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EVIL AND EMOTIONS:  
AN ARGUMENT FOR CHRISTIAN STOICISM

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## OUTLINE

*Thesis Statement:* When one examines the problem of suffering in light of God's omnipotence, the locus of moral evil, and the importance of an individual's response, the Stoic approach is the safest and most complete understanding of suffering and how it functions in the life of a Christian.

## I. Events are not intrinsically evil.

A. If God is both good and omnipotent, there can be no intrinsically evil events.

1. God is the primal agent in every action and therefore culpable for all events.
2. God actively determines whether an event will occur or not.
3. It is evil to cause an evil to occur, even if one works good out of it.
4. Explicit divine agency in apparently evil events suggests that moral value is located outside of physical action.

B. The ability of one event to be both good and evil suggests external moral value.

1. A single event can produce opposite effects in different recipients.
2. The intent of an action alters its moral value.

C. Physical impacts do not make an event evil.

1. Death is neither evil nor necessarily against nature.
2. Lesser impacts are outweighed by spiritual gain.

D. Biblical prohibitions do not imply that actions have a static moral value.

1. Actions are prohibited because they are inseparable from an evil will.

2. Some actions are prohibited because man's limitations prevent him from being able to do them well.

II. The impact of an event on a man is determined by mediation.

- A. Because the intent determines the moral value of action, it is impossible to sin accidentally or be forced to sin.
- B. Since neutral actions have no direct effect on the soul, it is impossible to be harmed unless one mediates.
  1. Since mediation is a choice, one cannot suffer harm unless one chooses to.
  2. Even if events can be evil, mediation still determines whether suffering will harm or benefit the recipient.
    - a) Proper mediation avoids a victim complex approach to suffering.
    - b) Proper mediation keeps man's intellect free and keeps him in good relation with God.

## Evil and Emotions:

### An Argument for Christian Stoicism

The atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan seem to grow worse and more numerous with each passing day, and it would be calloused indeed to deny that the affliction there is real and painful. Daily news reports confront the reader with the problem of suffering; the pivotal question is how one ought to view, understand, and react to it. How one answers this question determines whether one will hope, despair, or simply survive. When one examines the problem in light of God's omnipotence, the locus of moral evil, and the importance of an individual's response, the Stoic argument may be the safest and most complete understanding of suffering and how it functions in the life of a Christian. To evaluate this claim it is first necessary to construct a preliminary understanding of evil and how it functions in the context of the moral value of events.

Augustine suggests that the evil is not a substance or force with an independent existence, but rather to a privation of good.<sup>1</sup> This definition functions well in light of the idea that all substances are created by a good God, and thus evil can have no independent substance. However, the definition does not clarify the moral value of events because it necessitates that any object, desire, or event that is less than Ultimate Good (namely, God) is evil. Drawing this idea to the logical conclusion one would be forced to affirm that God acted evilly in creating, since he created substances that were less than the Ultimate Good and therefore privations.

To escape this quandary one must draw out a separate definition of evil in reference to an intent or event. Evil in this sense should be understood as a necessarily harmful impact on the

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick) 3.7.12 "I did not know that evil has no existence except as a privation of a good, down to that level which is altogether without being."

soul of an individual. In the context of intents, this understanding is very similar to the previous one. If an individual desires something less than the Good and substitutes a lesser good, he desires a privation and harms his own soul by directing it toward something that is not God. For events, however, this nuanced definition makes a world of difference: an event or action can only be considered evil if it necessarily inflicts lasting harm.

There are two ways in which an event could necessitate harm: first, if an event is intrinsically evil then its mere occurrence must harm any individual affected. Second, if the event has a direct, unmediated impact on an individual's soul, then he is unable to escape harm. The Stoic argument is that while an individual may respond to an event or action in such a way as to be harmed, he is equally capable of escaping such damage by mediating his reaction. Here one must make a critical distinction: although it is impossible for a Christian to be the victim of evil, this does not imply that it is impossible for a Christian to suffer at all. Not all physical sufferings affect the soul, and because an individual is always able to mediate those that do, none necessitate permanent damage.

Let us proceed through this argument in detail. The first question to resolve is whether it is possible for an event to be intrinsically evil. An "event" is anything that takes place in the physical world, excluding intangible things such as thoughts, intents, or wills. For an event to be intrinsically evil, its mere occurrence must always be evil. If one accepts that God is good, that he created all things, sustains all things, and directs all things, then the existence of evil events is denied simply by the fact that God is restricted by his nature from acting evilly. Building upon this foundation, there are four distinct theological arguments for the non-existence of evil events.

First, God empowers human action; so if there is an evil action God is culpable. One may object that as an action of a free agent, an evil event may take place and leave God

blameless, but this argument is insufficient. Though the decision to commit evil is indeed the sin of the agent, no individual would have the power to actually do evil unless God empowered him. Boethius considers this premise a given, stating in the *Consolation of Philosophy* that “there are two things on which all the performance of human activity depends, will and power. If either of them is lacking, there is no activity that can be performed.”<sup>2</sup> If all power is from God, then God must play an active role in any event or action: the role of the primal agent, without whom no action can occur.

When one speaks of evil as the action of a free agent, then, one does not mean that God has ceased to be the primal agent; instead, the secondary agent desires what is not good. In the natural world, secondary agents can be human, environmental, or physical. As secondary agents they have no power of their own, but instead are empowered by the primal agent. So, every natural event has a primal and secondary agent, both of whom are culpable for the act. Since the primal agent is therefore an actor in every event, the only way for God not to be culpable for every event is for there to be another primal agent. But allowing any other being power equal to God’s—or even simply power not dependent upon God for existence—removes that being from God’s sphere of power, which clearly violates His omnipotence. Furthermore, if one assumes that this second being enables evil wills, one sets up an impossible juxtaposition between a Supreme God and an independent, opposite force. Assuming that a supreme God can neither be conquered nor injured, any worldview that requires a struggle between God and an opposite force would be incoherent. There remains only one cogent understanding of action: a primal agent must supply all power, and God is the only possible primal agent. It follows that God is ultimately culpable for every event.

Secondly, one must recognize that God is the only agent actively determining whether an

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<sup>2</sup> Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy* (trans. Victor Watts [London: Penguin Books, 1969]) 4.2.

event will take place or not. One cannot simply assert, “God allows evil, but is not culpable”. His permission implicitly condones the event. John Calvin address this topic explicitly in *The Institutes* by writing that even in the most extreme case—the fall of mankind—God not only permitted a seemingly evil event, but also arranged it:

Nor ought it to seem absurd when I say, that God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it. For as it belongs to his wisdom to foreknow all future events, so it belongs to his power to rule and govern them by his hand.<sup>3</sup>

Even if one adopts a lower view of God’s providence, it is still impossible to say that a God who has the power to stop intrinsic evil but does not remains just or good.<sup>4</sup> By its very nature, intrinsic evil is evil simply by virtue of its occurrence, and therefore allowing it to occur must also be evil. Like a policeman who shirks his duty, a God who turns a blind eye to evil cannot be considered just. Additionally, the argument relies on the supposition that in allowing an event to occur God neither prohibits nor empowers evil. This would require the existence of second being endowed with independent power to act as a primal agent, the impossibility of which has already been addressed.

Thirdly, the argument that God works good out of evil events is not sufficient to avoid the logical impossibility of a good God doing evil acts. This argument fails mainly because if an act is intrinsically evil, it is evil in its very occurrence and thus God would still be causing evil

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989]) 3.23.7.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that this argument does not extend to man’s free will. God is culpable for giving man a free will, thus it must be a good thing to be able to freely choose between greater and lesser goods. In giving free will, however, it is necessary that God give individuals a real ability to choose badly. The reason why this does not fall prey to the previous argument is that the power given to man is over himself alone. If man were able to actually generate an evil event, that event would victimize another individual, granting man real power over other individual’s soul. By only allowing man to desire evil, rather than actually create an evil event, God limits his sphere of influence to his own person, ensuring that no man can ever be forced to sin or be victimized by evil. Thus, allowing man to have a free will does not mar God’s holiness, justice, or goodness, as long as it is good to have a free will.

regardless of whether He mitigated the damage later. If one objects that the redemption of an act could completely justify it, then the event is not *intrinsically* evil; the strongest statement that could be made about it is that it was a neutral event with evil short term ramifications, but good long term impacts.

The fourth and final theological argument for the moral neutrality of events is that God commands actions that must be considered evil if actions themselves can be evil. As a good God, he cannot actually command evil, but the accounts of divine agency in seemingly evil events are inescapable. The Old Testament contains numerous commands similar to the one recorded in Deuteronomy 20:16, in which God delivers the Law to the Israelites. The orders are clear, brutal, and seemingly evil:

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance you have shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction.<sup>5</sup>

The command amounts to genocide. If one holds the opinion that there are actions that are intrinsically evil, the systematic and intentional slaughter of an entire race of people must be one of them. However, the command very clearly comes from God, and God cannot both be good and command evil. Hence, one of the two propositions must be false: either God is not good, or the act that he commanded was not evil. Due to the limited scope of this paper, we assume God's inherent goodness and proceed to the second proposition. The most sustainable way to contend that Divinely commanded genocide is not evil is to deny that events have any intrinsic moral value.

One can also make the case for the neutrality of events simply by observing their relativity. It is empirically evident that a single event can function differently for various individuals. The event which Augustine addresses, the sacking of Rome, simultaneously functioned evilly for the

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<sup>5</sup> Deut. 20:16

many individuals who suffered from it and well for those who were called back to repentance from vicious extravagance.<sup>6</sup> If the same event can be both good and evil simultaneously, it cannot have a static intrinsic moral value. Instead, this dilemma suggests that the moral value is derived not from the event, but from the actor's intention, and/or the recipient's perception.

Abelard argues for this understanding of events in his work *Know Thyself*, "In fact deeds, which we said above are equally common to reprobates and to the elect, are in themselves all indifferent. They are not to be called good or bad, except according to the intention of the doer."<sup>7</sup> One can grasp this concept more clearly through a cursory examination of two hypothetical events. In situation A, a doctor attempts to perform high-risk surgery on his patient, but he is unsuccessful and the patient dies. In situation B, a man plans and carries out a murder. No one would say that the doctor acted badly or sinned, but most could agree that a premeditated murder is a sin. The physical events are extremely similar: a man inserted a knife into a woman's heart, and she died. Why is one condemned and the other praised? The difference is the intent, or will, of the actor: the doctor intended to save a life, but inadvertently killed; the murderer intended to kill. Thus, the murderer is not condemned for the act of killing, but for the intent.

An argument commonly made in favor of the existence of evil events is that anything that goes against nature is evil. Proponents of this position argue that death is against our nature (and therefore evil), thus it follows that any event that causes death is also evil. The contention fails at a few points. First, the assumption that it is inherently evil to go against nature necessarily condemns miracles, acts of God, and the ultimate redemption and glorification of man. Since these are undeniably Good things, any argument that declares them to be evil is flawed. Second,

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine *The City of God Against the Pagans* (trans. Marcus Dods) I.28-36

<sup>7</sup> Peter Abelard *Ethical Writings* (trans. Paul V. Spade) 1.90.

the argument that death is contrary to our created nature assumes that it is somehow divergent from God's intention for our lives. This would require that man is able to over-ride God's plan and given nature, replacing it with a nature of his own devising. Since Scripture is unclear about precisely what happened to man's nature at the Fall, it would seem more likely that man lost the ability to be pure, but did not change his basic nature. It would seem that there are two states which are natural for man: to be pure and sinless, or to be sinful. While man remained without sin, both options were open, but only the pure state would be active (since it is impossible to be both pure and sinful). Once man sinned, therefore, he switched to the sinful state, and lost the ability to be pure. Both states are natural for man. Just as life and health are the natural results of innocence, death and sickness are the natural results of sin. Now, if man retains his original nature, and sin is a natural state for man, and death is a natural result of sin, then it cannot be said that death is against nature.

Since our argument for the moral neutrality of events necessarily assigns a low value to the body and the physical realm, one may object to it on the grounds that humans are embodied, and therefore any harm to their bodies must harm their souls, and could be legitimately termed evil. However, physical experiences do not have unmediated effects on the soul. Paul argues for the insulation of the soul from physical pain in Second Corinthians. He simultaneously asserts the benefit of bodily affliction and the supremacy of the soul over the body, writing:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.<sup>8</sup>

Paul clearly shows the bifurcation between the spiritual and bodily states, explicitly denying that bodily suffering necessarily translates into spiritual harm. He also takes the argument a step

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<sup>8</sup> II Cor. 4:16-18

further by placing so much value on the state of the soul as opposed to the sufferings of the body.

In this framework, if forced to choose between damage to the soul or to the body, one must invariably prefer to protect the soul. This preference is justified at least three times over: first, bodily pain cannot cut off access to God, whereas a deficient or warped soul can. Second, physical affliction strengthens the soul's reliance on God, thus reinforcing faith and love. Finally, the true goal of a Christian is the ascension of his spirit, not the comfort of his body, and any action that serves this goal must be considered preferable. Physical suffering does not always result in betterment of the soul, but if proper mediation *can* cause even the most distasteful events to improve one's soul, they cannot be considered inherently evil.

Having established that no event is intrinsically evil, let us turn our attention to the second question, whether an individual can mediate the effects of an event on his soul. First one must recognize that there is no evil in physical acts, but instead an action's moral value resides in the intent. If this is so, then a recipient is only directly impacted by a neutral action, and thus always has the ability to mediate its affect on his soul. However, Scripture very clearly forbids specific acts. If it is not the act itself that makes the action sinful, what is evil about doing the deed? As previously observed, the moral value of an act is determined by the will of the actor. If a secondary agent desires to do evil, then actions stemming from that will are sinful.

To the extent that one cannot discern an individual's will in each act, one can neither categorically condemn nor excuse the actions. This argument is not incompatible with the Ten Commandments. Although one cannot categorically condemn actions, certain acts can never be done with a pure will. This is primarily because our language is colored to reflect the moral value of the will involved. For example, the terms 'manslaughter', '1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree murder', and 'euthanasia' all signify the same event: the cessation of one human life by another human.

However, the shades of meaning in each signifier denote the assumed state of the perpetrator's will, ranging from benevolent<sup>9</sup> (in the case of Euthanasia) to malignant (as in the case of first degree murder). Thus, since certain terms couple an evil will with abstract action, one could never use the term to refer to a morally good act. For instance, one can never declare it possible to commit murder without sinning, since the term "murder" indicates a sinful state of the will.

The remaining prohibited actions require the actor to make broad moral judgments that can only be good if the agent has complete knowledge. The justification for divinely commanded genocide, for example, is that God has the full knowledge required for the righteous execution of such acts, whereas human limitations necessarily prohibit this for men. Essentially, the act itself is not tainted; there are cases where genocide is justified and righteous. However, there are no cases where a human can righteously initiate genocide, since humans by definition lack the requisite knowledge and purity of intention.

The prohibitive commands in the Ten Commandments are therefore not indicative of the evilness of each prohibited action, but rather emphasize that for men they are inextricably tied to an evil will. If an action's moral value is determined by the agent's intent, one must conclude that it is thus impossible to sin accidentally: if an individual naively commits a crime, his action is not sinful. Because he cannot have intended any evil, his act was not morally bad, and since there are no intrinsically evil actions, it is impossible to sin without intent. Conversely, if an individual acts out of an evil will and ultimately benefits society he still has sinned. The event was good but the individual did not intend good; it was an accidental result. The same reasoning applies to victimless evil wills: an individual need not occasion suffering to have intended and acted badly. These concepts are not reinforced by societal justice structures primarily because

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<sup>9</sup> This paper does not concern itself with the debates over whether euthanasia and abortion ought to be socially acceptable, but rather uses the terms as generally understood as an act of non-aggression still ending in termination of life.

they are unwieldy. Actions liable to cause pain to society must be categorically discouraged, and therefore both punitive and redemptive measures must be taken to deter individuals from acting on evil wills. Since it is utterly impossible to distinguish the intent behind an action in a human court of law, it is perfectly justifiable to base punishment on the completion of detrimental actions, regardless of the actual intent or state of the will.

If it is impossible to suffer evil or be forced to sin, then it is impossible for one's soul to be damaged by anyone except oneself. In addition, since bodily suffering yields spiritual virtue, "undesirable" events are neither truly evil nor undesirable, since the individual has more potential to be helped than harmed by them. This logic should extend to situations with and without a secondary agent. When there is no secondary agent or the agent has no independent will (as is the case for physical or natural agents) nothing evil can happen, since it is impossible for God's will to be evil and there is no other will causing the event to take place. In case of independent agency the evil will of the perpetrator causes the event, but God still functions as the primal agent, and since God always has a pure will and there is no intrinsic evil in the event, He has done nothing evil by enabling the event. Though the secondary agent had desired to do something that was not good the only evil in the situation remains within the will of the perpetrator. In order to impact the recipient, the evil intent of a perpetrator must be translated into an event (which is by nature neutral and limited to physical impacts), which then affects the recipient's body but has no impact on the soul until mediated. The recipient is therefore not harmed unless he chooses to be.

Even if one is unwilling to accept the arguments against evil events, as long as three pivotal Christian doctrines are accepted one will arrive at the same conclusions regarding mediation. These doctrines are: first, the omnipotence of God; second, the supremacy of the soul

over the mortal body; and third, the redemption of suffering. Even assuming that real evil occurs and can be suffered, an individual who accepts these three doctrines must contextualize suffering as follows: “All things, including evil and pain, are controlled and directed by a good God. Though I may suffer in my body, yet my soul is not irredeemably harmed and therefore I can benefit from even the most painful circumstances.” Because all events can therefore impact a person either positively or negatively, even the impacts of intrinsically evil events are neutralized, and the perspective and reaction of the individual become pivotal.<sup>10</sup>

It is at this juncture that Christianity approaches Stoicism. If one can mediate the affect of physical action on the soul, then it is impossible to be the unwilling victim of evil. Mediation is the act of selecting an attitude or set of emotions and thoughts about a given event that in turn alter one’s ability to act and exist in the world. Since an individual’s response to an event is what determines the impact on his soul, mediation is essentially choosing whether or not to be truly harmed by an event. The act of mediating necessarily translates the victim into a free agent who can decide whether or not to subject himself to harm. Because one cannot be affected by an event except through mediation, all “victims” are necessarily translated into free agents and cannot be *forced* to be truly harmed by suffering.

Stoics such as Epictetus recognize the preceding argumentation and emphasize that one must be exceedingly careful when mediating, since happiness, well-being, and susceptibility to harm all hang in the balance. The core of the Stoic argument is that while it is not within one’s ability to choose whether or not to suffer, the decision of whether or not to be harmed by suffering is the function of mediation (and consequently always within one’s ability). The best life is therefore always available to a man who can properly mediate his response to events.

Proper mediation requires that the individual first evaluate the situation and recognize that

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<sup>10</sup> Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* (trans. Victor Watts) 2.4.

it is not evil. Although his body may have suffered, his soul has not been harmed by it, and will not be unless he reacts improperly. The man must recognize that his response to suffering is what determines whether it will harm him. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus clarifies that as long as an individual keeps events in perspective by valuing his soul above his body, he will not suffer harm. This is because:

The essence of good and of evil lies in an attitude of the will. What are external things then? They are materials for the will, in dealing with which it will find its own good or evil. How will it find its good? If it does not value over much the things that it deals with. For its judgments on matters presented to it, if they be right, make the will good, and if crooked and perverse make it bad.<sup>11</sup>

He argues that a good judgment is one that maintains a man's possession of his reason, control of his passions, and keeps him free from fear.<sup>12</sup> Working from this paradigm, destructive emotional responses such as resentment, bitterness, anger, dejection, and depression are clearly inappropriate because they either rob man of his independence from exterior forces (thus enslaving him) or else skew his perception of events such that his reason is no longer able to function well. Anger against God is also an inappropriate emotion, first because it harms the soul by pushing it away from God, and second because it is irrational, as God never causes harm to happen to any individual.

While emotional responses to events are not entirely invalid, they ought always be more directed by the soul and mind than by the body. In the midst of suffering, one must take care to never lose sight of the broader picture. If, like the Stoics, a Christian can approach suffering by recognizing its eternal insignificance and its potential to benefit his soul, his chances of mediating well and thus living well are substantially better than if he were to view evil as

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<sup>11</sup>Arrianus *Discourses of Epictetus*, (in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, ed. W.J. Oates [New York: Random House, 1940]) 1.29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.22.

something to which he is a helpless victim whose only real response is, “woe is me.” Operating within this framework, it is entirely possible for an individual to live in a world full of suffering, yet not be harmed. This mindset provides a great deal of both freedom and personal responsibility: freedom, because though events happen to him, he is not compelled to suffer harm. Personal responsibility is drastically increased for the same reason: if harm to the soul is dependent on appropriate mediation, then it is inexcusable to indulge in inappropriate emotions. If this task is too difficult when one is emotionally invested in the physical world, then it would seem that the responsible action is to curb that investment. Emotions are valuable, but if being emotional harms one’s soul it seems a worthwhile tradeoff to instead face everything with equanimity, and become, in a word, Stoic.

Epictetus argues that this conditioning is a first step, aimed to enable a man to emote appropriately: “Those whose bodies are in good condition can endure heat and cold; so those whose souls are in good condition can bear anger and pain and exultation and other emotions.”<sup>13</sup> The goal of being Stoic is to train ones’ emotions to respond to events appropriately. At first this task is difficult and unnatural, and must be accomplished by overriding emotions with the intellect. However, if one perseveres, then the proper response and the emotional response will eventually coincide, and one will be able to have emotional responses without risk of harm.

In this way the Stoic approach to the problem of suffering provides the most holistic understanding of pain in the greater context of God’s omnipotence. It enables a Christian to live well and to hope in the face of affliction and shifts his focus to the goodness and power of God whenever suffering becomes seemingly unbearable. It is this mindset—the Stoic mindset—that allows the greatest freedom and comfort to a Christian.

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<sup>13</sup> Arrianus *Fragments*, (in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, ed. W.J. Oates [New York: Random House, 1940]) 1.20.

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