

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* David Hume restates the problem of evil that believers in the God of Classical Theism have wrestled with since it was formulated by Epicurus and later by others, including Augustine and Thomas Aquinas:

Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. 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 both able and willing? whence then is evil? ¹

This goes to the heart of what is known as the logical problem of evil, so called because of the contradictory tenets that theists hold, namely that their God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent in a world in which evils exist. If God exists and is omnipotent and omnibenevolent then surely such a being would oppose evil and do everything that was not logically impossible to eliminate it?

I shall discuss the responses to the logical problem of evil by theists like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne and John Hick, who attempt to reconcile the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God with the prevalence of evil and suffering. Among these responses are the Free Will Defence and arguments that evils are necessary in order to produce countervailing goods and Hick's Irenaean theodicy. I shall also consider how far responses to the evidential argument from evil supports or undermines the foundational premises of Classical Theism. While some theodicies advocated by Classical Theists like Hick provide a stronger response to Hume's challenge than the traditional Augustinian theodicy none is ultimately convincing. The arguments of Process theologians, who abandon the dogma of Divine omnipotence, suggest a more convincing rationale for the co-existence of a Divine benevolent being in a Cosmos where evil and suffering exist.

Before considering the responses to the problem of evil we need to define the parameters for our discussion and provide a fuller statement of the problem. For our purposes when we refer to God's omnipotence we can take that to mean God is also

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p.63.

omniscient on the grounds that if such a being is all-powerful there are no limits to what that being can do and see. When we refer to a benevolent deity we use that term to mean a being disposed to doing good and it is understood that Classical Theists will consider such an omnipotent being as omnibenevolent, i.e., possessing unlimited benevolence.

Defining the logical problem

J. L. Mackie argues: 'The problem of evil seems to show not merely that traditional theism lacks rational support, but rather that it is positively irrational, in that some of its central doctrines are, as a set, inconsistent with each other'.² The statement of the problem (sometimes referred to as an inconsistent triad) runs as follows:

- 1) An omnipotent, omniscient God exists.
- 2) God is perfectly good.
- 3) Evil (both moral, e.g., murder and torture, resulting from free choices by human beings, and natural evil, resulting from physical occurrences like earthquakes and cancer) exists in the world.

Given that the acceptance of any two of these cancels out the third it is necessary for orthodox theists to modify the premises in order to try to eliminate the inconsistencies. Premises 1) and 2) are therefore modified to:

- A) An omnipotent, omniscient God has unlimited power to eliminate evil.
- B) A perfectly good God will eliminate evil whenever possible.

The deductions drawn in the modern statement of the problem are that:

- 4) God eliminates evil totally (deduction from premises 1 and 2 and A and B).
- 5) Evil does not exist (deduction from 4).
- 6) Evil exists and does not exist (deduction from premise 3 and premise 5)³.

² J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p.151. The chapter 'The Problem of Evil' updates his 1955 essay 'Evil and Omnipotence'.

³ Guidance notes on 'The Problem of Evil' (Trinity Saint David, University of Wales)

The deduction that evil exists and does not exist is clearly inconsistent and illogical and some critics of theism have formulated the following premises to underline the false logic used by Classical Theists. Such critics argue that:

- 1) An omniscient being knows how to eliminate evil.
- 2) An omnipotent being has the power to eliminate evil.
- 3) A perfectly good being will want to or have an obligation to eliminate evil.
- 4) Evil is not logically necessary (deduction from 1-3)
- 5) Therefore no evil should exist (conclusion).⁴

The Free Will Defence

Given orthodox theists' reluctance to deny the omnipotence and perfect goodness of God attempts must be made to solve the inconsistent triad by advancing reasons why a being possessing these attributes would choose not to eliminate evil. Two prominent thinkers to do this, Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne, have responded by invoking the Free Will Defence. For Plantinga God has created significantly free creatures and (in line with Augustinian theodicy) he argues that some of them have gone wrong in the exercise of their freedom through committing evil acts and so God cannot be blamed for their actions. Plantinga further argues, in answer to Mackie's compatibilist proposition, that if people are to be genuinely free to choose good or evil God cannot cause those creatures to do always only what is right. Hick agrees that there can be no free will if God makes us take a particular action as if we were puppets or under the influence of hypnotic suggestion.⁵

Mackie argues in *Evil and Omnipotence* and restates in *The Miracle of Theism* that, because it is claimed God omnipotent, it was logically possible for God to create a world containing significantly free creatures who were intrinsically virtuous and so would always do a morally right action A rather than a wrong action B even though they could, had they wished, have chosen action B. Plantinga concedes that it is logically possible that an omnipotent God could have chosen to create 'a universe

⁴ Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Bassinger, editors, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 2003, third edition), p.130.

⁵ John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall International, 1990), p.41.

containing moral good...without creating one which also contained moral evil'.⁶ According to Plantinga, however, God chose not to do this because free will is incompatible with determinism. We acknowledge the logic of Plantinga's response here, namely that unrestricted free will is incompatible with determinism. This prompts us to ask whether the God of orthodox theists, in prescribing restrictive laws, e.g., the Ten Commandments, as to how human beings should live, has already limited their freedom? Their God wants people to choose good action A rather than bad action B and to make sure they choose A invokes the threat of eternal torment. If Calvinist theologians hold to the doctrine of Predestination the benefit of free will is debatable.

Other components in Plantinga's attempt to use the Free Will Defence to reconcile the 'inconsistent quintet' also raise questions about God's benevolence and omnipotence. First let us deal with his arguments that cast doubt on God's omnipotence. Plantinga argues that God can create free creatures ex-nihilo but cannot cause them to do only what is right. If this is so Plantinga is placing limits on God's omnipotence because this suggests that God could not create any world *X* *e* pleased. In response to critics' contention that God could have created a world with less evil than our present one Plantinga maintains the Free Will Defence continues to apply because 'possibly it is not in God's power to create a world containing less moral evil'.⁷ Cleanthes⁸ might suggest these are 'arbitrary suppositions' and they certainly appear to restrict divine omnipotence.

If there is an omnipotent, benevolent God, why would this being 'give...human beings – and perhaps fallen angels – the freedom which they have misused'?⁹ Why would an omnibenevolent God, who Mackie argues should not need to use means to achieve ends,¹⁰ wish to do otherwise? If every person suffers from 'transworld depravity' and it was not possible for God to create a world of moral good without the

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 32.

⁷ Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Bassinger, editors, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 2003, third edition), p.133.

⁸ Cleanthes is one of the protagonists in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

⁹ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 155.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.153.

capacity for human beings to commit moral evil then divine omnipotence can be challenged. Similarly, if God created free beings but does not know how they will use that freedom before they act, this limitation in God's foreknowledge suggests limitations on God's omnipotence. It is difficult to refute Mackie's challenge to this defence of divine omnipotence when he asks: 'Was the freedom to make unforeseeable choices so great a good that it outweighed this risk?' Even if God was not the 'author of sin' He 'would be open to a charge of gross negligence or recklessness'.¹¹

Turning now to God's benevolence: Plantinga argues that evil is the price we pay for freedom. He writes: 'A world containing creatures who are significantly free ... is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all'.¹² This is to suggest God places a higher value on the absolute freedom of individuals than on the safety and welfare of billions of fellow beings. For example, was the absolute freedom of Hitler and Stalin of greater importance than the lives of the millions of people whom they murdered? If this is so might not a parent, not like God an omniscient one, allow a child the freedom to put her hand into the open fire at the risk of burning herself and her siblings to death rather than intervene and restrict the child's movement? Would a loving parent, knowing the curiosity of the child, not have taken measures to prevent the tragedy?

Countervailing goods and a life of soul making

Theists argue that good cannot exist without evil and that although God could eliminate evil He chooses not to because suffering is sometimes necessary to produce countervailing good. Swinburne warns that an end to moral and natural evils could curtail virtues such as sympathy, generosity and heroism that tragedies like the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, unpreventable accidents and childhood cancer are instrumental in prompting.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 174.

¹² Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 32.

We need those insidious processes of decay and dissolution to give us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid becoming heroes. God has the right to allow natural evils to occur...¹³

Hick's concept of life as a vale of soul making also attempts to reconcile an omnipotent, benevolent God with the presence of evil and suffering. He draws on the Irenaean Theodicy holding that humans are created as imperfect beings¹⁴ with the capacity for moral and spiritual development and through the suffering they experience in life are in the process of transformation (at an 'epistemic distance' from God) by their own free actions into 'children of God'. Like Swinburne, Hick believes in what Mackie refers to as countervailing goods and absorbed evils and suggests that goodness chosen in adversity and prevailing through struggle is of greater value than goodness without struggle. Hick maintains that an omnibenevolent God allows natural disasters to occur alongside moral evil because God's intention was not to create an aimless paradise but an environment in which people would spiritually develop.

Like Mackie we acknowledge the theists' argument that moral and natural evil may provoke sympathy, altruism and deep compassion but to acquit a God for whom theists claim omnibenevolence they must show that significant good will come from the exercise of freewill. If we cannot have what Mackie calls second order goods (e.g. sympathy) and third order goods (free will) without what he refers to as first order evils (pain, suffering, disease), the price is unacceptably high. The flaw in Hick's theodicy is that suffering does not always ennoble and develop character and is the degree of suffering experienced worth the end goal of the attainment of spiritual perfection?

¹³ Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 110.

¹⁴ The Irenaean Theodicy differs from the Augustinian Theodicy which maintains that God created a perfect universe where there was no evil but that it went wrong as a result of the fall of Adam.

Evidential argument from evil

It is difficult to conceive an omnibenevolent God allowing the *degree* of evil and suffering, particularly where it is gratuitous and without significant countervailing good, that humans and animals have experienced throughout history. Marilyn McCord Adams accepts that non-theists will never be satisfied by the religious theodicies based on orthodox Christianity, not least because there is no evidence to prove her suggestion that all will be well in the end because of the self-sacrifice of Jesus.

William Rowe, a critic of Christian theodicy, formulates his evidential argument from evil as follows.

- 1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- 2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- 3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.¹⁵

Rowe suggests that his examples of the fawn burned in a forest fire and taking days to die in pain and the five-year-old girl, Sue, beaten and killed by her mother's partner arguably show there is no sufficiently convincing reason for an omnibenevolent God to allow such suffering. While Rowe concedes there may be some greater good of which we are unaware emerging from such intense suffering, there are no rational grounds for doubting his first premise.¹⁶ In answer to Rowe Stephen Wykstra argues that being merely human, we cannot know God's ways and so it not reasonable to assume we know the real reason for God's failure to prevent evil and suffering,

¹⁵ William Rowe, 'The Evidential Argument from Evil', in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichembach and David Basinger (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition, 2001), p. 317.

¹⁶ William Rowe, 'Evil and Theodicy' in *Philosophical Topics* 16, 2, 1988, p.119-132.

however horrendous, as they may be justified by a greater morally sufficient good. Swinburne would concur with this view:

...a creator who gave them only coughs and colds and not cancer and cholera would be a creator who treated men as children instead of giving them real encouragement to subdue the world....The argument must go on with regard to particular cases. The antitheodist must ...show his adversary the horrors of particular wars and diseases. The theodist in reply must ...show his adversary the good which such disasters make possible....Interfere to stop evil and you cut off the good.¹⁷

Conclusion

Orthodox theodists cannot disprove Mackie's and Rowe's challenge: as the latter stress, it is for theists themselves to convince non-theists that a benevolent, omnipotent God exists and why a world in which evil and suffering are so prevalent was created. Morally we stand with Ivan, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, who wishes to 'return his ticket' because of the extreme suffering of children and other innocents. Hick's theodicy, though speculative, at least offers the hope of a benign God who wishes to redeem humanity through suffering. Yet even Hick's soul making theodicy does not convincingly explain why an omnibenevolent God permits natural evils like the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami or tolerates moral evil on the scale of the Holocaust and 9/11. The only way for theists to solve both the logical and evidential problem of evil is to abandon the dogma of Divine omnipotence, as Process theodists like David Griffin have done. While Process theology is itself speculative it is more grounded in reality and does not perform the contortions of Classical Theists like Plantinga, who attributes the occurrence of natural evil to the machinations of fallen angels. Process theologians do not shirk the philosophical difficulties of the co-existence of evil and a non-omnipotent God. Open minded theists might even take comfort from Demea's words that the 'present evil

¹⁷ Richard Swinburne, 'The Problem of Evil' in Stuart Brown (editor) *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.100.

phenomena...are rectified in other regions and in some future period of existence'¹⁸
and that Cosmic compensation may possibly come for us in an afterlife.

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¹⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 64.

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