

Comments and Questions on Evil and the Justice of God

A Friendly Response to N. T. Wright

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N. T. Wright's book on evil is an insightful one.¹ Before offering any comments, I should first say that I have a high regard for his scholarship and have been greatly influenced and spiritually enriched by his writings. I frequently cite him—thus far, always positively!—both in lectures and in various books I have written. In my book, *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion*, I appropriate various insights of his on topics such as the image of God, evil, atonement, and resurrection.² And for some time now, at my Web site I have had a link to the fairly official-looking “Unofficial N. T. Wright Page.”³

Now on to Wright's excellent book! Wright declares that he does not pretend to “provide a full, or even a balanced, treatment either of the problem of evil or . . . the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion” (9). Indeed, evil is not a problem we shall “solve” in the present world (11). Wright's primary task is modest: it is “not so much to give answers to impossible philosophical questions as to bring signs of God's new world to birth, on the basis of Jesus' death and in the power of his Spirit, even in the midst of ‘the present evil age’” (11). Wright's approach to evil takes seriously both a *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) as well as a *spes quarens intellectum*

ABSTRACT: Theologian N. T. Wright's book *Evil and the Justice of God* offers a biblical response to the problem of evil without attempting to “solve” the issue, but to shed light on the problem from a Christian theological perspective. This essay affirms Wright's approach, but notes the need for greater clarity of the ontological language related to evil. The essay also seeks further answers to questions regarding animal suffering and the fall as well as the role of (just) force in preventing gross evils and restoring peace.

1. N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006). Subsequent parenthetical references are to this text. An earlier version of this paper was presented at an American Academy of Religion meeting, sponsored by the Evangelical Philosophical Society, in Washington, DC, November 2006.

2. Paul Copan, *Loving Wisdom: Christian Philosophy of Religion* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007).

3. See <http://www.paulcopan.com> and <http://www.ntwrightpage.com>.

(hope seeking understanding), as Jürgen Moltmann has put it.⁴ The Christian confronting evil is not only to trust God that what he has done and promised in Christ is yes and amen, but also to live out in the present the glorious hope that will be ours in the new heavens and earth.

I would argue that biblically-informed philosophical reasoning about evil does have its place—and perhaps Wright could have included some relevant insights from Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Paul K. Moser, or Peter van Inwagen,⁵ whose reflections on evil are informed by theological/biblical themes such as the suffering God, the epistemological role of faith, the story of the prodigal son, or the insights (in connection to divine hiddenness) offered by the complementary passages of Luke 16:31 and John 20:29.⁶ Wright's book is much concerned both with what Scripture says (or does not say) about this troubling subject and with the ready implications of evil. Evil is, after all (to quote G. K. Chesterton), “a fact as practical as potatoes.”⁷ Thus, the many sharp edges to “the problem of evil” strongly suggest that it “isn't simply a philosopher's puzzle, but a reality which stalks our streets and damages people's lives, homes and property” (149). Wright is not searching for some “intellectually satisfying answer” to the roots of evil; rather, he seeks to discover ways in which the future healing, restorative justice of God can be brought to bear upon the present world in human lives and societies (150).

As part of this task, Wright addresses the *new* problem of evil: (a) we ignore evil when it does not hit us in the face; (b) we are surprised by evil when it does; and (c) we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result (24). These naïve reactions may involve dividing up the sides between good (us) and evil (them) or thinking we can make evil go away by using our smart bombs on terrorists and other enemies before they use their dirty bombs on us.

4. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. A. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967).

5. “Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness” (Alvin Plantinga, “A Christian Life Partly Lived,” in *Philosophers Who Believe*, ed. Kelly James Clark [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 71). A sampling of Paul K. Moser's writings include “Cognitive Idolatry and Divine Hiding,” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120–48; “Divine Hiddenness, Death, and Meaning” in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad V. Meister (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); “Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005): 261–83. Peter van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil,” in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 96–122.

6. Luke 16:31: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead”; John 20:29: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are they who, not seeing, believe.” See Peter van Inwagen, “What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?” in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*.

7. More specifically, “original sin.” G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., Garden City, NY: Image/Doubleday, 1959), 15.

I am grateful for Wright's not shrinking back from discussing the satanic/demonic as he addresses the matter of evil. In fact, he takes the *Christus victor* motif as the central thrust of Jesus's atoning work. Although periodically mentioned by Christian philosophers of religion, the demonic is allowed surprisingly little air time by Christian philosophers in their treatment of "the problem of evil." One of the bold examples of how this can be done is Princeton's (formerly Aberdeen's) Gordon Graham in his *Evil and Christian Ethics*. This work (which, incidentally, expresses indebtedness to Wright's work on the historical Jesus) fruitfully explores the remarkable explanatory power of the demonic.⁸ Graham's attempt is truly an insightful, penetrating, and useful explanatory alternative to the trite-sounding, superficial secular therapeutic accounts that reduce evil to "abnormality," "dysfunction," "maladjustment," and the "statistically-deviant." This malady of modernity is what Philip Rieff calls "the triumph of the therapeutic."⁹

Wright appropriates Susan Neiman's well-executed study in which the philosophical discussion of evil in the modern era, from the Lisbon earthquake (1755) onward, provides a grid or framework to better understand what has been going on in Western philosophy for centuries.¹⁰ Neiman is surely on to something. The literature on "the problem of evil" is immense and growing, and this topic helps serve as an organizing theme for modern philosophy. In his edited book on evil, Daniel Howard-Snyder points out that over 4,200 philosophical and theological books and articles on the topic of evil appeared between 1960 and 1990 alone—that is, one publication every two-and-a-half days on the subject.¹¹

The multifaceted and baffling subject of evil is not being ignored, and we can welcome Wright's contribution to the ongoing conversation. J. P. Moreland's endorsement that *Evil and the Justice of God* "should be the first work consulted by Christian philosophers and theologians working on the problem of evil" is certainly excellent advice, and given my sympathies with Wright's book, any critical comments will be of a minor sort.

Some (Fairly Minor) Responses to Wright

In this, the latter part of my paper, I want to address rather briefly certain questions Wright's book raises: (1) Evil as absence or privation; (2) reality

8. Gordon Graham, *Evil and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). I give a favorable review of this work in *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2002): 542–6.

9. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

10. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

11. Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), ix.

and physicality; (3) the place of animal suffering; and (4) peace-making and the use of force.

1. *Abstractions and Privations*

I appreciate Wright's modesty as he handles an array of difficult and often contentious issues. He is cautious in his theorizing about evil, desiring not to go beyond what the biblical text warrants. For example, he observes that "theories of the atonement are all, in themselves, *abstractions* from the real events, and . . . the events, the flesh-and-blood, time-and-space happenings, are a reality which the theories are trying to understand but cannot replace" (94). In the tradition of Aquinas (and, we can hasten to add, his predecessor Augustine), Wright does affirm the theological inference of evil as "the absence or deprivation" of good (113)—that is, "the moral and spiritual equivalent of a black hole" (113)—or even a pothole in the road.

Evil as privation is indeed a description with much explanatory power and punch.¹² Perhaps, however, we could quibble with the notion of evil as "absence" or negation. It may not be worth getting too technical here. I think it is legitimate to note at least that not *every* negation or absence is evil. Humans, for instance, do not have wings or antennae or exceptional nocturnal vision. The crucial point comes when there is a negation that is *due* something—for example, blindness or deafness in human beings. This is indeed a privation though not strictly an absence.¹³

That said, Wright appropriately affirms the long-standing Christian repudiation of Manichean notions that evil is a substance or thing in itself. The concept of evil, then, as deprivation or corruption of God's good creation yields fruitful theological insights: (*a*) that the black-and-white "they're evil—we're good" categorizations are not only facile, but dangerous; (*b*) that evil powers exist only insofar as they are sustained in being and are permitted by God to do their worst; (*c*) that evil will not ultimately have the upper hand since goodness is (onto)logically—indeed chronologically—prior to evil; (*d*) and that God's way of dealing with evil in creation is not to destroy but to redeem and renew through the cross.¹⁴

12. Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz, "Evil Is Privation," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982): 3–12.

13. See Patrick Lee, "The Goodness of Creation, Evil, and Christian Teaching," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 239–70.

14. *Ibid.*

2. Reality Check

I truly appreciate Wright's constant repudiation of the gnostic/docteric tendencies of popular Christian theology and hymnody. In his literally down-to-earth affirmations, he highlights (to name just a few items) (a) the goodness of the physical world God has created, (b) God's activity in the particularities of history involving God's flesh-and-blood image-bearers, (c) the awkward, unusual, unnatural dislocation of the soul in a postmortem intermediate—not final—state, (d) the redemption and immortalization of humans through a *transformed physicality* (life after life after death), and (e) the Christian hope of the gospel that is world-engaging and incarnational rather than world-avoiding and separatist.

Wright correctly reminds us the ultimate “future world” is not “a world of disembodied spirits, or of cherubs on clouds, or of a Platonic ‘Isles of the Blessed’ where the righteous get to talk philosophy all day.” He then adds, “It’s all much more solid, much more real, than that” (115); this future world will be “*more physical, more solid, more utterly real . . .*” (116).

I know and appreciate what Wright is driving at—an affirmation of the goodness of the robust transformed physicality of the new creation, in sharp contrast to the wispy, ethereal eschatology held by many Platonized/gnostitized Christians all around us. Indeed, C. S. Lewis illustrates Wright's point brilliantly in *The Great Divorce*.

I am confident that Wright is not adopting a Hobbesian¹⁵ or Latter Day Saint metaphysic—namely, that all reality is physical, including God. He would not agree, for instance, with the following LDS claims: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned with purer eyes” (Doctrine and Covenants 131:7); and, in Orson Pratt's words, “mind is extended material substance.”¹⁶ After all, God, who is spirit¹⁷ and whom no one has seen nor can see, is the creator of things invisible—for example, angelic beings. Wright indeed acknowledges that, without loss of personal identity, humans are capable of existing independently of a material body in an intermediate state between death and resurrection.¹⁸

All this to say that perhaps, in Wright's laudable enthusiasm to affirm the goodness of the physical creation and re-creation, he appears to equate the *real* with the *physical* here. I am aware that Wright is speaking in the context

15. Thomas Hobbes maintained that God is a spirit but still *corporeal*.

16. Cited in J. P. Moreland's incisive essay, “The Absurdities of Mormon Materialism: A Reply to the Neglected Orson Pratt,” in *The New Mormon Challenge*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 243–66.

17. E.g., Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 113–16.

18. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 132–5, 142.

of the genuine physicality of the new heavens and new earth, but the future world (115) does include God's dwelling with his people. Though the manifestation of God's tabernacling in the midst of his people will be glorious and his reality will become immediately apparent, this does not imply that God himself becomes "more utterly real" or "more solid." Perhaps Wright thinks I am reading a bit too much into such phrases as "*more* physical, more solid, more utterly real," but I thought I would at least raise the point.

3. *Transformed Animality?*

While Wright's book does not directly address the matter of animal suffering, he refers to death—"the corruption and decay of the good creation, and of humans who bear God's image"—as the "ultimate blasphemy" and "the great intruder" (116) that will one day be defeated. Presumably, he is referring to *human* death (which is what Romans 5:12 suggests), but I would be pleased to see in his writings what perspective he takes on the relationship of animal death and suffering to the Fall. Animal death and the extinction of species before the appearance of humans are well-attested and thus taken for granted within the scientific community, and plenty of theologians and biblical scholars take this view as well.

What is more, Scripture takes a prelapsarian carnivorousity for granted. Though Genesis 1 (perhaps for aesthetic and stylistic reasons)¹⁹ excludes mention of a food chain, the Scriptures elsewhere certainly suggest it. The latter chapters of Job and Psalm 104, a creation psalm, suggest that nature's redness in tooth and claw is built into God's good creation: "young lions roar after their prey" and "seek their food from God," and all animals "expire" and "return to their dust" (Ps. 104:21, 29); in this good creation, mountain goats give birth to their young with labor pains (Job 39:3), ostriches abandon their eggs (39:14), hawks gather blood-covered, meaty morsels for their nestlings (39:29-30), and Leviathan is a fierce, unsubduable creature (Job 41). All of this is part of a wise, powerful God's wild and wonderful creation. John Goldingay comments:

Genesis's readers know that the animal world does not live in harmony but lives on the basis of dog eat dog. Genesis 1 implies that this is not God's intention, but neither is it simply the result of a human "Fall." Animal inclination to kill and eat other animals is built into

19. Henri Blocher suggests that Genesis does not move from prohibition of meat-eating (in Gen. 1:30) to permission (Gen. 9:3). This shift in emphasis is more likely stylistic: Genesis 1 omits this feature to suggest the perfection of harmony in the creation. Genesis 9 adds this aspect of permissibility to convey the feeling that the peace has been broken. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 209n.

their nature as animals and is part of the “goodness” of creation, yet holding them back from doing that is part of humanity’s vocation.²⁰

That is, God creates something dynamic rather than static—a world that his image-bearers can “work with” as God’s priestly coregents.

How does the question of animal death and animal suffering fit into Wright’s discussion of evil? The late Colin Gunton affirmed, as Wright certainly does, that “it is necessary to conclude that evil . . . is not intrinsic to the creation, but some corruption of, or invasion into, that which is essentially good.”²¹ So then, is this food-chain state of affairs *evil*, or simply *good but less-than-optimal*—as with, say, our not having been created with incorruptible resurrection bodies?

Perhaps Wright’s reflections on salvation history elsewhere furnish some insight for us: “the Torah is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside—not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished.”²² Could it be that as with the Torah, the levitical priesthood, and the sacrificial system, we have something similar going on with creation?²³ To rephrase, *mutatis mutandis*: “the first creation—which includes the food chain—is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside in the new heavens and earth—not because it is a bad thing that will be happily abolished (or rather transformed) but because it is a good thing whose purpose will then have been accomplished.” Scripture does assume a certain planned obsolescence built into the first creation, whose purposes will be accomplished as it gives way to the new heavens and new earth. Though “very good,” it is not perfect, as can be said (again) regarding our being “fearfully and wonderfully made”—even though we do not yet have resurrection bodies.

Would this “very good”—though not perfect—creation include a food chain, a nature red in tooth and claw? Is *human* death—or is *all* death—the “ultimate blasphemy” and “the great intruder”? Is animal suffering a real problem of evil, or can it be categorized under a “very good,” but not fully restored, creation? And if Wright acknowledges *both* animal death (suffering) prior to the appearance of humankind and that this state of affairs is truly evil, how does he seek to reconcile them?

20. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 111.

21. Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 203.

22. N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 181.

23. On a discussion of the Mosaic Law’s limitations and shortcomings, see Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 7–27.

4. *Swords and Plowshares*

Wright's book commendably urges peacemaking, reconciliation, and restoration. He offers a number of wise and practical ideas in pursuing these Christian ideals. We should not merely warehouse prisoners in "universities of crime" (80) but constructively and redemptively involve them in contributing to the betterment of society even while imprisoned—an expression of "restorative justice" (124). Wright appropriately calls for bringing together offender and victim so that the evil might be named and acknowledged and that a way forward can be pursued—a course that has been taken, say, in post-apartheid South Africa.

I can appreciate Wright's not wanting to appear soft on crime or "soft in the head" by suggesting possible paths of redemptive reconciliation with criminals and wrongdoers wherever possible. (Think of the penitent insurrectionist crucified next to Jesus!) Wright respects the government's enforcement of just laws and the protection of its citizens. He affirms that human authorities are not a bad thing (121); indeed, they are needed because of humanity's failure to live up to their calling as God's image-bearers. So these authorities are to "keep evil in check" and to "prevent [chaos] from happening" at all levels (121). In Romans 13, Paul repudiates the way of personal vengeance for Christians, which is not to suggest that God is unconcerned about evil or that he wants society to collapse into chaos where bullies and power-brokers do what they want and get away with it, as Wright notes elsewhere. He acknowledges that

even in countries where people hate the authorities and fear the police, when someone commits a murder or even a serious robbery everyone affected by it wants good authorities and good police who will find the culprit and administer justice. That is a basic, and correct, human instinct.²⁴

Wright adds that we do not want to live by the law of the jungle, but as human beings in an ordered, properly-functioning society: "some government is always necessary, in a world where evil flourishes when unchecked."²⁵

Force and peacemaking, swords and plowshares—Christians must grapple with the tensions involved in considering *both* how the rule of law should function in society *and* what it means for Jesus to be Lord of heaven and earth.²⁶ Knowing Wright has expressed appreciation for the views of theologian Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*²⁷ and the work of bibli-

24. N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans*, part 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 85.

25. *Ibid.*, 86.

26. *Ibid.*, 88.

27. Wright commends Volf's emphasis on naming and confronting evil (86). See Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994). Although one may get the impression that Volf's position is pacifistic, in an interview he does take a different view on the matter:

cal scholar Richard Hays,²⁸ I think further clarity would be helpful regarding his views on the legitimacy of a Christian's involvement as a police officer or a soldier who uses force—perhaps lethally so—to protect (respectively) innocent civilians from harm by criminals within society or by ruthless aggressors from without. For example, I am confident that Wright would not follow Hays in affirming that a Christian's serving as a soldier (and by extension, a police officer) is morally equivalent to prostitution,²⁹ though I would be interested in Wright's elaboration on the topic.

While morally-sensitive Christians disagree here, I would inquire of Tom Wright whether it is morally permissible for the believer, submitted to the lordship of Jesus, to kill an attacker or rapist in self-defense to protect the innocent and vulnerable. Is it permissible, despite its seeming tragic necessity, for a Christian police officer to subdue criminals by killing as a last resort? If such is granted, it seems that, *ceteris paribus*, this can be extended to soldiers forcefully resisting—taking up arms against—invaders to protect their own country or another vulnerable nation from a brutal invasion. (This is, of course, a far cry from vengeful retaliation that tends to create its own vicious cycles of perpetual “honor killings” and tribalistic warfare.³⁰) Was an Allied invasion at Normandy (or some similar action) justified to stop an aggressive tyrant from oppressing whole countries and murdering millions of innocents—even if this means that millions more lives may be lost to help restore peace and stability to a large portion of the world? In a world of earthly empires, over which Christ is ultimately Lord, can *force* (as opposed to *violence*, which is not directed towards justice, reconciliation, and the restoration of peace)³¹ be rightfully exerted by individual Christians pursu-

“I do think that a military response may be appropriate in cases of intolerable aggression. I shifted from the pacifism of my childhood and early adulthood to the position I am taking now by extending the obligation to love my neighbor when that neighbor's life is threatened by a third party.” He tells his interviewer, “I find that I'm not as far from just war theory as I thought I was” (Miroslav Volf, “Faith and Reconciliation: A Personal Journey,” in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], 222).

28. Wright endorses Richard B. Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSF, 1996) as a book that blows away “the fog of half-understood pseudo-morality and fashionable compromise, and revealing instead the early Christian vision of true humanness and genuine holiness.”

29. Richard Hays bit the bullet on this point at the Evangelical Philosophical Society–sponsored panel discussion at the American Academy of Religion, which I attended in Nashville (November 2000). See also the comments of James Skillen and Keith Pavlischek, “Political Responsibility and the Use of Force: A Critique of Richard Hays,” *Philosophia Christi* 3 (2001): 427n1.

30. Regarding Matt. 5:39, I am assuming that the traditional rendering “do not resist [the one who is] evil” (*a*) does not mean absolute nonresistance and (*b*) is more likely translated “do not (vengefully) retaliate by evil means.” See Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 137–8.

31. Is the slap on the right cheek better understood as an act of violence or as an insult (backhanded slap)? It seems the latter. In his comments on Matt. 5, Wright affirms that hitting back (not turning the other cheek) only “keeps the evil in circulation.” Rather than receiving an

ing a just cause that is intentionally restorative and directed toward peace?³² If certain servants of the state “bear the sword”—which suggests more than a police officer’s ticket book—as a divinely-delegated means of ordering human affairs, then a Christian soldier or police officer may, it seems, justifiably engage in punishing evildoers and protecting innocent civilians, even if this means killing as a last resort.

So while Jesus’s disciples should beat whatever swords they can into plowshares, is it permissible for them to wield the remaining swords to maintain order and protect the innocent and powerless, particularly when efforts at reconciliation and peacemaking are spurned and even resented?

Conclusion

While the first two topics I have raised in response to Wright’s are more incidental than substantive, the last two are fairly exploratory, even if the issues are weightier and wide-reaching.

I certainly commend Tom Wright’s fine biblical exploration of the problem of evil—not to mention his other writings. All in all, my stance with him is similar to that of Horatius’s fellow-defenders at the bridge over the Tiber River: “I shall abide at thy right side, and keep the bridge with thee!”

insulting slap as an inferior under Roman rule (slave, child), turning the other cheek implies: “hit me again if you like, but now as an equal, not as inferior” (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, part 1 [London: SPCK, 2002], 52).

32. Hans Boersma, “Violence,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 836.