

Why is the world the way it is?

David Neelands

WHEN WE ARE VERY young, we learn that things happen for causes—one kind of event seems to follow from another kind, and we can make what we want to happen and what we like to happen over and over again. People around us can make good things happen for us. And we can prevent what we do not like from happening.

Very early in our life we also discover that things are not as we want them to be. We are confronted by disappointing and unwanted events. We react angrily to these frustrating experiences and try to change them or get others to change them. Later, we see that many of the things that frustrate us are beyond our control. We begin to understand that some of these things are as they should be, while others could be otherwise, and are not as they should be.

In some way, Christians assert that everything that is comes from God, who has created the world, and is still creating, and all that God has created is good. As the Bible has it, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.” And yet our experience that some things are not as they ought to be hauntingly remains for us. Was God shortsighted when he saw that the world was good?

God has created a host of natural objects—minerals, plants and animals—that behave in predictable ways. By means of these natural things everything that happens comes to pass. Human beings can understand these natural objects and have the ability to develop science and to understand good ways to behave.

For the most part, human beings can understand and learn to predict the movements of natural objects. Sometimes they bring sudden and surprising consequences. The power of the force of gravity and the flow of the tides, for instance, are generally good. Yet the force of an earthquake, or a flood, or lightning or disease causes bad things to happen. When we understand these powers, we may be able to predict these catastrophes and minimize the bad consequences.

Human beings are created with the desire to be happy and to have friends. With a generous measure of freedom, we can consider and choose our actions in the light of our goals and desires. Sometimes these actions conflict with the good ways that the human race has identified. This conflict may be the result of unwise decisions, or selfish ones, or even evil ones, and the consequences, though not inevitable, come to pass. For instance, ill-considered or selfish actions may in the longer term have undesired consequences that destroy or mutilate nature. Actions based on selfish and wicked goals may bring wars or reduce some human beings to a state of degradation and deprivation, rather than friendship.

In all that happens, whether good or bad, we believe that God in Christ is with us and the same God that is creating this wonderful world is present with those who suffer and is bringing good out of evil. And God invites human beings to be part of that transformation.

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Questions for discussion

1. Have you experienced the created world as good and benign or as evil and malevolent?
2. What evidence do you see that the world is not as it should be?
3. Do you know of ways in which you can contribute to and participate in the transformation of evil into good?