

## The “Inductive” Argument From Evil: A Dialogue\*

The article starts by defining four women, Iris, Beatrice Leaver, Athea Ist, and Agnes Tic. With the exception of Iris, each name is a clear indication to their religious beliefs. Bea Leaver is religious, Athea Ist is an atheist, and Agnes Tic is an agnostic. Iris’ six-year-old daughter has just died and Iris herself has been hospitalized for depression. The other three have gone to visit her and help her through her crisis.

In Agnes’ living room, Agnes, Athea, and Bea are discussing Iris’ downwards spiral and where it all went wrong. Agnes recounts how Iris divorced her now ex-husband Bo eight months ago. When Iris started dating Jim, Bo “went over the edge” (1.1 In Agnes’s living room). On New Year’s Eve the new couple ran into Bo in a bar and Bo and Jim got into an altercation and Bo was thrown out. When Iris came home, she found Bo waiting inside and he threatened her. Iris knocked him out and went to bed. She was woken up by a brother (it’s unclear whose), who found Iris’ daughter, Carrie’s, body beaten and strangled to death. Bo was arrested and Iris thinks he was high on angel dust again when he murdered her.

Agnes goes on to say that Iris “blames herself for not calling the police while Bo was unconscious” (1.1 In Agnes’s living room). She tells how Iris has begun to question her belief in God and segues into telling about how she has started to question her own beliefs about God because how could a good God allow such bad things to happen? After encouragement from Bea and Athea, Agnes remembers how their ethics professor claimed that “evils like this conclusively prove that there’s no God” (1.1 In Agnes’ living room).

After encouragement from Athea, Agnes begins to share her proof that God doesn’t exist. What follows is effectively the Epicurean Paradox where if God cannot prevent evil, God is not all powerful and if God does not want to prevent Evil, then God is not good. This raises the

question of why evil exists if we do accept that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good because such a being should be able to easily eradicate all evil.

Athea counters this by saying that religion does hold that God is omnipotent but in order to allow people to keep their free will, God must refrain from interfering in the lives of the people. She then notices how much time has passed and suggests continuing the conversation over dinner.

At dinner at the House of India, Athea agrees with Agnes that a good God “would not allow evils like Carrie’s death unless doing so served some “sufficient good.”” Athea argues that no matter what, as humans, we will not be able to see “sufficient good” and that this is what gives us reason to believe there is no God. Agnes asks about arguing from ignorance such as concluding there is no extraterrestrial life because we don’t know of any. Athea continues that through inductive reasoning, we can conclude that there is no God because we will never determine something to be so good that it exceeds the amount of suffering as a result of Carrie’s murder. Continuing, she says that because her argument doesn’t provide 100% certainty, it’s possible that some day there could be enough proof that God does exist.

The group breaks down Athea’s argument into premises and conclusions in a manner similar to that of the Epicurean Paradox as detailed previously. Bea, as a religious person, counters the argument that we don’t see a “God-justifying good” because they might be too small to see directly. Bea asks if we see “any good that might justify God in allowing this evil?” (1.2 At the House of India). Just because we don’t see the good doesn’t mean that there is no good. Lastly, she asks if they could find some evidence that counterbalances Athea’s arguments. Agnes cuts in and suggests taking the conversation down the road over desserts.

At dessert, Bea speaks to how she, as a religious person, reconciles these questions. She says that God puts good and evil decisions before us and gives us the free will to choose between them. The conversation continues, again running through various facets of the Epicurean Paradox. Bea says that she believes that God does sometimes step in to prevent greater evils from taking place and if God were to prevent more of them, we would lose free will. The trio then go on to discuss how much God could intervene before affecting free will. Bea mentions how if God is all-knowing, God's duties might be different due to differing levels of knowledge about the situation at hand. Agnes raises the question of how God decides when to intervene between two identical situations. She asks if God has a limit on how many interventions can be made and proposes that that's too much effort and God just made the universe and is letting it play out.

Bea closes out by summarizing the arguments thus far and asks if, since they don't see any God-justifying good, is there sufficient evidence that there is no such good. Agnes responds by proposing to continue the conversation over brandy at a place around the corner.

### **“Wading through Many Sorrows”**

This article by M. Shawn Copeland begins by defining suffering first not by what it is, but rather the effects it has on people. Towards the end of the first page, Copeland suggests that we can define suffering as “the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence.” Copeland goes on to point out that even though it seems paradoxical, we can develop and grow as human beings through suffering and that sometimes good things are the result of suffering such as blossoming culture in a post-plantations slavery world.

Although the author is choosing to focus on the suffering of black women, she acknowledges that many other people have suffered through the ages and points out that “there can be no ranking of oppression or suffering” partway through the second page. She does this because 88% of slave narratives were written by men and describe women in such a way as to imply that they are not taking an active role in their own lives, but rather are supporting roles in the lives of men. Because of this, Copeland chooses to write about and focus on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs who herself wrote about “the sexual exploitation of female slaves—thus centering on sexual oppression as well as on oppression of race and condition” (Quote from Copeland’s source number 22).

Briefly, Copeland outlines the most common accounts of American slavery. The “narratives and interviews with emancipated men and women, as well as their children and grandchildren” which “have given us a picture of daily plantation life” (Section: Black Women’s Experiences of Suffering). She tells of accounts that mention the “rape and sexual abuse of enslaved black women”, but those accounts choose not to go into detail because the authors thought it inappropriate to write about such things.

In the next section titled “Resources of Womanist Resistance,” details how Christianity has been labelled as the religion of slaves. She mentions how slaves formed their beliefs from Christianity and how they molded Christianity to match their world view. Copeland explains what Jacobs meant by saying there was a “great difference between Christianity and the religion of the south” (40, left side). Jacobs seems to suggest that the slaves were the ones who practiced Christianity while the white people of the south practiced their own religion which they labelled as Christianity. Copeland says that this could be because there were different sets of morals dependent on the color of your skin and what was between your legs.

Copeland says that the slaves found solace in the Bible and were able to relate to it as they saw their lives mirrored to those of the Jews in Egypt and were waiting for a Moses-like figure such as Harriet Tubman who could help lead them towards freedom. She talks about how they encoded messages to one another through prayer and religious song so that if someone did come, they would be able to communicate it to one-another. “The enslaved Africans sang because they saw the result of the cross—triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world” (41, top left).

On page 42, Copeland details the work of Joanne Braxton who explored the origins of the word *sass* and how it is often associated with black women. “For enslaved women, sass is a ready weapon” because it allows them to, in essence, fight back against their masters and the suffering they have been forced to endure (42, top right). Copeland talks about how there is “strong sass” in the lines of different songs that were sang in plantations across the south (42, top right). She then closes out the section by recounting the story of Linda Brent who used sass to defend herself and her fiancé from verbal abuse at the hands of a physician.

In the last section, “An Outline for a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective,” Copeland begins by pointing out the irony that “a theology of suffering is formed from resources of resistance.” She then spends two paragraphs detailing the differences between the written histories of men and women and how black women have built a “theology of suffering in womanist perspective” from “the dark soil of the African American religious tradition [that] is intimate with the root paradigms of African American culture, in general, and African American women’s culture, in particular” (43, bottom right).

Copeland then draws her four conclusions. The first that a theology of suffering avoids any tendency towards false “spiritualization of evil and suffering, of pain and oppression” (44).

The second that memory and retellings of past women serves to honor the women of the past and give hope to the women of the present. The third that “a theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *redemptive*” (44). And the fourth that a theology of suffering helps women resist the degradation of slavery. Copeland concludes by wishing that these beliefs would have helped Harriet Jacobs to find “god in [her]self and loves her/loves her fiercely” (Copeland’s source number 49).

### **The Challenge of the Holocaust**

In a powerful abstract, Dan Cohn-Sherbok asks “where was God at Auschwitz, and where was humankind?” Cohn-Sherbok aims to respond to those two questions “in light of contemporary Jewish Holocaust theology.”

In his introduction, Cohn-Sherbok outlines how the two questions are different. The first is theological. If God is a redeemer and the God of everything and the father of the Jewish people, where was God when the Jewish people were crying out for help? The second question, he says, is a moral one. Cohn-Sherbok asks how humanity could sit by and watch Hitler commit these atrocities, how Hitler’s followers could have acted as they did, how ordinary Germans “could [...] have turned away from such violence [and had] no compassion for their Jewish neighbors?” Finally, Cohn-Sherbok asks what lessons we can learn about humanity and wonders what we can do to prevent such things from happening again.

The next section, The Horrors of the Holocaust, tells of how Hitler’s dehumanization of Jews began in Poland by forcing them to perform menial and degrading tasks that often disrespected their religion such as forcing them to clean street gutters with their prayer shawls or forcing them to shave their beards. Next, Hitler formed the first death squads who advanced

across Russia, killing all the Jews they found. This was followed by the creation of death camps across Poland and forced concentration in ghettos in major cities.

In the next section, *Where Was God?* Cohn-Sherbok outlines the thoughts of several Rabbis who each formed their own thesis about why God let the Holocaust come to pass. Rabbi Bernard Maza believes that God is the reason for the Holocaust, that God wanted it to happen and made it happen so that Jews would be able to return to Israel and “find freedom to rediscover Torah Judaism and return to God’s law.” Similarly, Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum believes that God willed the Holocaust to happen so that Jews could enter “a new age of freedom and liberation.” Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits takes a very different approach and believes that God allowed the Holocaust to happen in order to preserve free will and that it is human evil which caused the Holocaust to come to pass. Rabbi Emil Fackenheim maintains that God issued a 614<sup>th</sup> commandment which says that Jews must not allow themselves to become distanced from their religion lest they grant Hitler a posthumous victory. Rabbi Arthur A. Cohen argues that God does not keep an active role in the world and thus, like Rabbi Berkovitz, believes that God allowed the Holocaust to happen in order to preserve free will.

Next, Cohn-Sherbok writes a section called *Where Was Humankind?* Rather than asking “Where Was God?,” this time Cohn-Sherbok wants to know how humanity either stood by and allowed the Holocaust to happen or how people took an active role in the Holocaust. He claims that this began with Hitler dehumanizing Jews in *Mein Kampf*. Hitler claimed that Jews were less than human and were a threat to the Nazi idea of a perfect society. This led the Nazis to the conclusion that “Jews could be treated brutally without any moral compunction” and that it was a Nazi’s patriotic duty to carry out the extermination of Jews (205). Cohn-Sherbok recalls the words of other people who tried to characterize how this could happen. The conclusion is that

these people are distancing themselves from the horrors they create by dehumanizing their victims and compartmentalizing their emotions. Cohn-Sherbok also suggests that “the Holocaust has taught us to be aware of the human potential for evil” (207). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks further argues that “there is no way to solve the theological problems presented by the death of six million Jews; rather, the Holocaust [...] is a mystery wrapped in silence” (207, source 17).

In Conclusion, Cohn-Sherbok returns to his original two questions: “where was God when six million died and where was humankind?” He acknowledges the wide range of both theological and moral responses and goes on to suggest that as humans, we cannot understand God’s mysterious ways. Further, he says that the Holocaust shows us the extent of human evil and that “in a post-Holocaust age, we must be aware of the depths of human wickedness, and take all measures to combat evil in all its forms (208).

### **Evil as Evidence for God**

Greg Koukl begins his essay with a problem. He says that contrary to popular belief, he believes that the presence of evil in the world is solid evidence for God’s existence. He goes on to state that moral judgement does not make sense without a moral standard and asks where the moral standard comes from.

Next, Koukl makes Four Observations about Morality. The first is that while moral rules do not take on a physical form, they do carry weight behind them and are very real. He says that this is “a profound realization” because this suggests that there is “more to the world than just the physical universe” (section paragraph 2). Second, Koukl claims, is that moral rules are shared between people and are therefore a kind of communication. Third, he says that when considering future actions in the context of moral rules, we can feel the weight of a given result and its interaction with said rules. Finally, Koukl says “there is a deep discomfort that is felt when we



violate clear and weighty moral rules, an ethical pain, making us aware that we have done something wrong and are deserving of punishment” (section paragraph 8).

Koukl then begins Narrowing Our Options. He says that the four above observations give us a platform with which to ask and answer, “Why morality?” (section paragraph 1). He claims that we are limited to three options to this question. First, that “morality is simply an illusion” (section paragraph 2). Second, that “moral rules exist, but are mere accidents” (section paragraph 2). And third, that moral rules are the result of intelligence. Koukl then asks which option makes the most sense with regard to the above four observations. He proceeds to rule out the first and second options through a logical and reasoned argument which, in short, says that if evil exists, morality cannot be an illusion and that “chance morality fails to be a communication between two minds, and therefore, cannot be imperative” (section paragraphs 4,11).

This leaves us with One Remaining Answer that “morals must be the result of an intelligent designer” (section paragraph 1). Koukl suggests that such morality could only be designed by a God whose character “provides an absolute standard of goodness” (section paragraph 2). Thus, if morals exist and were intelligently designed, then they must have been designed by God and therefore God exists.

Koukl concludes with The Final Verdict that the existence of God can only be called into question if morality is objective and since morality is not objective and is absolute, then God must exist.

### **My Thoughts**

I have one big issue with all of these arguments that I brought up in a discussion post in response to the PragerU video titled *If There is No God, Murder Isn't Wrong*. I alluded to and outright say now that morality is a collective agreement between people. What is moral can also

depend on your perspective on the events being judged. Let us consider what is currently going on in Israel and Palestine. Both peoples have a long and storied history with the land and both can lay claim to the land with that history. The Israelis currently are in control of the land and have “given” land to the Palestinians. Some Palestinians feel that their treatment at the hands of the Israelis has been unfair and have formed a resistance movement called Hamas that fights back against their Israeli oppressors. “Wait, wait,” you say, “isn’t Hamas a terrorist organization?” To fight back, Hamas does send rockets into Israel and from an Israeli and Western perspective, that is, indeed, terrorism. But consider the perspective of the Palestinians. They had been living there under British rule until one day Britain decided that it wasn’t their land anymore and gave it to a brand-new country. The Palestinians that had been living there were forced into two settlements, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. From the perspective of many Palestinians, the Israelis are the terrorists.

If morality was created by God as some authors claim, then surely God would have the power to make it absolute. Yes, bombing Israel is wrong, but so is subjugating a people and driving them out of their homes. If God truly did exist, then morality would be black and white and it would always be clear who was in the right and who was in the wrong. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that morality is not a human invention, but a byproduct of a thinking mind. Allow me to recall several occasions with my cat. She is quite fluffy and kind and I think she cares about me. I have tried asking her but she does not speak English and I do not speak cat, so I do not truly know how she feels. Sometimes, when being given head and back scratches, she becomes overwhelmed and suffers from Petting Induced Aggression (I promise this is real), and she bites. She does not mean to cause harm and never breaks skin, but nevertheless, I almost always say “ow.” At this point, she usually runs away to do cat things. When she decides to

come see me again, she is usually especially nice and gentle and will sit on my lap purring for quite some time. It is clear to me that even though she is a cat, she recognizes that she has hurt me and aims to make amends. If, as these authors suggest is true, then there are two possibilities. The first, which the authors would agree with, is that my cat believes in God. I have not consulted her on this particular topic. The second is that my cat understands that I do not like to be bitten and regrets having done so. If, as the title of PragerU video suggests, without God, murder isn't wrong, then surely my cat would not feel bad for doing something so benign as biting me because she does not believe in God. There is nothing wrong with biting someone and not causing damage or lasting harm and yet people do not like to be bitten and so it is generally agreed that biting people is wrong.

As I said in the second discussion, murdering people is wrong not because God said it is wrong, but because people generally do not want to be murdered and do not consent to being murdered. On the opposite end of the morality spectrum, donating blood is generally viewed in a positive light because there are people in need who would suffer without it. The people donating blood rarely, if ever, meet the people who received their blood and do not do it for any recognition, but because they feel good about it or recognize that it is necessary for someone else and does no harm to them as the donor. In short, morality was not created by God, but is a social covenant between groups of beings about what that group believes to be right or wrong.