

God is a Weak Force
Magical Thinking and the Problem of Evil

By
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Almost a year ago the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6 to 3 that a Washington State high school football coach, Joseph Kennedy, has a Constitutional right to pray on the field at the end of a game, something he was committed to doing after every game. Some of his players began joining him. School official asked him to stop and suspended the coach after he refused. The ruling stated that, "The Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment protect an individual engaging in a personal religious observance from government reprisal; the Constitution neither mandates nor permits the government to suppress such religious expression."

After this decision, it was widely reported the High Court had made it legal for public officials to pray during public events, including in classrooms and at games. But the ruling was specific to the fact that Coach Kennedy's was an act of private prayer after a game's end, and that he has the right to do so, even on school grounds. I do not personally find the ruling troubling. As one who believes we should always be as liberal as possible in matters of free speech, I tend to agree with it, so long as teachers, for example, aren't able to openly pray while teaching a class by arguing that doing so is a private act.

What has bothered me about this case is something Coach Kennedy is reported to have stated in response, "I thank God for answering our prayers and sustaining my family through this long battle," and "It was my covenant between me and God that after every game, win or lose, I'm going to do it right there on the field of battle."¹ I'm troubled, though sadly not surprised, that anyone living in the 20th century thinks a god controls the U.S. Supreme Court, let alone gives a damn about who wins a football game. How can anyone living in today's world, or who is aware of all the horrors, suffering, and injustices of the past, believe a loving and powerful god is in control of anything, let alone is making legal decisions and determining the winners and losers of high school sporting events? I'm also offput by the Coach's frequent use of the term "battle," especially when describing what is merely a game among high school athletes, but that peeve is beside the point.

A friend of mine, who is a devout Christian, recently shared a story with me about what he believes was an angelic encounter. It was, indeed, a captivating account with a mysterious ending as good as anything I'd ever seen on *The Twilight Zone*. But, out of appreciation and respect for him, I won't tell it here. It is his story to share, not mine. Whether it really happened or not, as I listened, I inwardly wondered why God would send angels to help one person in what was a minor, non-injurious, one-car accident, when an estimated 3,700 people die in road accidents every day? It could be that God considers a few individuals more worthy of divine intervention than most everyone else on the planet (which would make the Calvinists happy). But, if this is the case, it would mean God does not have the unconditional love theologians insist is one of his qualities (I say "he" because they also claim God is a father, not a mother).

Nevertheless, angelic encounters are as plethora as stories of bigfoot, ghosts, and UFOs, not to suggest these mysteries might not be real, but that the existence of angels is just as mysterious and just as unproven. Whether we believe or disbelieve, we cannot be sure if the stories we hear about

such phenomenon are true or not. When I was a teenager, I read a book about angels written by Billy Graham that had lots of such stories in it, and today, similar stories are just a Google search away.

A simple example comes from a woman who says that as a child she fell on a playground "filled with metal objects and wood chips," when something hit her just below the eye. "But I felt something pull me back when I fell," she says. "The teachers said that they saw me sort of fly forward then fly back at the same time. As they hurried me to the nurse's office, I heard an unfamiliar voice telling me, 'Don't worry. I'm here. God doesn't want anything to happen to his baby.'"

This can easily be considered an interesting, though likely distorted, childhood memory. The more serious question, again, is why anyone would think such a loving and powerful god would have allowed the child to be injured in the least to begin with? And what about all the children who have and are suffering so much worse? Children with terrible illnesses and disabilities? Children who have died of hunger or killed in war? Why didn't God stop the heartless and devastating mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, or the more recent shooting just a year ago at Uvalde Elementary?

Another example is of a woman who says that once when she was hospitalized and in tremendous pain, she awoke in the night to a strange woman reading the Bible to her. "Why are you here?" the patient asked.

"I was sent here to make sure you'll be alright," the stranger said. "You are going to be fine. Now you should get some rest and go back to sleep." She began to read again, and I drifted off back to sleep."

In the morning, she told her doctor what had happened, who checked and told her that no staff had visited her overnight. She then asked all of the nurses, who also knew nothing about the visitor. To this day the woman believes she was visited by her guardian angel, even though it is far more likely a volunteer had stopped by unnoticed by those working the nightshift.

But, yet again, the more pressing question is why such a measly effort by one who is presumed to be such a powerful being? Those who believe these stories take them as evidence that God is in charge. As Jesus is reported to have said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them can fall to the ground without your Father's will."² But if this god is so powerful, why do people get sick to begin with, or have to live in pain to begin with, or get injured, or involved in car accidents? At best, if such accounts were true, they would prove either that God is not all powerful, or not all loving, or neither. They prove that if God exists, God is, at best, a weak force in the Universe, not an all-powerful one.

During the Enlightenment, when it first became safe to begin questioning the existence of God, philosopher David Hume famously argued, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then, is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"³ These questions lead to an unsolvable problem, a problem known as "The Problem

of God.” Stated more simply, *If God is all-loving and all-powerful, how can he allow so much evil and suffering in the world?*

Some have tried to solve the problem by suggesting evil is a result of our own free will that God has so magnanimously granted us and is, thus, no fault of his own. But this response only leads to more unanswerable questions. Firstly, it remains hard to understand how an all-loving, all-powerful being can stand aside in the wake of such tremendous suffering and evil on mere principle. Any loving parent, no matter how permissive, will intervene before allowing their children to be injured or make terrible decisions. Are they more loving than a perfect all-loving god? Furthermore, if God can't violate his own rules—the law of free will, in this case—then he is not all-powerful. So, either way, the doctrine of free will, does not resolve the Problem of God.

The Problem of God doesn't refer to a problem that belongs to God, but to the problem with believing in God's existence. Questions around the existence of evil make it unreasonable to also accept the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful god. This is the *Problem of Evil*, which can be summed up with the following argument and question, *If God is all-good and God is All, then All must be good. How, then, can evil exist?* Keep in mind that theologians also make the claim that God is omnipresent, everywhere at once, so that nothing exists without God or where God isn't. Hence, if evil exists anywhere, God is either not all-good or not omnipresent. And if Evil exists outside of God, then God is also not all-powerful, there is a space he has no dominion over.

Some have attempted to avoid the Problem of Evil by arguing that it is evil that does not exist. They don't deny there is suffering and cruelty in the world, only that these states exist not because of the presence of evil, but because of the absence of good. It's not a very clever argument, because, again, if God is good, and all is God, any place where there's an absence of good implies there must also be an absence of God.

This brings us back to Hume's point, that if God exists, then, at the very least, God is either not all-loving or not all-powerful. Such a god either does not care much about the suffering in the world or cares but is unable to do much about it.

The Problem of God has gotten a lot bigger in our modern era because of one horrific event that shocked the moral sensitivities of the hardest hearts, the Holocaust, during which some human beings built ovens and gas chambers in which to purposefully and systematically exterminate other human beings. In fact, the *Problem of God*, is itself a modern term, first coined in 1929, but remained mostly an academic exercise until after World War II. In his 1966 book, *After Auschwitz*, Rabbi Robert Rubenstein says, “To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purpose,”⁴ and that, “A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent.”⁵ The Holocaust has proven so devastating for those still hoping to promote a rational belief in God that “the problem of God,” has since become its own branch of study, *Theologie auch Auschwitz*, “Theology after Auschwitz.”

The point here is that today the Problem of God and the Problem of Evil are bigger than ever, not mere theological exercises left over from the Middle Ages that have no importance in our lives.

When I consider so many major concerns facing our world and all the suffering thousands and millions of people are currently experiencing, I cannot help but wonder why I should be comforted by a few stories of divine intervention into small, personal, ordinary matters. Perhaps it would be unfair to blame God for Russia's violent aggression against Ukraine, if we accept the free will argument. But what of the devastating earthquakes that recently occurred in Turkey and Syria that left over 55,000 people dead, 130,000 injured, and millions without homes and in need of urgent assistance? The overwhelming problem of evil—by which I mean, suffering, cruelty, and injustice in the world—prohibit me from believing in an Almighty God.

But drawing such a conclusion doesn't make the Problem of God or the Problem of Evil go away. Many nonbelievers, or those who don't hold traditional beliefs about God, might still be burdened by the same logical inconstancies in our own thinking. Whether or not we believe in angels or divine intervention, most of us have experienced positive events in our lives that seem too uncanny to be merely coincidental. Psychologist Carl Jung famously referred to this uncanny "acausal connecting principle," as *synchronicity*.

Whatever we call it, synchronicity, karma, the power of positive thinking, or the result of a benevolent and interconnected Universe. These forces, if we believe in them, aren't expected to happen all the time, so we accept them with gratitude and a sense of mystery when they do, still wondering if they truly were meant to be or if they were just coincidence. But we still have to ask why they don't happen all the time, and if they do exist, why, then, is there still so much evil and suffering in the world? Is this just magical thinking on our part, or is there really some invisible force at work that sometimes influences the outcomes of otherwise random events, but not always?

What if, to begin to answer this, there is something about the physical nature of the Universe that sometimes acts as an invisible connector between what appear from our perspective to be random events? What if, on a quantum level, things are more intricately entwined than they appear on our limited macroscopic perception of the world? If this sounds out there, and maybe it is, consider that Einstein himself referred to quantum entanglement, the ability of particles to influence each other instantly across vast expanses, defying both time and space, as "spooky action at a distance." Neils Bohr, the Nobel Prize winning physicist who discovered the holistic nature of quantum reality, suggested we can't even think about this phenomenon without getting, "*schwindlig*,"⁶ the German word for "dizzy."

To me, the most convincing evidence of this invisible force are the results of some of the repeatable experiments conducted with REGs, random event generators, and RNGs, random number generators. These are devices programmed to move about or operate other devices at random. If you put them in a confined space and map their movement, they move about randomly all over the room. But put it in a room with a brood of newly hatched chicks that instinctively follow the device around like a mother, then put those chicks in a cage in a corner of the room, and the REG spends most of its time near the caged chicks that have bonded with it. If done with a litter of baby rabbits, which are initially frightened of the REG device, and it tends to stay away from them, at least until they get used to it and want its comforting light nearby. Then it mostly stays near them. A

similar experiment has been done with plants that, of course, require light to grow. When an RNG is alone in a dark room, it switches various lights mounted in different corners at random. But when in a room with a single plant in one of the dark corners, the RNG tends to keep the light nearest to the plant on most of the time. I won't go into the details of these experiments now, but you can find out about them by researching the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab, PEAR for short, at Princeton University.

Most people, including the experimenters, conclude the chicks, rabbits, plants, or other subjects are somehow causing the mindless, emotionless technology to do their bidding, perhaps through telekinesis, or through the sheer force of will. But ever since I learned of such research, I interpreted the results to indicate something else, that it is the technology that, on a quantum physical level, cares for those in need. This isn't to say that the REGs and RNGs used in these experiments have minds or wills, but that love is a fundamental force embedded in the underlying nature of the Universe on a molecular level. As Cosmologist Brian Swimme says, "Love begins as allurements—as attraction ... Nothing in all science has been established with greater attention and detail than this primary attraction of each part of the universe for every other part."⁷

Gravity is one of the forces Swimme uses to illustrate this point. Of gravity, he says, "This attracting activity is a fundamental mystery"⁸ On a macroscopic level, the Earth attracts rolling stones, the Sun attracts the Earth, and, larger still, Swimme says, "our galaxy is attracted to every other galaxy in the universe; and our galaxy attracts every other galaxy."⁹ To talk about love in its cosmic dimension, he says, "We must start with the attraction that permeates the entire macrostructure." He goes on to say this underlying allurements, this cosmic kind of love, "the basic binding energy found everywhere in reality,"¹⁰ also exists on the quantum level, in atoms and protons. Human love, special as it is, is but one manifestation of this fundamental law of attraction for other bodies, the law of allurements, of gravitating toward others in a caring way.

Interestingly, gravity is also the Universe's weakest force or interaction. Could this bit of physics, then, which operates on an invisible subatomic level, best explain those uncanny positive coincidences we sometimes attribute to a loving god, or to good karma, or happy thoughts, or synchronicity, and so on? Gravity is strong enough to hold solar systems together and to keep us from floating off into space, but not strong enough to prevent us from lifting our legs so we can walk, or travel in airplanes, or blast off into outer space.

Perhaps, in the same way, each of us occasionally experiences meaningful coincidences that prove so uncanny we cannot help but say, "It was meant to happen," or, "meant to be," and to even leap to the conclusion there must be some benevolent force or deity watching over us and protecting us, like angels or God. But this benevolent force that is inclined to give comfort to chicks and bunnies in a dark room, or to plants in a dark corner, is ultimately a weak force and cannot prevent all the suffering, evils, and injustices in the world. Allurements, love, isn't he only force in the Universe.

So, regarding Hume's argument, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then, is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" It may be that God is neither impotent nor malevolent. God is simply weak, and, thus, can only do so much. Of course, I don't mean this literally, as I don't believe in the existence of such a

god, weak or otherwise. But I do believe in the possibility that quantum forces sometimes respond to us in caring ways that we cannot explain, even against what often seems to be a larger backdrop of suffering, disaster, and injustice. These forces, weak as they are, are strong enough, as Swimme points out, to hold the entire Universe together on both a cosmic and quantum level.

A couple of months ago I spotted a puppy about to step into a busy road. I pulled over to rescue him and found him emaciated, slightly injured, without a collar, and very happy to see me. Although Peggy and I had already decided we weren't going to get anymore dogs, and even though I initially had him taken to the humane society, there was one moment between us when he ran and jumped into my arms and my heart warmed in a way it never had with an animal. I couldn't forget that feeling and had three sleepless nights worrying about him.

So, with Peggy's full support, we adopted Wiley, and he has brought an incredible amount of love and joy into our home and lives. When I tell people all the coincidental details of our meeting, of the attraction, the allurements, the gravity, the love that pulled us together, they say, "It was meant to be." And I agree, on some level, perhaps a quantum level, it was meant to be. I don't fully understand how this mystery works, and it may not be enough to right all the wrongs in the world, but, on occasion, it is enough to bring us together with the persons, circumstances, and, sometimes, pets, that we most need in our lives to help us enjoy the best of times and endure the worst of times together. Like Brian Swimme, let's just call this weak force, love, which may not be the only miracle we need, but it may be the only one we get.

¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/supreme-court-sides-coach-public-school-prayer-case/story?id=85369666>

² Matthew 10:29

³ Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (1779), Norman Kemp Smith, ed., Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 198.

⁴ Rubenstein, Robert L., *After Auschwitz*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, IN, 1968, p. 153.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86-87.

⁶ Radin, Dean, *Entangled Minds*, Paraview Pocket Books, New York, NY, 2006, p. 1.

⁷ Swimme, Brian, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1984, p. 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45

¹⁰ *Ibid.*