people of faith we question, why does God allow bad things to happen to us? When Bad Things Happen to Good People written by Harold S. Kushner and The Tree of Life directed by Terrence Malick attempt to answer this tough question and help us to recognize these evils, see why they are deemed evil, and understand what our response should be when facing them.

1. Types of evil presented in When Bad Things Happen to Good People and The Tree of Life. Reasons why these examples of evil are considered or understood as evil.

There are two main types of evil, moral and natural. Moral evil involves the willful acts of humans while natural evil involves things that just happen, such as natural disasters and deadly diseases. While moral evils are easier for us to understand, the occurrence of natural evils causes us more of a problem because there are no real explanations for why tragedies occur, and
no perpetrator to blame. The idea of natural evil is so troubling because it challenges not only the belief in the omniscience or the omnipotence of God, but also the belief in the existence of God all together.

When a tragedy occurs, such as a deadly tornado or earthquake, or an untimely death, many questions about natural evil and God arise. We ask ourselves things like, why would God send this deadly earthquake that destroyed so many homes and killed innocent people? Or why would God take the life of this innocent child? During these times we often look to God for answers and some kind of reasoning. We wonder things like, is God punishing me? Is He forcing me to learn a lesson? What have I done wrong?

Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was written to help shed light on some of these difficult questions. As a Rabbi who has helped suffering people through dark times, and even experienced tremendous pain himself in the loss of his young son, Kushner is someone who many people would consider a good man to go to for answers. Published in 1978 by Random House Inc., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* addresses one of the principal problems of theology, the contradiction of why, if the universe was created and is governed by a God who is of a good and loving nature, there is still so much suffering and pain in it. The book’s chapters, including “Why Do the Righteous Suffer?” and “What Good, Then, Is Religion?” offer meaningful explanations to the problems of evil. Dedicated to Kushner’s son Aaron, who died of progeria, an extremely rare genetic disorder at the young age of 14, Rabbi Kushner offers comfort to grieving people. His answer to this age-old problem is that God does his best and is with people in their suffering, but is not fully able to prevent it.

The 2011 film, *The Tree of Life* by Terrence Malick is another art form that offers answers to these same questions, but through a more visual medium. The film stars actors Brad
Pitt and Jessica Chastain as Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, the contrasting parents of three boys, and Sean Penn as one of their sons, Jack. Taking place in the 1950s in Waco, Texas with flashes to modern day, Malick paints the picture of a family that are good, loving, religious people who do everything right, but tragedy still strikes them in the form of losing a son and brother. The film addresses the questions of “How could this happen?” and “Where are the answers?” all while following the suffering and despair that their loved one’s death has caused. The concept of a tree of life has been commonly used in religion, biology, and philosophy. It applies to the interconnection of all life on our planet and serves as a metaphor for common descent in the sense of evolution. We see this design about 30 minutes into the film, in a visually beautiful scene by Malick where the earth is created and the earliest forms of life come to existence. With its profound music and images, this scene serves as a basis for this idea of interconnection, as well as one of the major themes of this film, compassion.

2. Why is it deemed evil? How does the author present these evils to the reader?

We see these tragic situations as evil because so often in life bad things happen to undeserving people. It seems so unfair for innocent people to suffer or die due to something that we see as easily controllable by God, who we are taught to believe is all-powerful and all-knowing. The untimely death of a beloved son leaves a family in pain for years to follow. A rare genetic disorder takes the life of an innocent child before he even gets a chance to really live. All the while we are left waiting for answers and praying to God for his mercy. We have a hard time making sense of why He would continue to allow these devastating events to take place.
The death of nineteen year old R.L. O’Brien in *The Tree of Life* causes suffering and is felt as evil by everyone in his family. Mrs. O’Brien especially struggles with this heartbreak, as not only his mother but also a woman whose beliefs are rooted deep in her faith. As we watch Malick’s take on the family’s suffering play out on screen, a voice over from Mrs. O’Brien is played in a low, somber tone. She says, “The nuns taught us there were two ways through life - the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow...The nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end” (Malick). Mrs. O’Brien chose the way of grace for herself and her family. Like so many of us, she believed that if she was a good person, who did the right things and was a righteous follower of God, no bad end would ever come for her. She taught her children and raised them in this same sense. Her belief was that bad things shouldn’t, almost *couldn’t* happen to good people. It’s a belief that many of us share based on our religious upbringings. It doesn’t make sense to us how doing all the right things can still lead to suffering and evil.

The question of why the righteous suffer is also addressed in Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner talks about the basic question of natural evil, “why do bad things just happen?” Kushner tells us about a young wife and mother named Helen who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. When facing her diagnosis Helen went to Rabbi Kushner with her difficult questions about God. Kushner writes, “She wanted so desperately to go on believing that, to hold onto her belief that God was in charge of things, because if He wasn’t, who was? It was hard to live with multiple sclerosis, but it was even harder to live with the idea that things happened to people for no reason, that God had lost touch with the world and nobody was in the driver’s seat” (Kushner, 20). This is a perfect example of what any faithful person questions in a time of despair or when considering why bad things
happen. We want to believe that God is watching out for us; but how do we know? We ask ourselves in an attempt to find comfort, there has to be a reason, doesn’t it?

Our unanswered questions about loss, pain, and where God is in all of this can be considered evil as well. When such tragic events take place, life changes tremendously. Evil does not only impact the primary victim, but also all those who love and are impacted by that person. Those affected are often times left feeling abandoned by life or God. They are faced with the difficulty of learning to cope, and many other challenging questions, such as “what will I do now?” and “will I ever be able to accept this?” The unknown is a scary thing, especially when it is our faith that we are questioning. We are taught to look to God for comfort and answers in our dark times, but it is difficult to look to God when we are questioning His actions or lack thereof.

3. What is our response to these forms of evil?

So how do we survive? How we choose to carry on is up to each of us individually, but one thing has always remained the same. For centuries humans have been faced with these same situations, the world has never stopped spinning, and life continues to go on. There is no definite answer to what the right thing to do is or the right way to respond to evil things; however, there are things that we can choose to believe and things that we can choose to do.

The Bible has a response to why God does not prevent these awful occurrences from happening in the Book of Job. The Book of Job addresses this theme of God’s justice in the face of human suffering. *The Tree of Life* begins with a famous quote, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4, 7) This quote presents the idea that the problem we see with the
presence of evil in our world is not for us to question. The line “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth” speaks of the big picture, the idea that in the grand scheme of the universe, we are in no place to ask God for an explanation. Kushner offers the example of God as a wise, caring parent and us as naive children. There is no way of us knowing these answers. As faithful people we can choose simply to have trust in God and His plan.

There is also the case of free will, or the belief that we each have the ability to make choices that are not controlled by fate or by God. In The Logical Problem of Evil, James Beebe writes that if God eliminated evil, he would have to eliminate the greater good of free will as well. Taking away our free will as humans would prevent us from experiencing evil, but it would also prevent us from experiencing things like joy and love. Beebe offers a quote from Alvin Plantinga that expresses this idea. “God’s creation of persons with morally significant free will is something of tremendous value. God could not eliminate much of the evil and suffering in this world without thereby eliminating the greater good of having created persons with free will with whom he could have relationships and who are able to love one another and do good deeds” (Beebe, n. p.). To be human we have to experience both the good and the bad; it could never be all good or we wouldn’t be a part of God’s grand scheme. We can choose which path to follow, the path that will lead us to God or the path that will lead us to the evil one. As humans we know what’s right and what’s wrong and we are free to make our own decisions.

Another way we can address the problem of evil is to choose to learn and grow from it. The only way we can truly learn compassion and empathy towards others is through suffering. Although God does not intentionally send us pain to make us grow, we absolutely grow from it. Evils such as tragic death or disease actually in a way help us to be more grateful, humble, and humane to others. In his book Where the Hell is God? Richard Leonard shares this idea. He
writes, “I think that spiritual sanity rests in seeing that every moment of every day God does what he did on Good Friday, not to allow evil, death, and destruction to have the last word, but to ennoble humanity with an extraordinary resilience, and through the power of amazing grace, to enable us to make even the worst situations positive and let light and life have the last word” (Leonard, 14).

No one on our planet is exempt from experiencing evil and suffering. Suffering is viewed by humans as evil because there is no quick or easy way out of it, and there are no concrete answers for why we must feel the way we do when we are going through a loss or great misfortune. We have no choice but to carry on, and in doing so we must be able to face our evils with some type of understanding. Although suffering is a burden to us, we come out stronger and wiser in life. We become able to comfort others and offer insights to those who have their own set of questions. There may never be definite answers, but the compassion that is born of suffering offers consolation to our fellow victims of evil.

Conclusion

Trying to explain and understand the evil that we endure in our lives is a hard concept to grasp. People will always ask the question, why does God allow us to suffer? There are many different insights on why the righteous suffer and many different takes on the problem of evil. It is important to consider these when coming up with our own responses to evil and how we answer the question “why do bad things happen?”
Bibliography


The Tree of Life. Terrence Malick. Performed by Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain and Sean Penn. Cottonwood Pictures, River Road Entertainment. USA, 2011.


Church Window in Rome, Italy (Photo by MC)