

## THE LISBON EARTHQUAKE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

On 1st November 1755, an earthquake occurred in the Atlantic Ocean. It remains the most powerful earthquake to strike Europe in recorded human history.

At around 9.30am the earthquake, followed by a tsunami, destroyed the city of Lisbon, and killed thousands, not just in Portugal, but along the coasts of Europe, Africa, and South America. In the end, according to historian, Mark Molesky, 3% of the world's surface was affected in some form.

The Lisbon Disaster, as it became known, caused 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, scientists, and priests to ask **if natural disasters are 'evil', and, if they are, who should be held responsible for them: humans, nature, or God?**

Below, I introduce you to some key themes in the debate surrounding the Lisbon Disaster and the Problem of Evil. Themes which Dr Joe Cunningham and I shall return to in our IF Festival event: *Are Humans Responsible for Natural Disasters?*



### Evil and Suffering

When it comes to the evils that human beings suffer in the world, a distinction is often made between **moral** and **natural** evil:

- **Moral evil** – the acts of harm human beings inflict on each other
- **Natural evil** – natural events, like earthquakes and plagues, which inflict harm on human beings

*In the case of moral evil, it might seem fairly clear who is responsible...*

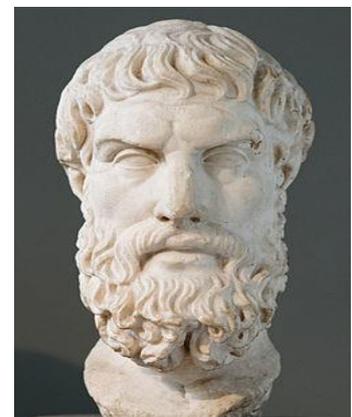
Assuming human beings have freewill, then the individuals who freely choose to do evil are responsible for the suffering they cause.

*But what about natural evil – especially if you believe in God...*

The Ancient Greek philosophers, **Epicurus** (341-270BC) made the following argument, often called 'the inconsistent triad':

- ❖ Evil would not exist in a world made and controlled by an **all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God**.
- ❖ However, there is evil in the world.
- ❖ Therefore, an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God does not exist.

**Epicurus'** point is that God is responsible for what happens in the world he creates.



So, either natural and moral evil in the world disproves God's existence – or **it proves that the God who created the world is not all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing – otherwise why would such a God allow evil to happen?**

*The philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), summarised Epicurus' argument like this:*

*'Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then evil?'*

Natural Disaster: Humans Are Responsible

Interestingly, the Christian theologian and founder of Methodism, **John Wesley** (1703-1791) when answering the question, **'Why is there evil', blamed human beings** – he did so by **bringing together moral evil and natural evil**.



For him, it was human moral evil that brought the evil of natural disasters into the world – because **natural evil, like the Lisbon Earthquake, was punishment from God for human sin.**

Wesley accepted that the Lisbon earthquake brought evil, in the form of human suffering – but **denied that that suffering was random, unjustified, unexplainable, chance** – it was instead the just and purposeful punishment of God for sin.



### Natural Disasters: Nature is responsible, but it's not really a disaster

The German philosopher, **Gottfried Leibniz** (1646-1716) and the English poet, **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744), died before the Lisbon earthquake happened. However, their views were central to the debate about who was responsible for the disaster.

- Leibniz and Pope represented *optimism* (a word first coined to describe Leibniz's philosophy).

Like Wesley, their *optimism* **denied that natural disasters were random events without any purpose.** However, unlike Wesley they denied that natural disasters were miraculous acts of God.

Instead, their view made **natural events part of an ongoing plan in the machine of nature that God designed.**



God doesn't act miraculously through nature to bring disasters on human beings – but **natural disasters are not disasters** – they only look like disasters and seem evil because we cannot understand God's plan for the whole machine of nature of which they are a part.

*'The universe that God chose to exist is the best of all possible worlds'; 'Supreme wisdom United with a goodness no less Infinite could not fail to choose the best' (Leibniz)*

*Cease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name:  
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.  
[...]  
All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;  
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;  
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;  
All partial Evil, universal Good:  
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,  
One truth is clear, "Whatever IS, is RIGHT."  
(Pope)*



As a result, unlike **Epicurus, Leibniz and Pope** did not think that evil disproved the existence of an all-good, all/powerful, all-knowing God. Instead, **they believed – optimistically – that as such a God created the world everything that happens in it must happen for the best, according to a divine plan.**

Human beings think natural disasters are evil – and admittedly they do cause suffering to some human beings some of the time – but **if we had knowledge of the entire universe, like God, we'd see that even short-term and limited suffering is according to a divine plan which works for the best outcome overall.**

### The Lisbon Disaster, Voltaire-Rousseau, and COVID-19

In this talk, we will continue to discuss attitudes to natural disasters and the question of who is responsible for them.

- We will explore why **Voltaire** (1694-1778) rejected the idea we could view natural disasters as punishment for sin (Wesley) or optimistically deny that they are evil (Leibniz and Pope).
- We will also discuss why **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778) agreed with Voltaire in rejecting the 'sin' and 'optimism' responses to natural disasters – but why Rousseau also publicly rejected Voltaire's own answer to the question 'whence then evil?'
- In doing so, we will see how the debates that surrounded the Lisbon Earthquake are being repeated today, as we find many of the 18<sup>th</sup> century views described above appearing again over COVID-19.