

Baseball, the Cubs, and the Problem of Evil*

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I do four things in this essay:

1. I describe my personal background and experiences as a Chicago Cubs fan.
2. I explain the problem of evil as an argument for the non-existence of God.
3. I explain how the Cubs and their terrible record raise the problem of evil in a particularly acute way.
4. I present and assess possible solutions to the special problem of evil raised by the Cubs' terrible record. I argue that a modified version of the traditional "free will defense" looks to be the best answer to the special Cubs Problem of Evil. It answers most, but not all, of the special problems raised by the Cubs' sorry record and the tribulations of their fans.

I. My Life as a Cubs Fan

I was born in Chicago in 1950. During the first 16 years of my life, the Cubs never had a winning season and never finished higher than 5th place – not once. One of my grandfathers was a huge Cubs fan. [My other grandfather was also a huge baseball fan - he lived in Ohio and was devoted to the Cleveland Indians. Since I spent most of my childhood in the Chicago area and Iowa, I naturally gravitated to Chicago teams.] I started following the Cubs in the mid to late 1950s. At that time, the Cubs were a bad team with lots of good home run hitters. Ernie Banks was my favorite baseball player. He was at his peak in the late 1950s and won the MVP Award in 1958 and 1959. At this time, I also followed the White Sox and cheered them on to a Pennant in 1959. In 1963 the Cubs got off to a great start and were in first place briefly around the beginning of June. On June 9, I saw the Cubs

play the Dodgers in Wrigley Field. The Cubs had been in first place two days earlier and they sent their best pitcher Dick Ellsworth (who won 22 games and had an ERA of 2.10 in 1963) against the great Sandy Koufax, who pitched the Dodgers to the World Championship that year and again in 1965. The atmosphere in the park was electric; the fans were giddy with excitement about the Cubs' great start and the wonderful pitching match up. The promised pitching duel didn't materialize; it was high scoring game. Ernie Banks hit three home runs (two of them off Koufax). Seeing that game was one of the most memorable and pivotal events of my life. That was the day, the hour, when I became a fanatical Cubs fan. [It is very noteworthy that the Cubs lost this wonderful game 11-8 - a clear warning signal that went unheeded by me.] This game also marked the time when I began to dislike the White Sox. But disappointment followed (it always does); the Cubs fell to 7th place (although they still they had a winning record (82-80) for the first time in my life). In 1964 and 1965 things got worse and worse. During these years, they fell to eighth place and finished well below 500. In 1964 the Cubs traded Hall of Fame outfielder Lou Brock to St. Louis for Ernie Broglio -- once an excellent pitcher -- who developed a sore arm as soon as we got him and never did anything for the Cubs. The Cubs fell to last place and lost 103 games in 1966. They were a terrible team, but they made some excellent trades and improved greatly by the end of the season.

In 1967, the Cubs had a good young team and finished in 3rd place. They were in first place for a several days in July. The game in which they went into 1st place was at Wrigley Field. They packed the park, and many thousands of fans were turned away. The fans wouldn't leave after the game ended. There was more joy in Chicago that day than in NYC when the Yankees win the World Series. 1968 was another good season: the Cubs finished in 3rd place again.

1969 is a year that will live in infamy. The 1969 Cubs were a great team; they had the best starting lineup and the best starting pitching in baseball. They were far ahead in mid-August, but then they completely collapsed to the Mets. The Cubs went from being 11 games ahead of the Mets to 8 games behind. At the end of the season, the Cubs' players were tired and didn't get nearly enough rest. Many people blame the manager Leo Durocher for this, but the Cubs had a lousy bench and bullpen, so there wasn't much for them to fall back on. Ernie Banks would never play in a World Series.

My Cubs grandfather died several weeks before the collapse began. I was very sad when he died; it seemed to me to make it worse that he would not see the Cubs in the World Series that Fall. I attended many games that summer, and I was one of the regular bleacher bums in right field. The bleachers were a real den of iniquity with lots of underage drinking and gambling. The collapse of the Cubs was a dark night of soul for me. I sank into dissipation, from which I have never recovered. I became the morose, sour, whiney, pessimistic person that I am today. It was at this time that I became interested in stoicism. I read Epictetus, who said that we should not to be concerned with external events that are beyond our control. I tried stoicism but was a total failure as a stoic — I couldn't be indifferent to the fate of the Cubbies. Instead, I turned to Schopenhauer and pessimism. I was always haunted by the question: "Will I live to see the Cubs in the World Series? Will I be able to attend a World Series game at Wrigley Field?" At the age of 21 or 27 that was a bit of a joke always mentioned in jest, but now that I am 62, this is a burning existential question for me and not the least bit funny. At my wedding in 1982 I presented each of my groomsmen with a baseball bat and a 16-inch Chicago softball with autographs of the 1969 Cubs that I forged. In 1973 the Cubs spent much of the season in first place and staged another late season collapse to Mets. (Not many people remember this now.)

Next year the great team was broken up: Williams, Santo, and Jenkins were traded away. (Ernie Banks who retired in 1972 and Ken Holtzman who was traded in 1972 were already gone.) The Cubs finished in last place in 1974 and did very poorly from 1974 until 1983. Then, in 1984 they finished in first place. Ryne Sandberg was the MVP, and Rick Sutcliffe won the Cy Young Award. The Cubbies played a five game playoff with San Diego. They won the first two games at Wrigley Field and were one victory away from the World Series. But they celebrated prematurely on the airplane to the West Coast and lost the next three games in San Diego. In Game 5 they blew a 3-0 lead late in the game. In a crucial play, Cubs' first baseman Leon Durham allowed an easy ground ball to go through his legs and then the Cubs fell apart. I was sick – this was horrible!! This was another dark night of the soul for Cubs fans.

Next came 1989; the “Boys of Zimmer” finished in first place. They lost 3-1 to the Giants in the playoffs. This didn't hurt as badly as 1969 or 1984 because these players were over-achievers who lost to a better team. They put up a good fight in the playoffs, which included several dramatic games. 1998 was the year of the Sammy Sosa-Mark McGwire home run race. I went to the game on August 19 in which Sosa went ahead of McGwire and then McGwire hit two home runs to regain the lead. His 10th inning homer won the game for the Cards. The home run race was wonderful and very dramatic, but now it seems that they were both cheaters — more disillusionment. The Cubs won a Wild Card slot in a one game playoff with the Giants and then were blown out of the playoffs in three games by the Braves, a much better team. Since I knew that the Braves were a much better team, I didn't have my hopes up. This didn't hurt too much.

2003 is the most painful memory of all. In the 6th game of the second round of the playoffs, against the Marlins, the Cubs were up three games to two and leading 3-0. In the

eighth inning, they were five outs away from finally going on to the World Series. Tens of thousands of people gathered outside of Wrigley Field to celebrate the Cubs winning the pennant. Then the nightmare began. That stupid, moron, knuckle-headed fan Steve Bartman tried to catch a pop foul ball that the Cubs left fielder Moises Alou could have caught and which should have meant the second out. After that, Alou lost his cool. Then there was an easy double play ball hit to the shortstop Alex Gonzales who booted the ball. The pitcher, Mark Prior, melted down, and the Marlins scored 8 runs. In our heart of hearts we knew that it was over then and there. Kerry Wood and the Cubs blew the seventh game. This was the worst collapse in sports history. It's our nightmare. I can't go on. The wounds are too fresh, the ache too raw.

My son, Dan, was deeply affected by the Cubs collapse in the playoffs. He had been a rabid Cubs fan up until then. Since then, he has lost interest in the Cubs and baseball itself. He isn't much interested in going to games any more and seldom watches games on TV. This was also part of the reason why, a few months later, he gave up his very promising high school baseball career. Only late in 2008, did he again show much interest in the Cubs, but then he was burned again in the post season. Dan has found other useful interests to replace baseball. Perhaps, he is wisely trying to avoid the heartaches and embitterment I have suffered as a Cubs fan. But I miss that wonderful bond we once shared and the many hours we idled away talking about baseball and our Cubbies.

The White Sox won the World Series in 2005 after winning a very dramatic playoff series against the Angels. I took pleasure in the White Sox victory, but it gave me no joy. In the aftermath, I felt bad about the Cubbies. White Sox fans were not gracious – they rubbed it in. I was the recipient of numerous sarcastic comments, phone calls, and emails from Sox fans. In 2007 the Cubs were a so-so team for most of the season and then got hot

at the end the season to take first place in a weak division. But they stunk in the playoffs against the Diamondbacks and lost all three games, looking bad. The 2008 Cubs were a very talented and exciting team who won more games than any Cubs team in my lifetime. All in all, they are the best Cubs team I have seen. Then, in the playoffs, they didn't put up a fight and were knocked out in three games by a much weaker Dodgers team. During the first game of the playoffs, the Cubs got off to a 2-0 lead, but then (during the middle of the game) the Dodgers hit a grand slam home run. The crowd at Wrigley Field grew deathly silent with forboding; everyone knew that it was over then and there. And it was over; we've been down this road too many times before to think otherwise. As of this writing, the Cubs have lost their last 9 postseason games. During 2007-2008 the Cubs played very well during the regular season then completely collapsed in the playoffs. Failure in the playoffs used to hurt us much more. It doesn't hurt the hardened and experienced Cubs fan nearly as much any more. We have lost all hope and expectation of doing well in the postseason. All that remains is the certain knowledge of our doom and the unyielding despair that comes with this. We have abandoned all hope and this softens the blows that await us.

More recently 2009-2012, the Cubs have reverted to their earlier pattern of being a totally crappy team all year long. 2012 was a new low for the team; despite their huge payroll, they lost 101 games. Dollar for dollar, they were arguably the worst team ever. Do I see any difference between 2008 and a year in which the Cubs finish in last place or lose 100 games? No, none whatever. The 2008 season was a terrible disappointment, another bad year. Anything short of a World Series appearance is a big disappointment and 2008 was no better than a year in which they finish in last place.

I have been watching the World Series for 55 years and have never seen my team in the Series. I remember the Milwaukee Braves playing against the Yankees - I always pulled

for whoever was playing the Yankees. I can hardly bear to watch it any more. After 55 straight years of disappointment and heartache, how can one believe in anything?

II. The Problem of Evil

The Problem of Evil, or Argument from Evil, is the most important and influential argument for the nonexistence of God. The classic statement of the argument comes from David Hume in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Hume writes:

"Is it possible.... that.... you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, and mercy, and rectitude...? His power, we allow, is infinite; what he wills is executed; but neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite; he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end... Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he able and willing? whence then is the evil?" [David Hume from, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. 66]

Hume's Argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If God were omnipotent, then God could eliminate all evil.
2. If God were benevolent, then God would want to eliminate all evil.

Therefore,

3. If God were both omnipotent and benevolent, then evil would not exist [if there were a God who was both omnipotent and benevolent evil would not exist].

But,

4. Evil plainly exists.

Therefore,

God as traditionally defined doesn't exist (an omnipotent benevolent God does not exist).

The problem is not simply that some evil exists. There exists a tremendous amount of evil and suffering. Horrendous evils exist. There seem to be pointless or gratuitous evils that serve no purpose whatsoever. Young children suffer excruciating pain and die. Animals in the wild suffer horribly. Many mentally ill people suffer horrible torments. Many children are abused and treated cruelly. They seem to have little chance of living a good life and often go on to abuse their own children. How can we say that God is loving and benevolent in light of the fact that God permits so much horrible pointless suffering that God could easily eliminate (given God's omnipotence)? Note: no one would say that someone was a loving and benevolent person if she stood by and failed to prevent horrible suffering that she could easily prevent. An adult who knowingly failed to stop young children from incinerating themselves while playing with matches around gasoline could not be described as loving or benevolent.

There are two standard answers to the Argument From Evil: 1. Evil is the result of our misuse of free will. Human beings are to blame for the evil and suffering in the world; God is not responsible for it. 2. The existence of evil is necessary for the existence of certain "greater goods." Moral virtues such as benevolence and courage require the existence of suffering and other evils. Moral virtues are so valuable that a world that includes both evil and moral virtues is better than a world with neither.

The first answer doesn't work. Not all evil/suffering is the result of our misuse of free will - there is a great deal of suffering that results from illness, accidents, and natural

disasters. Further, human suffering that results from the misuse of free will is the result of human vulnerability and liability to suffering and injury. Human beings are acutely sensitive and vulnerable. It is very easy for us to hurt each other. God could have made us far less vulnerable to suffering. God could have made creatures similar to Ninja Turtles, who are both physically and psychologically invulnerable. Why wouldn't a loving compassionate God do that? If you think about it, a big part of the problem of evil is that it is difficult to understand why God created us - human beings. We are so screwed up! God could have created any kind of creature. Human beings are acutely sensitive and liable to suffer physical pain, disappointment, frustration, boredom, and jealousy. We are easily subject to temptation and anger. We are also prone to insanity, paranoia, and irrational behavior. Why couldn't God have created less vulnerable creatures and creatures less prone to wrongdoing instead of creating us?

There are also serious problems with answer 2. The existence of some evil is necessary for the existence of moral goodness. Certain kinds of moral goods like compassion and generosity can't exist without some suffering. However, it is doubtful that so much evil and suffering needs to exist in order for moral goodness to exist. Isn't the moral badness of many people a further evil that God allows? Does the moral goodness of some people outweigh the evil of moral badness and the evil of suffering? [Christians can't say that it does; they say that our moral badness is so great as to require God's grace and forgiveness.] It is unclear that our modest moral goodness and moral virtues are such great goods that they justify God in allowing so much suffering and moral evil to exist. The second answer says that God allows so much suffering as a means to our being morally good. God allows the suffering caused by poverty and want as a means to the moral goodness of more affluent people who help the poor. Mother Theresa once said something like this - the suffering of

the poor is a means to make possible the goodness of those who help them. This seems to get things backwards. The benevolence of charitable people is a means (or primarily a means) to reducing the suffering of the poor. The suffering of the poor should not be viewed as a means to enable us to be morally good.

III. The Cubs and the Problem of Evil

The Cubs' record for last 67/104 years is clearly a monstrous, horrendous evil. The question is whether it is also a gratuitous evil that is inconsistent with the existence of God. In this connection, we need to raise the issue of cosmic injustice. The relative success of New York and Chicago baseball teams is, on its face, a great cosmic injustice. Let's look at the facts. Question: Which team has waited the longest for a pennant? Answer: The Cubs 67 years and counting. Question: Which team has gone longest without World Championship? Answer: The Cubs at least 104 years and counting. What's the next longest wait? Answer: The White Sox - 88 years (but their agonizing wait ended in 2005). Question: How many times in the last 92 years have the White Sox won the Pennant? Answer: Only twice!! That's worse than the Cubs, who won 5 Pennants during that time, in 1929, 1932, 1935, 1938, and 1945. Between 1949-1964, the New York Yankees won 14 pennants in 16 years. New York had at least one team in The World Series for 15 of those 16 years. 1959 was the only exception; 6 times during that period both teams in the Series were from New York. Altogether, the World Series has featured two New York teams 13 times.

IV. Possible Solutions to the Special Problem of Evil Raised by the Cubs' Terrible Record

I now want to consider possible solutions to the special problem of evil raised by the

Cubs.

1. One could deny that the performance of Chicago baseball teams is a great evil. But this is absurd. It's clear that this is a horrendous evil, not something that is merely an apparent evil. Our pain is real! The unfairness and injustice of it is real!

2. We in Chicago are being punished for sins in earlier lives. People in New York City are being rewarded for their virtue in earlier lives. If true, this would resolve the problem of cosmic injustice. But this is not a solution that most theists (Christians, Muslims, or Jews) can endorse. They don't believe in a previous life. Call this the Hindu Karmic solution to the problem of evil.

Another more promising solution (more promising for traditional theists) is the following:

3. Suffering is necessary for greater good. The suffering of Cubs fans promotes greater moral goodness and builds character.

This is a serious argument that needs to be considered. This line of argument is explored at length by James Langford in his book The Cubs Fans Guide to Life. Langford proposes a theory about the virtues developed by Cubs fans. Let me quote from his discussion of the virtue of patience:

Remember the next time you're in a traffic jam or waiting to get a driver's license renewed, or standing in line at the post office, you're a Cubs fan; you can handle the wait. While others around you are cursing, making obscene gestures and generally losing it, you, the Cubs fan, can maintain your inner cool. You've waited a long, long time for something more important than mailing a package; you've been waiting for a pennant [The Cub Fan's Guide to Life, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Diamond Communications, 1984), p. 26].

Langford gives a very powerful argument, and I recommend his book to everyone. But there are serious problems with this line of argument. Being a Cubs fan can create vices as well as virtues. Many Cubs fans hate and envy better teams. As a kid, I hated the Yankees, and I am ashamed to say that, as a teenager and young man, I hated the White Sox. I hated the White Sox because they were a better team than the Cubs during the early and middle 1960s. They were a perennial second place team, a heartbreaking team. I should have sympathized with my fellow sufferers, but I didn't. I still hate the Mets. That's a grudge I've been holding for 43 years. My bad character is attributable to my being a Cubs fan.

There is also the problem of the spoiled fans of good teams. I'm thinking of spoiled Yankee fans booing and tearing up the field when the Yankees fail to win the World Series. They didn't win the World Series?!! Boo Hoo!! I would be thrilled and ecstatic if the Cubs lost the World Series, because in order to lose it, they'd have to be in it. Think of how whiney Boston Red Sox fans used to be before their recent World Series triumphs. The Ken Burns baseball mini-series on PBS TV from the 1990s showed all these people from Harvard and Boston whining about the Red Sox. At that time the Red Sox had been in three World Series that I remembered, 1967, 1975, and 1986. The famous biologist Steven Jay Gould described how he was so upset when the Yankees lost the Series two years in a row!!! - 1963-1964. He was practically in tears. Give me a break! They Yankees only won 9 World Championships between 1949 and 1964! Cubs fans would all be thrilled if you told us that the Cubs would lose two World Series in a row. He also whined about the Red Sox losing the World Series in 1967, 1975, and 1986; he teared up about how [the ex-Cub] Bill Buckner blew the 1986 World Series for Boston. Suppose that you told me that, before I die, the Cubs will play in three 7-game World Series and lose all of them, play in what is generally regarded as greatest most dramatic World Series ever played, and play and win the most

dramatic baseball game ever played. I would think that that was very good news indeed — not something to complain about. [Glad I got that off my chest.]

I was thrilled when Boston came back and beat the Yankees in the 2004 playoffs, but when they won the Series in four games, it was too easy and it made me feel bad about the Cubs. There is no comparison between the disappointments caused by the Cubs and Red Sox before 2004. I utterly reject that comparison. *We had and still have* whining and complaining rights over everyone.

There is yet another possible answer to the Cubs' version of the problem of evil. This appeals to the free will defense. According to this answer, the suffering of Cubs fans is freely chosen; we could become fans of winning teams. We could root for Yankees or whoever is hot next year. This parallels standard theological arguments. But I think that this reply is unacceptable on two counts: a) it's not clear that our attachments and loves and hates are freely chosen; it's not clear that being a Cubs fan is a free choice and b) even if we could choose not to be Cubs fans it would be immoral to just care about the winning team. It would violate clear moral principles about loyalty and fidelity; the free will defense is not an adequate solution here. If we choose to be fans, we should support the home team. (This raises difficult questions about people who move and live in different places at different times. What if I had moved to New York as a young man? I won't attempt deal with these questions here.) Our home teams, the Cubs and the White Sox, are both big time losers. *It is immoral just to pull for the winner*. You know the kind of person who trades in his team for a winner. This is the same kind of person who trades in his wife for a younger model or the sort of person who is always looking to trade in his friends for more well connected or more influential friends.

What about the argument "Cubs fans can root for both teams. They don't have to give

up on the Cubs, but the evil of the Cubs' record would have been counter-balanced by the joy that they should have taken in the success of the White Sox." I am to blame for my mean-spirited dislike of the White Sox from 1963-1972. I am to blame for my lukewarm attitude about the Sox World Series victory in 2005. Maybe this does it. Maybe this is the answer. But it is very difficult to accept this when Sox fans are gloating over this and sending us emails and phoning us to rub it in. [I know of someone who said (during the 2005 World Series), "I was watching the White Sox on TV last night. There must be something wrong with my TV set. I couldn't find the channel that the Cubs were on." This person also gave flowers to his church in gratitude for Steve Bartman.] It's hard, but maybe the answer is still to turn the other cheek and love both teams. Still, we need to consider the heartache of the many Cubs and Sox fans who died between 1960 and 2004; those fans died in despair. This argument doesn't address their suffering and it is not a fully satisfactory answer to the special Cubs/Chicago, problem of evil, even though it speaks well to my own personal complaints.

An Inconclusive Conclusion

This modified version of the traditional "free will defense" looks to be the best answer to the special Cubs Problem of evil, but it is still open to serious objections. The best attempts to explain why an omnipotent, omniscient, and good God would permit the evils and cosmic injustices of the Cubs' sorry record are not fully adequate. But this does not show that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God does not exist. For all that these arguments show, it is possible that an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God has reasons (or could have reasons) to permit these evils and that these reasons are beyond our ken. [For the record, I don't think that the problem of evil renders theism untenable. See my "Axiology, Realism, and the Problem of Evil" Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,

Volume **LXXV**, September 2007, pp. 349-368.] This leaves us with the question whether our inability to discern what these reasons are or might be is evidence that such reasons probably do not or probably cannot exist, a question much debated by contemporary philosophers of religion under the rubric of the “evidential argument from evil.” [See in particular, William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” American Philosophical Quarterly **16** (1979): 335-361, Steven Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘ Appearance’,” in The Problem of Evil, Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 138-160 and The Evidential Argment from Evil, Daniel Howard Snyder, editor, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996.)

Endnotes

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