

Why would a benevolent and omnipotent God have created a world with evil and suffering?

‘The fact of suffering faces theists with a truth that is both undeniable and apparently incompatible with their belief’.¹ The “problem of evil” is thus a direct challenge to the existence of the good god of theism. It also weakens the teleological argument, since if you are looking for the best explanation of the universe, you need to take into account not only the presence of order but that of evil too. This paper presents the problem in its traditional form, examines some responses that have been advanced, and concludes without reaching a conclusion since faith seems to override philosophy.

At the outset of this paper, I need to address a structural issue in the question: are ‘evil and suffering’ the same thing? Evil is a sufficient, but not necessary, cause of suffering: for example, I can suffer because of unrequited love but this is not generally felt to be the result of evil. I either need to lump evil and suffering together or examine them separately. In favour of the former is that the paradox set out above works just as well if we use the word ‘suffering’ instead of ‘evil’. In favour of the latter is that Buddhism, for example, seems to treat them differently and moreover gives a coherent explanation that does not rely on a theistic god. I will therefore do both: pretend that evil and suffering are the same for most of the paper and split out “suffering” again towards the end.

The problem of evil can be stated as a paradox in the following form:

A: god is omnipotent (and thus omniscient)²

B: god is benevolent

C: a benevolent god would eliminate evil as far as it could

D: an omnipotent, benevolent god would not be limited in doing so

E: therefore there cannot be evil in a world created by such a god

F: and yet evil exists.

In general, responses by theists to the problem of evil fall into three camps: defences (for example, disagreeing with the definitions) so as to avoid the logical paradox, theodicies (‘a term coined by Leibniz ... concerned with establishing the justice of God in the face

¹ Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism* (Routledge, 1996) p. 88.

² By convention, I do not capitalise the word ‘god’.

of evil'³), and refutations (denying that the problem even exists). I will examine each of these (although they overlap to some extent), and consider the two traditional categories of evil: moral evil i.e. man-made; and natural evil such as catastrophes. When "suffering" is added, it seems that the theist will have to explain three somewhat different but related "bad things" in the world.

Let us start by examining the theists' first strategy; defence, which can be summarised as tinkering with the premisses. Since most theists would believe premiss B to be a necessary truth, one such approach is to argue that premiss C is somehow insufficient and that there might be reasons for god to allow evil to exist. I will consider these below under 'theodicies'. Another option is to argue about the nature of evil, in a sense to tinker with premiss F.

Augustine tried such a tactic by rejecting the dualist opposition of good and evil and redefining evil rather as the absence of good. The origin of evil is the biblical Fall: that is, god created a perfect world but man messed it up. Evil is thus man-made. Although simple and satisfactory in that it seems to resolve the paradox, Augustine's argument begs the question of how a perfect world could give rise to evil. God could alternatively have created perfect men, who would not mess things up, as I discuss further below. Moreover, Augustine's argument in its pure form requires us to believe in the biblical Fall, which does not fit well with evolutionary theory. A modified version of the argument could remove this origin story and just allow that evil is man-made, but this still leaves the first problem.

The theists' second strategy, theodicy, usually allows that there is evil in the world but tries to justify why a good god nevertheless allows it to exist. One commonly adopted approach is that of sceptical theism, which attempts to show that some evil is necessary in order to create a 'greater good'. In other words, premiss C is unsatisfactory because god deliberately put evil in the world in order to achieve some greater scheme that we are not capable of apprehending. One such possibility is that evil allows man to institute justice and compassion, or to build strong character. However, weighing this apparent good against the sheer extent of suffering in the world seems to devalue the latter and does not explain why an omnipotent god could not have found a less painful way. On the other hand, it is epistemically possible that an unknown greater good might explain evil, or at least it is not possible to prove that there is no such greater good, and thus this theodicy seems sufficient to resolve the paradox.

A similar approach is the "free will defence", of whom the progenitor was Irenaeus. He offered a pre-Augustinian account of evil in which humans go through two stages, like a

³ Beverley Clack & Clack, B, *Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, 2008) p. 73.

caterpillar/butterfly. In the first stage, they are immature and imperfect. Free will is the chrysalid that moves them into the second stage, where they can aspire to the likeness of god. Free will therefore acts in both Augustinian and Irenaean theodicy to remove blame from god and could potentially be the 'greater good' that we were looking for.

I note, though, that this attempt to distance god from evil only seems to work for moral evil: it does not explain the harm caused by Pompei or the 1931 China floods that killed up to 4 million people.⁴ Nor does free will fully explain the types of *duhkha* caused by ageing or fear, or the suffering of animals.

Robin Le Poidevin deftly examines the attribution of evil to the exercise of human freedom. Noting that humans seem to be uniquely gifted at wreaking cruelty, he asks why god would have given us the freedom that was almost bound to frustrate his divine plan. Le Poidevin comes up with a two-by-two matrix based on the questions: 'is determinism compatible with our conception of human freedom'; and 'if god completely determined human actions, would this make us mere automata in god's eyes, devoid of moral significance'.⁵ Whichever of the four possible positions the theist takes on these binary questions, Le Poidevin demonstrates that the result is fatal to him.

There are other problems with the free will defence. For a start, it places a lot of value on the notion of freedom, apparently holding it as a higher good than the absence of evil. But are men really free anyway? Determinists would say not, indeed theological determinists claim that god himself predetermines all outcomes. Presumably they do not concurrently rely on the free will defence. Alternatively, it may be that men are not free, because they are just an assemblage of biochemical interactions, as posited by Yuval Harari⁶ and to some extent by Buddhist notions of the self.

Even assuming free will exists, if god is omnipotent he could, as Mackie⁷ illustrates, make men who freely choose to do the right thing all the time, thereby hitting the freedom and the goodness targets with one stone.

A final objection to the free will defence is what Mackie calls the Paradox of Omnipotence: 'can an omnipotent being make things which he subsequently cannot control'?⁸ In the case of Brexit, it was argued that the UK gave up control by giving precedence to European laws. But the UK somehow still had enough sovereignty to 'take

⁴ Query whether Covid-19 is a man-made (and thus moral) evil or is natural.

⁵ Le Poidevin, *Atheism*, p. 97.

⁶ Yuval Harari, *Sapiens* (Harper, 2014).

⁷ John L Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind* (1955), 64:254, pp. 200-212.

⁸ Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', p. 210.

back control', suggesting that had not really lost it at all. Perhaps it is similarly still open to god to take back control and stop men (since we are principally talking about men) being cruel.

I turn now to what I called the refutational strategy. This claims that attempts to justify evil are complacent because they trivialise the extent of suffering in the world. We should just trust that god has a reason, and the fact that we cannot rationalise it is proof of our limited capabilities. There may be a difference between explaining evil, as the free will defence attempts to do, and justifying evil. The claim here is that we cannot justify evil because we cannot understand what god understands, and attempting to do so belittles suffering. We can trust that god has a justification for it, however, because god is benevolent. Unfortunately, as Le Poidevin points out,⁹ this forces the theist to admit that his belief is irrational: once you admit that the problem of evil cannot be solved using reason, you have to let go of the claim that belief in a loving creator is intellectually defensible.

Another refutational strategy seems still more delusional: theists can claim that evil is not real; that premiss F is incorrect. Perhaps they say that evil is an illusion, it is not something that is 'out there'. Mackie¹⁰ calls this an 'adequate' solution in the sense that it is logically coherent but I am not sure it would give much succour to someone who is suffering.

A final, more postmodern, refutational tactic might adopt the following approach. In discussing the problem of evil, we are using man-made tools: language, logic, perhaps even temporality. The very concept of evil might be man-made, too: a mental configuration that we have come up with to try to explain why we experience suffering. Perhaps this is why we are unable to come up with a justification for it. If we had other tools, if we could see the world the way god sees it, then evil might not be a problem at all. Rather like when one hides a stick behind one's back, infinitely puzzling one's dog, a higher order of intelligence might see through the paradox. This more radical tactic is in a sense unanswerable by mere humans: we are using these tools precisely because they are the only ones we have. At most, this means that the theist cannot rationally believe in a beneficent, omnipotent god. But many theists will retort that their belief is not based on reason anyway, and that there is nothing wrong with that.

⁹ Le Poidevin, *Atheism*, p. 104.

¹⁰ Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', p. 201.

An interesting theistic approach to the problem of evil was that of the Cathars.¹¹ As a form of Gnosticism, Catharism held that all that is physical is a manifestation of evil: one attains goodness through wisdom and through the sacrament of *Consolamentum*. There is a good god, but the fact that we are physical beings implies that we are surrounded by, indeed made up of, evil created by an equally powerful bad god: we are already in hell. This solution to the problem of evil consists in a challenge to premisses C and D: the omnipotence of the good god is attenuated by the existence of the bad god. Although it requires the belief not just in one but two gods, I find the response 'evil exists because you are already in hell' to be another 'adequate' solution.¹²

The last tactic I want to explore is process theology.¹³ According to this doctrine, god is in the world, developing in tandem with it. The universe evolves according to choices made by god and man, and it is hoped that, over time, god will find ways to minimise evil. This theology, developed by Whitehead,¹⁴ finds issue with premiss A, since god is not yet omnipotent. As a counter argument, it seems that evil is getting worse, not diminishing. In a sense, process theology is not a theodicy but a defence insofar as it rejects god's omnipotence. Moreover, process theologians do not always believe that god created the world and to this extent would not agree with the title of this paper as posed.

Having explored some theodicies, it is worth looking briefly at anti-theodicy, as coined by Braiterman.¹⁵ 'By refusing to justify the relationship between God and evil, the author of an anti-theodicy places full blame on God for the horrendous evils she may experience in her life.'¹⁶ This protest is seen as a proof of the individual's love for god and of her faith. Thus, according to anti-theodicy, we do not need to answer the question posed: "it is what it is", as the current saying goes, and we should just get on with loving god anyway. This approach can also be seen as a refutational one.

At the outset of this paper, I drew a distinction between evil and suffering. It appears from the above that most of the theists' responses only deal with moral evil. Natural evil such as disease is not explained by, for example, the free will defence (although it might be explained by 'greater good' theodicies or by process theology). Moreover, to the

¹¹ As I write this paper, I am holidaying in the Occitan region of France where the Cathars were based in the thirteenth century.

¹² But it did not do the Cathars much good.

¹³ Chad Meister, *Introducing The Philosophy Of Religion* (Routledge, 2009), p.143.

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process And Reality* (Macmillan, 1929).

¹⁵ Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz: Tradition And Change In Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton UP, 1998).

¹⁶ Charles Taliaferro & Elsa Marty, *A Dictionary Of Philosophy Of Religion* (Continuum, 2010), p. 17.

extent that suffering can exist in the absence of evil, it seems to require yet another explanation. The Buddhist notion of *paticca-samuppada* might suffice, but that does not posit the existence of a good god. A somewhat related explanation is that suggested by Camus;¹⁷ life is absurd and there is no point trying to understand why we suffer. Again, however, Camus was not a subscriber to premisses A/B and so this approach does not help with the paradox above.

To sum up, the logical problem of evil, in its *modus ponens* form, uses a man-made tool (logic) to demonstrate that evil cannot coexist with the good god of theism. Some theists enter into this game and try to demonstrate that it fails in one way or another due to problems in the premisses. Others use theodicy to subvert the analysis, for example by arguing that god's intention cannot be second-guessed by man. A third approach denies that the problem even exists or claims that theodicy is itself an inadequate tool. Not surprisingly, neither theists nor atheists are likely to change camp solely on the basis of these discourses. Those who have faith do not find analytical arguments relevant, whereas those who do not think reason alone should persuade believers out of theirs. In short, there are two answers to the question posed: 'because she did, so deal with it'; and 'if there were such a god, she wouldn't have'. Philosophy allows us to explore both answers but not to judge which is correct.

¹⁷Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus* (1942: Penguin, 2013).

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