

Free Will, the Holocaust, and The Problem of Evil

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Abstract: *In this paper, I ask whether the occurrence of the Holocaust is good reason to doubt the existence of God. To do so, I will explore different varieties of the problem of evil to determine exactly what kind of argument the problem of the Holocaust is. I will then explore proposed solutions to the relevant varieties of the problem of evil to see if they can solve the problem of the Holocaust. The logical problem of the Holocaust, I will argue, can only be solved at the cost of embracing an unorthodox (heretical?) “open” view of God. The evidential problem of the Holocaust can be solved, but only at the cost of embracing a deistic view of God that would entail that he might as well not exist. What’s more, both solutions are rooted in the idea of free will. Consequently, either the theist will have to answer the myriad of arguments which suggest that libertarian free will doesn’t exist, or embrace a compatibilist notion of free will which renders the above solutions moot and turns the problem of the Holocaust into a version of the logical problem of natural evil—a problem which has not yet been satisfactorily solved.*

Keywords: Holocaust, The Problem of Moral Evil, The Problem of Natural Evil, Free Will, Open Theism, Deism, Alvin Plantinga

*Wenn es einen Gott gibt muß er mich um Verzeihung bitten.
(If there is a God, he will have to beg my forgiveness.)*

—Anonymous

The above German quote, which translates “If there is a God, he will have to beg my forgiveness,” appears in a documentary about the Mauthausen concentration camp.¹ It was supposedly written by an unknown prisoner, on the wall, during the Holocaust. Because the walls have long since been painted over, the veracity of this claim is difficult to verify—but there is little

¹ Giuseppe Ronzoni, “Mauthausen.”

reason to doubt it. The events of the Holocaust have long raised questions about God's existence, and why (if he exists) God would allow such suffering; so it's not hard to imagine that a prisoner in one of Hitler's concentration camps, in the throes of despair, would have etched such a thing on the wall of their cell.

Now, this quote is far from a clearly articulated argument with a specific conclusion. Once we realize, however, that conditional (if ... then) statements like this can be translated into disjunctive (either ... or) statements, the potential conclusions the prisoner might have had in mind become clear. Translated, the quote becomes this:

Either God doesn't exist ($\sim G$) or he will have to beg for my forgiveness (B). If we add in the assumption that God certainly exists, then the conclusion becomes that God will have to beg the prisoner for forgiveness. And from there, it is a short step to the conclusion that God is morally imperfect (I); any divine being that has done something to apologize for, by definition, cannot be morally perfect.

$$\sim G \vee B, G, B \rightarrow I \therefore I$$

(In case you haven't taken symbolic logic, you can read that this way: Either God doesn't exist or he will have to beg for my forgiveness. God exists. If he will have to beg for my forgiveness, then he is morally imperfect. Thus, God is morally imperfect.) Indeed, one might even argue that a moral imperfection that allows God to permit the Holocaust makes God downright evil. If, however, we add the assumption that God is, by definition, morally perfect (P) and thus cannot do anything deserving of an apology, then the prisoner's statement becomes part of an argument that God doesn't exist.

$$\sim G \vee B, G \rightarrow P, P \rightarrow \sim B \therefore \sim G$$

(Read: Either God doesn't exist or he will have to beg for my forgiveness. If God exists, he is morally perfect. And if God is morally perfect, he cannot ever have to beg for my forgiveness. Thus, God does not exist.)

Now, it's entirely possible that the prisoner didn't know which assumption to make, and thus which conclusion to draw.² The latter argument, however, is the more interesting one. After all, anyone can tweak their definition of God, after the evidence has already come in against him, so that

² I must also grant that the prisoner may not have even intended to present an argument at all.

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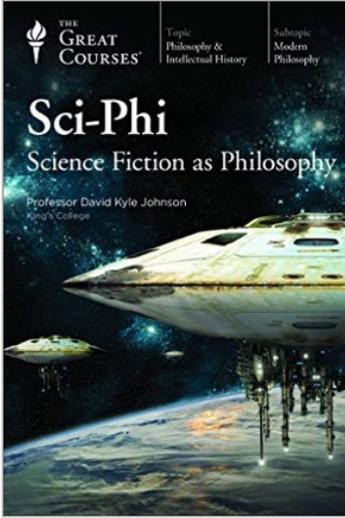
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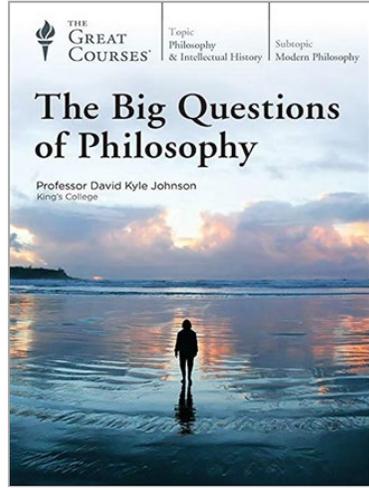
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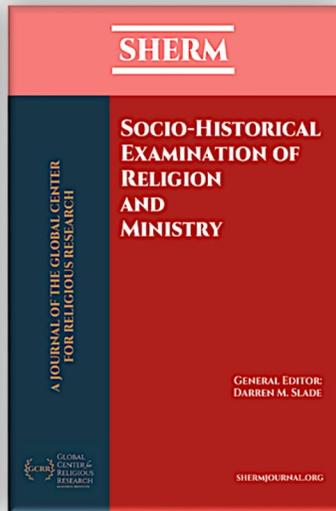
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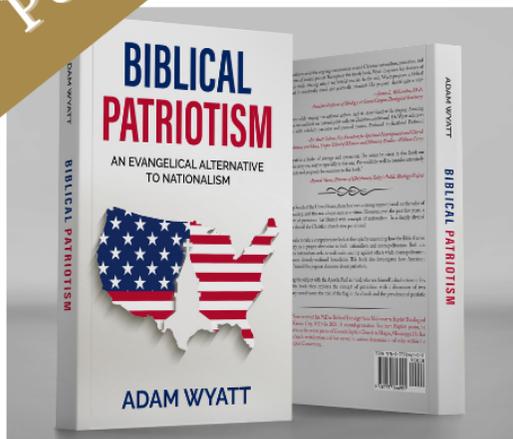


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