

Theodicy: A response to Stephen Fry

Introduction

There is a popular YouTube video of an interview with Stephen Fry on an Irish television station.¹ In this, the interviewer probes Stephen about his very strong atheism. Answering one question about what he would say to God ‘at the pearly gates’ Stephen launches into a visceral denunciation of God, whom he proceeds to directly castigate like an angry parent.

The chief cause of Stephen’s ire is what theologians name (and which he refers to) as ‘Theodicy’. This is the doctrine, or rather apologetic, dealing with how we square a belief in a righteous and good God with the problem of suffering and evil in the world.² It is a problem that many Christian teachers have either struggled with or have given up on.

Since Stephen makes some points that are regularly found in witnessing to atheists, it behoves us to consider them. This is especially true since Russell Brand has countered Stephen Fry’s denunciation of God with a New Age defence of the concept of God, but without dealing with the real issue.

The charge: suffering in the world

Apart from bone cancer in children, perhaps Stephen’s most chilling reference is to parasitic worms³ that infest poor children in primitive conditions and slowly eat their eyes from the inside out.⁴ Stephen’s position is a common one – he directly blames God. He asserts that God causes misery that is not our fault and causes injustice and pain. Thus God, he says, is an utter maniac and totally selfish.

The rationale is: God made the worm to do this sort of damage. Therefore God is evil. Therefore I won’t believe in such a god.

Here I must contend against Stephen because I know that he is a scholar who has studied these things; yet I must accuse him of a lack of scholarship in this instance; a wilful decision to ignore the answer to his own question.

Having read the Bible, Stephen knows the answer to this question but has deliberately ignored it because accepting it would also mean a necessary acceptance of God’s righteousness and law. Instead he puts himself above God and his law.

The world God made was good

Stephen knows deep down that God is not the cause of evil or suffering in the world; man is.

¹ RTÉ One; ‘The Meaning of Life’, hosted by Gay Byrne.

² A late 18th century word from French *Théodicée*, the title of a work by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz [1646–1716], the German rationalist philosopher. *Théodicée* was derived from the Greek words *theos*, ‘God’ and *dike*, ‘justice’.

³ The reference is probably to the Loa Loa, or African eye-worm; a nematode transmitted through fly bites. The parasite is rarely life-threatening. The disease is called Onchocerciasis or ‘river blindness’ and is caused by worms spread by Blackfly of the family Simuliidae, which is endemic in swamps and rain forests in central and west Africa. Roundworms in cat and dog faeces can also infect the human eye.

⁴ It appears that he has taken this from a David Attenborough interview in Radio Times where he castigates Creationists and mentions this.

In the description of Creation in Genesis, the Bible explains that all of God's creation was 'very good'.

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was* very good. Gen 1:31

God did not make anything evil in the creation; what he made was fit for purpose and thus 'very good'. God did not make parasitic worms specifically to eat the eyes of poor children.

Of course Stephen wishes to avoid the question of the Fall of man into sin and the terrible changes which the entrance of sin into the world made to creation, such that it now groans, awaiting release from the present state of bondage (Rm 8:22).

Even in Genesis we learn that the realm that God made had very different protocols to the world today. Thus animals that are now carnivorous predators then ate vegetables

And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, / have given every green herb for food'; and it was so. Gen 1:29-30

Since all animals only ate vegetation then, there were no worms that feasted on children's eyes. There were no parasites.

Also, in that prelapsarian world there was no death; death only appeared after sin entered creation.⁵ Since there was no death, there were no things that fed on death. There were no saprophytes.

Since animals only ate vegetation, there were no predators.

God's world was very good.

The world wants to ignore the matter of sin and rebellion to God

The reason why there is so much suffering in the world and why the natural order of creation has been subverted, is sin. The sin of man has ruined God's creation. The cause of Stephen's problem is not God but man.

This ruin is not just the actual damage that man does to the environment, but the day sin entered the world something terrible occurred and subverted everything. The delicate balance of the world in submission to God was ruined, as the world became rebellious to God – and this affected creation.

As a result of sin, God gave man (and his environment) over to fulfil that sin and become exceedingly wicked.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men ... Therefore God also gave them up ... For this reason God gave them up ... And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over. Rm 1:18-32

Man chose to follow sin instead of God, so God gave mankind over to fulfil the depths of sin; this sin will increasingly ruin the world until God puts a stop to it forever. The natural order around us is now subject to a world in rebellion instead of a world in harmony with God. We ruined creation.

⁵ Rm 5:12: 'Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned'.

The providence of God

Despite the fall of man into sin, which ruined creation, God is so gracious that he provided various means to alleviate man's suffering. Foreknowing that man would fall, God knew that evil and sickness would prevail and so provided certain factors to assist man and also gave him knowledge to use the things.

The immune system

Of first importance is the fact that God created the human body with the inbuilt means to heal itself from many things that beset us. Without the immune system a common cold would kill us. Few people would survive more than a few years.

Stephen gives God no credit or thanks for this, something that has enabled him to live this long.

Natural medication

God has provided multiple means of using vegetation to heal certain ailments. This was known even by the ancients. Certain modern medicines, such as aspirin or cough medicine based on plants,⁶ were known thousands of years ago. Almost everywhere you travel there are local plants that will alleviate the symptoms of different diseases. As a child I quickly learned that nettle stings could be alleviated by rubbing dock leaves⁷ on the wounds. Some plant remedies are now known to have greater effectiveness than pharmaceuticals.

God did not need to do this, but he not only provided a few medicines but thousands; many of which we have yet to learn about.

Stephen gives God no credit or thanks for this.

Physicians

Then God gave man the knowledge to use natural medicines and various therapies. From the earliest times certain people knew a calling from God to be doctors and help others. As he gave man the knowledge of fire, smelting ore, or making musical instruments through precise mathematics, so he also gave the knowledge of healing.

Thus there are ancient texts regarding medicine, such as Galen's [129–99] attempt to systematise the whole of medicine, making important discoveries in anatomy and physiology. Or the earlier Greek physician Hippocrates [c.460–377 BC], traditionally regarded as the father of medicine. His name is associated with the medical profession's Hippocratic oath.

Ancient knowledge was advanced; modern archaeological discoveries have shown that the ancients were able to perform cranial surgery and fill teeth. Some old therapies are coming back, such as using honey or maggots on septic wounds.

God provided physicians from the beginning.

Stephen gives God no credit or thanks for this.

⁶ Aspirin is acetylated salicylic acid, originally derived from the plant genus *Spiraea*. Cough medicines were based upon extractions from the Ipicac tree.

⁷ Genus *Rumex*, family Polygonaceae.

Stephen Fry's real issue

If Stephen faces the fact that sin is the cause of the things he hates in the world, he would then need to face the fact of his own sin. In the passage above, God's word specifically highlights the sin of homosexuality,⁸ a sin that Stephen publicly avows.

Homosexuality itself is incongruous with a good world since it eliminates the possibility of reproduction. People who believe in evolution (as Stephen does) ignore the fact that if everyone was homosexual, the race of men would end in one generation. Homosexuality is irreconcilable with either the theory of evolution or Christianity, or even common sense.

Many psychologists affirm that it is sexual abuse of young people that often leads to homosexual leanings later in life. Indeed, Stephen has admitted that such was the case with him at school. Instead of blaming his sinful abusers for his situation he blames God for the world's ills; the very God who condemns abusive behaviour.

However, be that as it may, Stephen's deliberate avoiding of known facts in the Bible show that his atheism is not a reaction to an unjust God but a deliberate choice of his own. His problem is not with God but with his own choices.

Here is a man who strives to scholarly excellence and has a pedagogic reputation for being one of the brainiest presenters on the television. He even hosts the most interesting and intelligent quiz show on the BBC (Q.I.).⁹ Yet he deliberately ignores statements in the Bible that he has read because they go against his inclinations. That is not scholarly at all; it is prejudice.

Conclusion

So, is God responsible for parasitic worms? No he is not. Such things resulted from the Fall and the sin of man in our first parents. The cause of evil in the world is not God but sin. We are to blame for the evil and suffering in our world.

The only escape from this evil world is to believe the rest of God's word as expressed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to repent of our evil thinking and actions and believe in Christ as our only hope of eternal life. The world is doomed to sin and judgment, but we can be saved from this fate if we submit to the Lordship of Christ and believe in his name.

Stephen's anger against God needs to be turned into worship.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
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⁸ Rm 1:26-27, 'For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due'.

⁹ 'Just Connect' and 'Mastermind' may be more academically intelligent but are far less interesting.