

Did God Create Evil?: Keith Ward

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Keith, I've talked to a number of philosophers who criticize the existence of God. And everyone to a person puts the existence of evil on the top of their list. The moral evil of what human beings do to each other, and the natural evil, the things that occur from evolution to earthquakes and tsunamis that kill innocent people. What can you do about evil?

Keith Ward:

I think you're right. It is the greatest objection that people feel to these instances for a good God. And I think first of all, I've got to be blunt and say God does create evil as well as good. I mean, God creates a universe in which evil is an integral part. By evil, I mean there is suffering. There is harm. There is death. There is grief.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

For you to say that God creates evil is really quite revolutionary. I haven't had anybody else tell me that.

Keith Ward:

Well, I think it's implicit in all the great theistic traditions. I think most medieval theologians would be able to say that. Although, they've got a take on evil, of course. There's evil being the privation of good. But that doesn't mean it's not real. It is still a real loss. And, of course, pain is something that is as real as you'd like to make it. But if you're asking why, there's only one justification for God creating evil. And that is quite simply that God couldn't create a universe like this with people, beings like us, in it without creating evil. In other words, evil has to be a necessary part of a universe that has beings like us in it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And it's the free will. So that we have the ability to be independent agents.

Keith Ward:

It is. It's not just free will though. It's the whole evolutionary process itself that we are the product of a very long evolutionary process in which that has been a process of random mutation and the elimination of those which didn't adapt to their environment. And that evolutionary process necessarily involves the extinction of millions and millions of individuals. And predation also involves suffering and death. So if you're going to have a process like that – so it's not just free will. It's also the evolutionary process which means things like we are beings who have lust and aggression as well as altruism and benevolence. These are rooted in our nature. How did they get there? Well, over millions of years, in the past, of evolutionary development. So we are the beings we are because we're in a process like this. And people who think, well, the world could have been better and have us in it, I don't think they've thought that through. I mean, a better world would not have us in it. That's it. So God might have created a better world, but the price of that for us is that we wouldn't even exist. So the crunch question has to be do you want to exist?

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Or what your definition of better is. If better is a smooth uniformity, you know, I wouldn't define that as better.

Keith Ward:

You could say that. Although, the amount of evil and suffering is often horrifying, it's fairly easy to justify some suffering. You just have to think of people who indulge in extreme sports of one sort or another, like rock climbing or anything that involves danger, car racing, etcetera. And if you think of that, the possibility of risk is part of the adventure, is part of what you find good about it. So there are certain sorts of good things which involve, entail, the possibility of things going wrong. And nobody would ever say I did this in order that I have a crash. I mean, that would be ridiculous. But they would say I do this because I'm going to try not to have a crash. But I know that it's

possible to have one. That gives the edge and excitement. So I think one could show perhaps to a certain extent that a universe without the possibility of suffering and harm and death wouldn't actually be as worthwhile a universe. And certainly not for creatures like us. This is where we fit, you might say. So that's the defense. I think it's a defensive inevitability of necessity. If there are going to be beings like us, we have to have a universe with the suffering and death that exists in this universe. We've made it worse, of course, than it need have been. I think that's also important to say. This is where free will comes in. That human beings actually have made things much worse for each other.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Much worse than God, pre-thought?

Keith Ward:

Than God wanted them to.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

A subtle distinction to be sure.

Keith Ward:

Yeah. I'm going to distinguish, not all theologians have made this distinction. But I would distinguish between what God wants and what God makes possible. So that God creates a world in which it's possible to do great evil to others. But God doesn't want you to do that. So not everything that God creates is what God intends.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, this sounds coherent for the scope of humanity, maybe more than humanity, but certainly humanity. What about the individual, the child, the person who suffers, who gets killed, who is tortured? I can go on and on. Are we subsuming the individual to the species? Or is the individual important in some ultimate sense?

Keith Ward:

I think you have to say it's the individual who's important. And there's this great Dostoevsky question about is it worth creating a world in which one innocent child is tortured and dies? But that's a hard question. But the question presupposes that innocent child is tortured and dies and that's the end of it really. But suppose you say you are that child and you die in agony. And then in a life beyond this, you are given an endless overwhelming good. Then the question might be would you as the victim consent to a universe like this given, assuming these to be true, given that you couldn't have existed in any other universe. That's where you belong. And you got a tough deal. Things had gone terribly wrong. They were allowed to go wrong. That was part of the way the universe was. And you got the tough end of it. But then having done that, you have an eternity of goodness, happiness, and fulfillment. If that's possible, then it might be possible for everybody to say, I do ascent to this world given those conditions. So I think it is ...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Even though in my finite existence, I got the short straw as it were.

Keith Ward:

Very short straw.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But that means that in your harmonization between the real prevalence of evil in the world and the existence of a God, that an afterlife is absolutely essential.

Keith Ward:

Yeah, I think that's true. Otherwise, there is a logical incoherence between saying God is good and God is powerful and God creates this universe. God couldn't create a universe in which just evil triumphed.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, it wouldn't be that. You could argue that there is some global benefit to the species, but individuals along the way are sacrificed, if you will, for the good of the species. And that is the ultimate approach. I mean, that is a logical possibility.

Keith Ward:

That's a logical possibility. But that is not consistent with our idea of a compassionate God who creates individual human persons so that they should have some possibility of fulfillment. And that's why I think all the great Abrahamic faiths have insisted on resurrection by which they mean some form of continued personal life. And it's the victims who will get resurrected to a better life. And the oppressors, too. But for them, that's something different. They have to learn. They have to learn –

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I think each religion has a different experience for both the oppressors and the victims. But the one thing they do have in common is that they all bring them back.

Keith Ward:

That's right. And that's entailed, I think, in the idea of a God who cares about creation and who intends creation. So it has to be not only God intends the good, condemns the evil, but that God will also compensate those who suffer evil by giving them endless good.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

In your conception, how did God in the pre-existence of the universe conceptualize evil?

Keith Ward:

Well, I think that evil is necessarily implicated in the being of God. I don't mean that God is evil. If you think that God contains the idea of every possible world in the divine mind, and that's the traditional idea, then a lot of those possible worlds are incredibly evil. So God must conceive as well as all the good worlds every evil world. Then the question is ...

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Which does he actualize?

Keith Ward:

Which does he actualize? And I think that God is justified in actualizing any world in which no individual suffers evil which cannot ever lead to good. But be followed by it, compensated by good. I don't mean that evil is a means to good. I mean, once they've suffered evil, their lives will achieve goodness. So creatable universes are universes which may contain a great deal of evil. But that evil is never unredeemable. And I think myself that our universe is just about on the edge of a creatable universe.