

Did God Create Evil?: Jesse Couenhoven

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Jesse, the one thing most theologians, philosophers of religion who are believers get apoplectic about, is when I challenge them if God created evil, because I think that, with evil in the world, if you have God in an omnipotent capacity and consistency would have to say that God created evil. And then you may give all sorts of reasons and theodicies, but you have to come to say that. So I want to put the question to you: Did God create evil, but specifically in the context of the so-called Original Sin. So I'm making a lot of suppositions here, that there is Original Sin, which I don't necessarily believe, there is a God, you know, but assuming there is a God, the Bible it true, there's Original Sin, didn't God create evil?

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah, well that's a great – that's a great set of questions. I think that actually, just to be perfectly clear from the start, I think that the theist does have to admit, if they're honest, that God is responsible, in some sense or other, for the existence of evil. And then you can do lots of sort of added complexities and fill-ups to that, but I do think that we sort of have to just own up to the fact that God is responsible for the existence of evil in this world that God created, in some sense or other.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So you're making a fine distinction between responsible and created.

Jesse Couenhoven:

That's right, because I think it makes a difference how exactly God is related to the existence of evil.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I'm not sure it makes a difference, but I'll let you try to show me why I'm wrong.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Well I think that – so when you talk about Original Sin, there are a number of things going on.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

First of all tell me what it is. What is Original Sin?

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah, well, so let me just make a distinction between three things that sometimes people mean when they talk about Original Sin. The first is the idea of, what I call, the primal sin; that is, there's a historically first sin, right? So you think of a garden with pure beings that then fall, right? So that's one thing that sometimes people have in mind when they talk about Original Sin. I don't think that's the key concept of Original Sin. A second thing that people can have in mind when they talk about Original Sin, is the idea that sin is inescapable; that it can't be avoided.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It's in our nature.

Jesse Couenhoven:

It's in our nature. And so that, I think, is much closer to the traditional conception of sin, but then, I think the traditional conception of Original Sin is, as I think you're pushing it towards here, not just that it's unavoidable, but that, yeah, somehow it's in our nature; that it's born, baked in in a way, that, as the first person to really talk about this suggests, St. Augustine, that we have inborn desires inside of us that are just wrong in certain ways. That they don't properly appreciate goodness. That they're – they're twisted in the way that they love things.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So you're talking about three then definitions; a first instance, an unavoidability, and built into our nature.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So how do you – how do all of those work together or teased apart?

Jesse Couenhoven:

Well the first instance part is just a way of trying to explain how did it come to pass that we would have such a thing as this baked-in, wrong desire in our nature.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So original means like the first or how it commenced?

Jesse Couenhoven:

Right. Right. And then the suggestion, for the most part, is that it gets inherited somehow. It's not exactly clear exactly how it gets inherited. I think that

you can actually draw on a lot of recent research in social science to just make the point that there are many things that we inherit in a whole manner of ways, the most obvious maybe is genetic, and it's popular to talk about genetic inheritance these days, but there are lots of aspects of culture that are inherited, too, even if people don't intend to pass them on, they do. And in those sorts of ways, various aspects of humanity can be passed down from one generation to the next.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So that seems to be a very soft kind of way of going from Original Sin to making it part of our nature. It seems like the religious tradition has it much more hard-wired rather than kind of a cultural determination.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah, I think partly it depends on how deep you think cultural determination goes in people. So if you have a really strong conception of how deeply influenced you are by the past history, prior to you, then it could be hard-wired because of those more kind of sociological and, as I said, potentially also genetic considerations. So I think there's a way of making that modern talk about sociology and genetics congruent with that sort of traditional idea about how sin is hard-wired.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Alright, so then let's go to the second one where it's unavoidable.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah. I think on that conception of sin, what you have is the sense that there's a struggle that people have, and that they can't sometimes avoid sinning, but oftentimes there's also the suggestion that at least some of the time they can. So it's not as though in every instance they have to sin; there's just some sense that on the whole, on average, something like that, people are going to be doing things that are wrong, at least some of the time.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

They can't avoid not sinning at some point or another?

Jesse Couenhoven:

Right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It doesn't mean all the time, obviously.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Right. But so, in that sense, I think it's a weaker kind of conception, this idea where you have a lot more control over your moral identity. You get to decide, in many of these individual instances, it's still up to you to figure out, am I going to be in the right, or am I going to be in the wrong.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And then the third is where it's really intrinsic in our nature.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Which is--

Jesse Couenhoven:

It's involuntary.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

It's a stronger sense than just unavoidable, which may be slightly more superficial, but now it's really inherent in everything that we are, our essence. Our essence.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah, I think that's right.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So humans, in that sense would, at their essence, be sinners as opposed to, you know, in essence good people, which many people would like to believe, who occasionally do bad things. It's in your essence. You're a bad person. We're all bad people in our core.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And that leads to some theological requirements of redemption and all sorts of things.

Jesse Couenhoven:

That's right. Well I think it is important to note that even on this conception of Original Sin that we're talking about, the kind of severe one, if you want to

put it that way, that um--

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's a good way.

Jesse Couenhoven:

--yeah. The idea, though, is always that sin is also always a way of not being what you were meant to be. So it's true, on this conception, that all of us are deeply bad, but it's also true, on this conception, that all of us are still deeply good; it's just that we're fragmented and sort of torn apart in the ways in which we're good and bad and we're not very well integrated in our lives.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But however you define it, God is responsible for all three of these kinds of things.

Jesse Couenhoven:

Yeah. I think that's right. So the question then, when you're talking about this idea of Original Sin is, do you think any of these is a more proper diagnosis of the human condition? That's what I think is really at stake here. And on that score I actually think that the conception that seems more severe is often more perceptive that I think it's really the case that people often do struggle very deeply with aspects of personality that neither they nor other people really think are admirable, things that they wish they could change about themselves, but even though they've tried they can't, and so on. And, as this relates to God's goodness, my suggestion is that leaves a certain amount of room for grace. Because God can recognize and respond generously to the ways in which human beings are, in a sense, stuck. They're not just independent autonomous generators of evil; they're, in a sense, helpless.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But does that then mean, and give strength to the argument, that God, indeed, created evil such that God – people could experience that, feel it, hate it, such that God could extend grace and redeem?

Jesse Couenhoven:

That, I think would be, yeah, part of the story. But the idea would be that on the whole, it's not necessarily so terrible if God is in the end generous and gracious and brings people up out of this.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But God does create the evil that requires – is a required part of the story?

Jesse Couenhoven:

So, I think that the hope is that although God has written evil into the storyline of history in one way or another, that ultimately the story takes a positive kind of trajectory, so that what you end up with is not a tragedy but a tale of hope and inspiration.