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# The Devil and Philosophy

## *The Nature of His Game*

Edited by  
**ROBERT ARP**



OPEN COURT  
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It's not through reason that the Devil persuades us, for reason, according to Lewis, is an aid on the road to Heaven. The Devil must rely rather upon unreason, irrational thinking, and fallacious logic to manipulate the human mind. And if reason is the road to Heaven, than unreason could be said to be the highway to Hell.

## 16 Either Demons Exist or God Doesn't

THOMAS WARD

It can be enlightening talk about how the *idea* or *character* of the Devil in movies, novels, and other works of art gives us this or that insight into human nature or our place in the world. But let's cut to the chase: does the Devil really exist?

Most thinking people nowadays would say *no*. If pressed, they might explain that the Devil and other demons are a superstition from a bygone age, they're incompatible with a scientific understanding of the world, they're mere inventions of wicked priests who sought to scare people into submission, they're mental makeshifts, projections of subjective human terrors onto the world of nature, and so on.

But C.S. Lewis—of *The Chronicles of Narnia* fame—said that the Devil and other demons do exist, and he gave a philosophical argument for his view in his book called *The Problem of Pain* (1940). Lewis was an academic, literary critic, medievalist, novelist, poet, as well as a lay theologian, and Christian apologist. We need the Devil and other demons, he thinks, to explain how certain kinds of evil can exist in this World alongside an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God, as envisioned by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Or to put it more bluntly: if you believe in God and want to be a reasonable person, you've got to believe in the Devil, too. It's a *damned* good argument given certain assumptions which aren't crazy.

### Non-Crazy Notions about God

These non-crazy assumptions boil down to two basic views: first, God exists; second, there is no evil for which God is

morally responsible. To say that God exists is to say that there is a being that is ultimately responsible for the existence of the universe and everything in it. Since He has made everything, we can assume that he has an extremely high degree of Power, so high in fact that He can do anything that can be done in our universe. For all practical purposes, He is *All-Powerful*. Also, since He invented everything that He made (what else could have invented it?), we can assume that he has an enormous intelligence; so He's *All-Knowing*. And since He has no need of anything and yet does good things for people all the time (like bringing them into existence), we say that God is extremely Good or, to fit the pattern, that He's *All-Good*.

Because God is All-Knowing he always knows what is good to do. Because God is All-Powerful he always can do what He knows to be good to do. And because God is All-Good he always wants to do what is good. So it seems to follow that God couldn't possibly be morally responsible for any evil. For surely to act in a way such that you're morally responsible for evil is to fail to do good. But God can't fail to do good—He knows what's good, can do what's good, and wants to do what's good. That's just what it's like to be God.

Lots of reasonable people accept this view about God and lots don't. We're not going to settle who's right in a few pages—or even try to. This is why I'm saying that this view about God is *not-crazy* rather than *true* or *false*. If you believe in God but *not* in the Devil or demons, you might develop a new belief by the end of this chapter. If you believe neither in God nor demons, then just roll with me for the sake of argument; probably you'll come to a better understanding of what believers believe in, or ought to believe in, and a better understanding is always a good thing.

### The Problem of Evil

Lewis's argument for demons begins with reflection on the so-called *problem of evil*, which is almost surely the best reason for not believing in God. It tries to show that people who believe all that stuff about God, in particular that He's All-Powerful and All-Good, have unwittingly committed themselves to believing contradictory propositions, and no reasonable person wants to be caught doing that. Think about

it: if God is All-Powerful then it seems to follow that God can prevent any evil from happening; and if God is All-Good it seems to follow that He wants to prevent any evil from happening. But evil happens all the time. Something's gotta give.

It's hard to see how we're going to deny that there's evil in the world. So it looks like what's gotta give is something about God: either He isn't All-Good, or He isn't All-Powerful, or He's neither, or He doesn't exist at all.

Everyone I know who has taken the trouble to think about the problem of evil has come to feel its force, no matter what they believe about God. But many people have thought that the problem doesn't pose quite as serious a threat to the reasonableness of belief in God as it seems to at first glance. They point to various possible reasons why God might have allowed evil to occur. For example, evil seems to be necessary for some really great human qualities to emerge, such as courage, mercy, and forgiveness. These really add to the overall goodness and nobility of the person who has them. And people with qualities like these really do add to the goodness and nobility of the universe as a whole. So maybe God allowed there to be evil so these qualities could have a place in the world. Others have suggested different reasons why God might allow there to be evil. But the most common suggestion by far is what has come to be called the *free will defense*.

### You Made You Do It

A Christian philosopher-saint named Augustine of Hippo (354–430) usually gets the credit for the free will defense. Here's the basic idea: God has made a world that contains free agents—people like you and me—and we can use our freedom for good or for evil. When you cheat on your taxes or squash a spider you're freely doing evil and it's your fault, not God's. When you give your coins to the Salvation Army or mow your neighbor's strip of lawn that's adjacent to yours, you're freely doing good and you get the credit. Maybe there are demons and angels on our shoulders, but they can't make us do anything; we're free to do what we want.

Sure, God knew, or at least had a pretty good idea, that his free agents would misuse their freedom and do all the very naughty things we've done over the centuries. But He made us

free agents anyway. Why? Because you've got to be free to be able to love, and God judges that love is a very great good. Without freedom we couldn't love each other and we couldn't love God. If you think hard enough about what makes a world good, you'll see pretty quickly that the best sort of world is not merely a world without evil. It's easy to imagine a world with no evil that's actually pretty boring: suppose that instead of making our world God made a different world which contained exactly one thing—a yellow rubber ducky. This world would have no evil in it, because the rubber ducky can't do any evil and there's nothing else in the world to do evil to the rubber ducky. But this world is nothing really to write home about.

On the other hand, a world like ours which contains a great deal of love, even though it comes with a boatload of evil, is a world that is at worst very interesting and at best very good indeed.

So, yes, there is evil, and yes, God is All-Powerful and therefore could prevent all evil; but God is All-Good, and the way He has chosen to express this goodness in our world is *not* to will the non-existence of evil but instead to create free agents who have the ability both to love and to hate, to do good and to do evil. And there's nothing inconsistent about these claims. So it looks like we can be realistic about the evil in the world and still hold on to a traditional conception of God as All-Powerful and All-Good.

### The Baby Bat

The free will defense says that God's not to blame for the evil in the world—we are. And maybe this really does get God off the hook for lots of evil: all the evil things, in fact, that come about as a result of the free decisions of human beings. But surely this doesn't cover all the evil there is. Not every drought or flood or hurricane or tornado can be blamed on human-induced climate change. My wrath has never to my knowledge caused an earthquake. And what man, woman, or child is there under heaven who could be blamed for what happened to the baby bat?

The baby bat haunts my dreams. A philosopher named John Perry told this story about a cave with bats hanging from the roof, as bats do, with an enormous mound of guano (that means

*bat poo*) on the floor. Cockroaches live in and feed on the guano. One time this baby bat lost its grip (its baby bat claws were tiny and weak) and fell down to the mound. It broke its little baby bat wing, so it couldn't fly back up to the roof to mommy and daddy bat. And, it turns out, cockroaches don't always eat just bat poo; they'll take baby bat when they can get it. So as the baby bat sank down into the guano the cockroaches made a meal of it.

Then there's the deer in the forest. This story comes from another philosopher, William Rowe. Think of Bambi, but instead of having his mom killed by a hunter, he is caught in a lightning-caused forest fire. He tries to run to safety, but he's badly burned. Finally he makes it to a clearing and escapes the fire, but it's too late—he's mortally wounded. He dies slowly, in agony from his burns and panting with thirst.

Evil like this, evil that doesn't seem to be caused by human beings, is sometimes called *natural evil* because, it seems, it's just a part of nature, a part of the way the world is set up. Lightning, fire, and flesh just do their thing, and too bad for Bambi. Gravity, guano, and cockroaches do their thing, and the baby bat is *S.O.L.* And things get worse when we think about natural evils that happen *to* human beings, which we won't do now because that would just make us even more depressed.

The free will defense is no use here, it seems. Evils that humans do with their freedom might be tolerable in a world with the great good of love, but what good is achieved in a world with natural evil?

### Demons to the Rescue

This is where the Devil and demons save the day—philosophically, I mean. Since humans aren't morally responsible for natural evils, we're left with three alternatives: God is morally responsible for natural evils, nothing is, or something else is. We can rule out the first alternative right away because it's the contradiction of one of our basic presuppositions—God's not morally responsible for any evil. The whole point of a solution to the problem of evil is to show that God really is who His followers say He is: All-Good and All-Powerful. So it's really just about those last two alternatives: either nothing is morally responsible for natural evils, or something else is.

But *something's* gotta be morally responsible for these evils given our presuppositions. These say that at the Back of All Things there is an All-Good *Person*; this means that what goes on in this world has come about, either in whole or in part, due to *decisions* made by this divine Person. It follows from this that nothing happens by chance; for all that happens, someone has decided that it should happen. The bad things we humans perpetrate are in part due to God's decision to keep us in existence and sustain the regular order of nature. But the *morally relevant* part of these bad actions gets pinned on human decisions. By definition we don't have humans to blame for natural evils, so every aspect of a natural evil, including the morally relevant part, has got to be assigned to some non-human decisions. Not to God's, by hypothesis. So to something else's.

The *something else* here has got to have a certain kind of nature. It's got to be non-human and non-divine. It's got to be personal, that is, it's got to have intelligence and a will and be capable of making decisions and acting. Oh, and since the something else (or the *somethings* else) must be the perpetrator(s) of all natural evil, they've got to be at least a little bit wicked. Or maybe a lot wicked, once you start thinking more about that baby bat. And It or They must have superhuman powers, since they can do a lot more than make a baby bat fall from the roof: they can cause earthquakes and terrible storms, they can direct an asteroid to earth or cause a solar flare big enough to shut down our smartphones for a couple of days. That's serious power. And for all we can tell they must be spirits rather than animals, since we have no notion of an unseen animal that could cause an earthquake or a solar flare. So here's what we have on our hands: a super-human, non-divine, personal, malevolent spirit. And that's about as good a definition of *Devil* as you're ever going to find.

Here's the payoff: all the evil things in the world not caused by human actions are caused by diabolical actions. The demons are free just like we are, and they were made free for the same reasons we were: to love each other and to love God. This means that the demons weren't made to be demons; originally they were good spirits, like guardian angels, Gabriel, St. Michael and all that crew, but unlike that crew they did very bad things and thereby became demons.

## The Devil Didn't Make You Do It

One of the bad things that demons do, apparently, is to try to entice or trick us humans into going along with their wicked ways. In *Genesis*, in the Bible, a serpent dupes Eve into eating the forbidden fruit and so begins the long story of bad things people do to one another, what we call, euphemistically, *history*. St. Peter said in one of his letters that the Devil prowls around like a lion and seeks the ruin of souls.

C.S. Lewis takes up this theme with gusto in several books. In *The Magician's Nephew* (1955)—one of the *Chronicles* books—there is a devilish witch, Jadis, who magically invades the newly made world of Narnia and tries (but fails) to get the little boy Digory to eat that world's version of the forbidden fruit. In *Perelandra* (1943) the demon-possessed physicist, Weston, tries (but fails) to get the Green Lady of Venus to do the one thing her god has forbidden her to do: to sleep on "the fixed land" rather than the floating islands that make up the majority of her planet's habitable terrain. And that junior demon, Wormwood, in *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) seemingly spends his whole life trying to sway his assigned human to the ways of darkness, frequently writing to his uncle, Screwtape, seeking advice.

But remember: Lewis thinks that we humans have free will. So we don't need demons whispering in our ears to do damnable deeds; we're very good at them on our own. And this means that we don't need demons to explain how we humans went bad. Instead, Lewis thinks, we just need them to explain how our world has what we call natural evil. Messing with human beings is a kind of sideshow for the demons. Their chief cosmological role is to make sure that Mother Nature remains red in tooth and claw.

The postulation of demons stretches the free will defense to cover the whole class of natural evils—which therefore turn out to be no more or less natural than the evils that we humans cause. So the free will defense can be made to account for all evils whatsoever. We and the demons are to blame, not God. Problem of evil solved.

## Not as Crazy as It Sounds

This isn't as crazy as it sounds. Many reasonable people believe in God, but the problem of evil presents a serious challenge to

the reasonableness of belief in God, so believers need a good response to this problem. If God turns out to be morally responsible for evil, any evil at all, then He's not who believers believe in—either he's not morally perfect, or he's weak, or both, or maybe He doesn't exist after all. So believers have got to find a way to show that God isn't morally responsible for evil.

Human beings can only account for some evil. Animals and other non-intelligent things (like trees and stones) are incapable of moral responsibility. But something has got to be responsible. So we conclude to the existence of a special kind of personal being—the Devil and demons—in order to account for the evil humans can't account for.

You might be thinking that an argument for demons is just the sort of philosophy that a writer of fantasy stories would invent. Lewis's argument for demons, maybe, is just the product of an overactive imagination. Well, maybe it's the product of an overactive imagination, but it's not *just* this; it's a reasonable inference from far less controversial claims.

*If* you think that some version of the free will defense is the only explanation of the existence of evil that is compatible with the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful and has created everything there is; and *if* you think that human beings can't account for all evils, *then* you've got to admit that either this idea of God is fatally flawed or there are creatures other than human beings endowed with free will who do evil.

It comes down to this: either demons exist or God doesn't. In Lewis's mind, atheism is far less plausible than belief in demons.