Christian Moral Apologetics & The Problem of Evil:
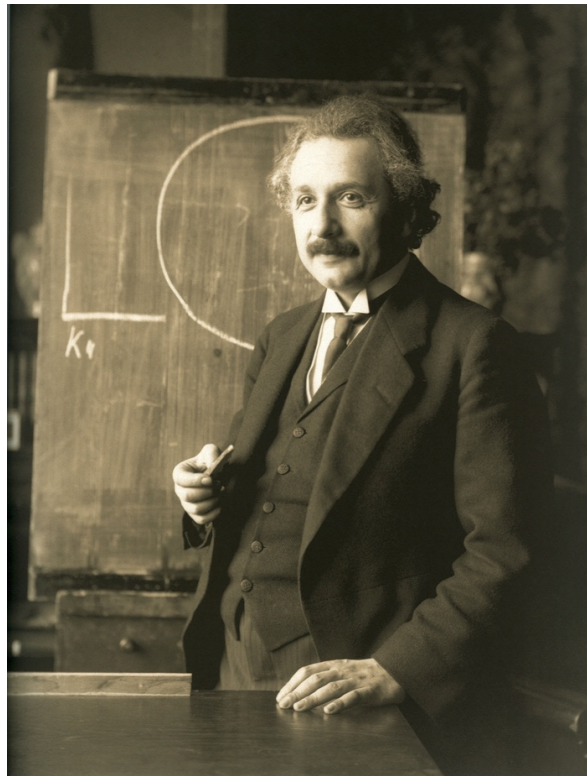
A Hopefully Helpful Primer

by

Jonathan Michael Huls

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

—Albert Einstein

Introduction

Every profession or field of study incorporates a "jargon." In my day-job as an airplane pilot, this private language is rather sophisticated. Indeed, it contains more acronyms and specialized terms than I can count. I can carry on a conversation with another pilot in English, and a "layman" might conclude that we are conversing in Vulcan—or some other alien language. This private language phenomenon often defeats effective communication. But this need not be the case.

First, one should notice that any annoyance caused by specialized jargons is unwarranted. Everyone does this—and so do you. My father is a dairy-farmer by profession. He might have a conversation with another dairy farmer about milk-weights, protein percentages, mastitis counts, and crop yields per acer. Unless you are literate in "dairy-jargon," it will go right over your head! Likewise, my wife is a registered nurse. She can carry on full conversations in acronym just like I can. Unless she is willing to translate, I won't have a clue what she is talking about. If you think about it honestly, you also share a jargon with those of your particular training and expertise. The philosophy of religion and ethics is no different. So there is no need to be overly intimidated by the words associated with these fields. They are not beyond your grasp.

In the interest of putting some $5 words on sale, and placing important philosophical language within easier reach—I have prepared this primer for the reader with a different "expertise" than mine. Still, this will by no means make your exploration of ethical philosophy or religion "easy." The big questions examined in my thesis have been big questions for thousands of years. In every endeavor undertaken in a meaningful life, one can expect to get out of a project what they are willing to put into it. It is hoped that this primer will be of some benefit towards making some of the most difficult philosophical concepts more understandable. There can be no "help" without "understanding." That's what my thesis is all about.

Key Concepts

(These are given in a logical order, not an alphabetical one)

God

> A self-existent Being who is Perfect in moral value, knowledge, and power. In the words of St. Anselm, God is "that which nothing greater can be thought."

Evil

> Commonly used as an umbrella term for all of life's negatives. For our purposes, this meaning is insufficient. Evil describes a moral state of affairs that "should not be the case." The holocaust, abuse of young children for fun, and actions of a serial killer are obvious examples of personal evil.

The Problem of Evil

> If God is by definition a Perfect Being, then why isn't the world that He created a perfect place? For thousands of years, philosophers have been trying to dismiss God on account of the reality of evil—or trying to defend the idea of God in the face of real evil.

Argument From Evil

> An argument from evil attempts to demonstrate the non-existence of God on the basis of the reality of evil.

> Rarely, a contrarian argument from evil will be given to demonstrate the existence of God from the reality of evil. This "judo-like" strategy is adopted in my thesis.

Defense

> A defense is a modest answer to the problem of evil in that it forwards a possible solution. That is, it **might** be a suitable answer. The **"free will defense"** is perhaps the best known of these. If a human person has genuine free will, then they might be causally responsible for their own evil actions. Likewise, human freedom might be a good that sufficiently justifies the risk of evil. In my thesis, I argue that it is not.

Theodicy

> A theodicy is a more ambitious answer to the problem of evil that risks giving an **actual comprehensive answer.** In most cases, theodicies are not preferred since they are more easily shown to be false or inadequate as an explanation. Yet "nothing ventured equals nothing gained." My thesis is an attempted theodicy risking a uniquely Christian answer to the problem of evil. Unlike freedom, Love is a good which never fails.

Metaphysics (Think Worldview)

Metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality. One's choice of a metaphysic determines their accepted explanation of reality. Of course, the field of metaphysics is interested in objectively exploring the suitability of various worldview options.

Theism

Theism is a systematic worldview which incorporates persuasion in the reality of God, or of gods as an ultimate explanation for being, value, and meaning.

Christianity

Christianity is a theistic worldview grounded in the radical identity and supernatural actions of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians believe that Jesus supplies an ultimate revelation of God to man—as well as a divine solution to human imperfection (or sin) through His substitutionary life, death, and resurrection to glory.

Christians believe that Jesus is God and also with God. Jesus' recorded teachings indicate a three Person plural Godhead known as the Trinity. This obtains in the necessary love relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Naturalism

Naturalism is a systematic worldview that incorporates belief in the totality of the natural order (the universe). This view is positively synonymous with **atheism.** On naturalism, value and meaning are fortunate evolutionary accidents. The nature and possibility of moral facts on naturalism is an ongoing debate.

Determinism

Determinism is an entailment of naturalism that insists that every event that does occur is the result of an inviolable chain reaction of physical events. Of course, objective morality on such a framework is just plain weird. Good and evil are not particles, waves, forces, or any other element of physics.

Theistic determinism insists that every event that does occur is the result of God's foreordination. This view runs into a serious problem of evil in that it sees God as the efficient cause of evil. This is an explicit violation of the law of non-contradiction.

Logical Categories

The **possible** describes what **might** happen. I **might** have a rib-eye for dinner.

The **impossible** describes what **cannot** happen. I **cannot** become genetically female.

The **necessary** describes what **must** happen. The necessary being of God may be the only necessary component of reality. Naturalists posit the necessity of the universe, but this

belief is held against clear evidence that the universe had a beginning in the finite past. By definition, God has no beginning. Necessity is a critical part of discovering an ultimate explanation for reality—morality included.

Abductive Argument (Think Livable Explanation a.k.a.: Common Sense)

An abductive argument is essentially an **inference to the best explanation**. Which available explanation makes the best sense of reality as it actually is? In the case of morality and ethics, human persons seem to have an awareness of an objective moral framework. *Good, evil, right,* and *wrong,* are words with basic meaning (**axioms**). These are needed to make sense of the world. Which worldview-explanation (metaphysic) has the power and scope to make the best sense of the world as it really is?

The cumulative case argument for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an example of an abductive argument. Which explanation makes the best sense of the improbable conversions of Paul and James; the radical change in the behavior of the disciples before and after the crucifixion; the empty tomb; and the rapid expansion of the early Church?

The best explanation is that God exists and raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus is exactly who He says He is—God and with God. This is an abductive argument.

Deductive Argument (Think Logical Proof) **Reveals either the possible or the impossible.**

A deduction is a logical proof in which the truth of a conclusion necessarily follows from the truth of an argument's premises. For example:

> P1: Everything that begins is caused to begin.
>
> P2: If the world began, it was caused to begin.
>
> P3: The world began.
>
> C: Therefore, the world was caused to begin.

Or:

> P1: A bachelor is an unmarried human male.
>
> P2: Jake is a married human male.
>
> C: Jake is not a bachelor.

Inductive Argument (Think Process of Elimination) **Reveals the probable or improbable.**

An inductive argument makes judgements based on probabilities. This is how science works (when properly conducted). A meaningful hypothesis is formed and tested by way of carefully controlled experimentation. The results are collected, measured, and then objectively interpreted based on the presence or lack of any statistical significance. More often than not, science shows us what 'is not' the case by disproving a hypothesis. Induction leaves us with what **probably** is the case since it has not yet been **disproved.**

It is a popular myth that science can lead to certainty. This philosophy is known as **scientism.** In point of fact, nothing leads to certainty. You cannot prove by induction that you didn't begin reading this sentence at this very moment with the memories in your brain and the food in your stomach. Science has limits, but in all fairness so does faith.

Faith

Faith is the orientation of a person's persuasion or trust. Every human person has faith.

> The Christian is **persuaded** that Jesus is the Lord and **trusts** their eternity to Him as a suitable source of meaning, value, and being.

> The atheist is **persuaded** that there is no God, and **trusts** their eternity to their own metaphysical resources.

> The agnostic is **persuaded** that belief in God does not matter, and **trusts** that it won't when and if they are called to give an account for their lives.

Each faith position involves risk. The French genius Blaise Pascal thought that Christianity could rightly be adopted simply by weighing the risks and benefits. There is a lot more to faith than that, but I think that Pascal is ultimately correct.

Fideism (Faith-ism)

Fideism is a strategy in which knowledge is grounded by persuasion in a system of belief prior to, and unconstrained by **reason**. Many, if not most religious systems are examples of fideism. The truth value of the system is simply believed on **faith alone**.

Ironically, **scientism,** is an example of fideism since the explanatory power of science is assumed beyond reasonable constraint. Notice that the explanatory ultimacy of science cannot be demonstrated by way of the scientific method. It must be accepted on faith. This is an example of self-refutation in a worldview.

A self-refuting worldview ought to be revised or rejected.

Ontology (Think *Being*): **Moral Facts**

Ontology is the realm of **Facts** and **States of Affairs.**

Nobody needs to know a fact for a fact to be a fact.

Even without an objective human observer, the earth orbits the sun as a matter of fact.

The necessary and immutable nature of God's perfection is an ontological concern. God was God before any creature could recognize and glorify Him.

The contingency and imperfection of human persons is likewise an ontological concern.

Basic ontological ideas are Love (Being) and sin (non-being). On Christianity, the theological concept of life "in Christ" is the ultimate ontological concern for human persons who have been commanded: "Be Ye Perfect."

At issue are moral facts. Are **good** and **evil** objective features of reality. Is rape, murder, or slavery evil/wrong as a matter of fact, or only as a matter of subjective opinion? Are charity and compassion good/right?

On Christianity:

> P1: God is the first and ultimate Fact of Reality.
>
> P2: God is a Perfect Moral Being.
>
> C: Therefore, Moral Facts Exist in God.

Epistemology (Think *Knowing*) **Moral Knowledge and Rationality.**

Epistemology is the realm of Truth and Knowledge. Think **information about facts.**

Is **Truth** an objective feature of reality, or is it a human construct? Obviously, this depends on whether or not there are **facts.** This is why epistemology and ontology are often confused, especially in conversations about morality.

At issue with **moral knowledge** is our **source of Truth.** Where does moral knowledge come from?

> Is it by Divine Commands? Think broadly **revealed moral law.** You shall Love God completely, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the essence of the revealed moral law. It is not arbitrary; it is a function of the divine purpose for human persons. It is our operating manual as humans. We are created to reflect the goodness of our Creator. The moral law verbally tells us how to do it.
>
> Is it by Natural Law? Do we have access to moral knowledge simply by being **human persons** made **in God's image**. This is the concept of a **properly basic** knowledge. You can know that a stone is solid, that an ice cube is cold, that the embrace of your spouse feels pleasurable, etc., etc. You don't need to learn these things—they are properly basic.
>
> Is it by random physical accident? This is the only option available to the naturalist.

At issue with **moral rationality** is how we are **justified** or **warranted** to accurately interpret the above. David Hume said that we cannot infer an *ought* from an *is.* Why is he wrong? Because he has it backwards. If God is the Moral Fact, then we infer our fallen **is** because we have knowledge (basic and revealed) of our moral **ought.**

The Euthyphro Dilemma (A moral question from Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*)

Is something good because the gods love it? Or do the gods love it because it is good.

This has been reformulated by modern scholars into the form, "is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good."

Notice that these are very different questions given the above definition for God. See chapter four for critical analysis.

If the first, then goodness is arbitrary and meaningless. God could be a monster and we would still think He is good. Why? Simply because He says so.

> This is a problem for an authoritarian or presuppositional epistemology. This is behind any denominational/state/organization's requirement for a confession of belief—or **inquisition.** This is where **cults** come from. It is also where most of our silly divisions in the church come from.
>
> > e.g. "If you think that God created the world one minute more than six thousand years ago, you are a heretic bound for hell!"
> >
> > or: "If You think that human freedom is not perfected until eternity, and that we retain the power to walk away from faith in Christ—you are not really a Christian." etc. etc.
>
> The big question is the one Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I AM?"

If the second, (God commands things that are independently good), then goodness is something that exists independently of God.

> Of course, this takes us back to the beginning (ontology/being). If goodness is something that God has to learn about and respect, where does it come from?
>
> See the logical categories. This would make goodness necessary and God merely possible which is a reduction to nonsense.

Ultimately, God's divine commands are good because God ontologically is The Good.

Principle of Analogy

Every effect resembles its efficient cause.

> God is Perfect; therefore God's purposes and actions are perfect too. If they weren't, then God would not be God.
>
> Of course, this drives us right into the problem of evil. If God is perfect, then why isn't the world perfect too. Perhaps it is because He has a purposeful reason to create that requires human freedom.
>
> Human persons have the capacity to reason morally because we are persons made in the image of God. Such is basic to our human moral sense (conscience), just like appreciating the harmony of a C-major chord is basic to human hearing.

Law of Non-contradiction (Think, the Impossible) **a.k.a. The Category Fallacy.**

A statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense at the same time.

Jake cannot be a "married bachelor."

I cannot be a "male woman."

Being cannot be non-being.

Therefore, God cannot be evil. Such is like saying that Perfection is imperfection.

Hermeneutics (Think Interpretation)

> We have woven so far from being (ontology), to knowing (epistemology), to interpreting (hermeneutics).

> Here is our moral **current issue.**

> Postmodernism has flipped the script, and works from interpreting (I identify as); to knowing (it is my truth); to being (I am).

>> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and righteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness…who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever Amen (Rom. 1:18-25).

> All true equations balance, but only on the right order of operations. Man cannot invent themselves, let alone invent their Creator. No effect has such a power over its cause. Postmodern humanity is suffering from a cosmic delusion of grandeur.

Teleology (Think *Purpose*) **Moral Transformation** (Repentance—Sanctification—Glory).

> Why be moral? What is the point? If the universe is bound for heat death, why not eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die? Why not do what feels good at the expense of others (rape, slavery, theft, adultery, etc. etc. etc.).

> At issue is the tension between **moral** and **prudential** (practical everyday living) concerns.

> Really, what is the purpose for human persons? Why do human persons care for one another, and why do we strive to improve, and be more today than we were yesterday.

> The purpose issue is where our tapestry comes together and starts to make sense.

>> God exists as the first fact of reality. God is a morally perfect Being and supplies the perfect standard that we call Good. God created the world for a good purpose—namely to bring about the being of others with whom He could share His goodness.

>> God has revealed His perfect purposes through moral law (revelation), and through natural law (properly basic knowledge/conscience). The revealed purpose of human persons is to love God and their neighbors. This is an **incommensurable** (un-measurable) good, and constitutes both God's sufficient reason to create, and a morally sufficient reason to permit evil and suffering on account of human freedom.

> The story of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ makes better sense of moral facts, knowledge, rationality, and transformation than does any other competing theory.

> Therefore, the moral person should consider trusting in Jesus Christ and loving God and their neighbors with His perfect Love.

> Why?

> Because it is the good reason for which we exist.

Axiology (Think *Value*) This is an **ontological** issue of **being.**

>In view is the difference between **good** and **evil.**

>It is good to *be* like God as we are designed and informed to do.

>>we *ought* to do this.

>>*ought* **implies** *can* with the help available.

>>we can *be* like God in Christ. This is the glory that awaits us at the end of sanctification—the end goal of moral transformation.

Deontology (Think *Duty*) This is a **teleological** issue of **purpose.**

>In view is the difference between **right** and **wrong.**

>Also In view is the **duty** to conform to the above issue of **being.**

>We have a moral obligation to Love God and our neighbor. Jesus demonstrates this in perfection. We are to do likewise by being born again and living by the Spirit (John 3; Romans 8; 1 John). Don't confuse deontology (deontic) with ontology (ontological).

Latin Words and Phrases

>*a priori* (from the former). A style of reasoning based on presumption—such as fideism.

>*a se* (from self): Aseity is a feature of God by which He supplies His own existence. God is **necessary** and therefore independent and un-caused.

>*de re* (about the thing). An intrinsic feature of a subject. God is *de re* a Perfect Being. This concept is helpful when comparing different theological conceptions of God.

>*de facto* (of fact). The relationship of a thing to reality as it actually occurs.

>*modus ponens* (the affirming mode of deductive logic) If P then Q. P therefore Q.

>*modus tollens* (the denying mode of deductive logic) If P then Q. Not Q therefore Not P.

>*simpliciter* (simple). Not easy—but absolute, irreducible, and ultimate as an explanation. Something like a "prime number." God is **simple** in this way.

>*summum-bonum* (ultimate Good) A term coined by Cicero to denote the unifying first principle in a system of ethics.

>*Quid est Bonum?* What is good?

>*Quid est Malum?* What is evil?

Conclusion

I hope that you have found this primer on Christian moral apologetics and the problem of evil helpful. Good luck and God bless you in your search for the Truth. I hope that you find the meaning and value that you seek. I invite you to consider the meaning and value to be found in a love relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. God's love is an immeasurable good. He can be **your** immeasurable good too.