

The Problem of Evil

Excerpts from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/> by Michael Tooley (CU Boulder)

1.1 Relevant Concepts of God

The term “God” is used with a wide variety of different meanings. These tend to fall, however, into two main groups. On the one hand, there are metaphysical interpretations of the term: God is a prime mover, or a first cause, or a necessary being that has its necessity of itself, or the ground of being, or a being whose essence is identical with its existence. Or God is not one being among other beings—even a supremely great being—but, instead, being itself. Or God is an ultimate reality to which no concepts truly apply.

On the other hand, there are interpretations that connect the term “God” in a clear and relatively straightforward way with religious attitudes, such as those of worship, and with very important human desires, such as the desires that good will triumph, that justice be done, and that the world not be one where death marks the end of the individual's existence.

What properties must something have if it is to be an appropriate object of worship, and if it is to provide reason for thinking that there is a reasonable chance that the fundamental human desires just mentioned will be fulfilled? A natural answer is that God must be a person who, at the very least, is very powerful, very knowledgeable, and morally very good. But if such a being exists, then it seems initially puzzling why various evils exist. For many of the very undesirable states of affairs that the world contains are such as could be eliminated, or prevented, by a being who was only moderately powerful, while, given that humans are aware of such evils, a being only as knowledgeable as humans would be aware of their existence. Finally, even a moderately good human being, given the power to do so, would eliminate those evils. Why, then, do such undesirable states of affairs exist, if there is a being who is very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very good?

What one has here, however, is not just a puzzle, since the question can, of course, be recast as an argument for the non-existence of God. Thus if, for simplicity, we focus on a conception of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, one very concise way of formulating such an argument is as follows:

- 1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.**
- 2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.**
- 3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.**
- 4. If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.**
- 5. Evil exists.**
- 6. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.**
- 7. Therefore, God doesn't exist.**

That this argument is valid is perhaps most easily seen by a reductio argument, in which one assumes that the conclusion—(7)—is false, and then shows that the denial of (7), along with premises (1) through (6), leads to a contradiction. Thus if, contrary to (7), God exists, it follows from (1) that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. This, together with (2), (3), and (4) then entails that God has the power to eliminate all evil, that God knows when evil exists, and that God has the desire to eliminate all evil. But when (5) is conjoined with the reductio assumption that God exists, it then follows via modus ponens from (6) that either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil. Thus we have a contradiction, and so premises (1) through (6) do validly imply (7).

Whether the argument is sound is, of course, a further question, for it may be that one or more of the premises is false. The point here, however, is simply that when one conceives of God as unlimited with respect to power, knowledge, and moral goodness, the existence of evil quickly gives rise to potentially serious arguments against the existence of God.

Is the situation different if one shifts to a deity who is not omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect? The answer depends on the details. Thus, if one considers a deity who is omniscient and morally perfect, but not omnipotent, then evil presumably would not pose a problem if such a deity were conceived of as too remote from Earth to prevent the evils we find here. But given a deity who falls considerably short of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection, but who could intervene in our world to prevent many evils, and who knows of those evils, it would seem that an argument rather similar to the above could be formulated by focusing not on the mere existence of evil, but upon the existence of evils that such a deity could have prevented.

But what if God, rather than being characterized in terms of knowledge, power, and goodness, is defined in some more metaphysical way—for example, as the ground of being, or as being itself? The answer will depend on whether, having defined God in such purely metaphysical terms, one can go on to argue that such an entity will also possess at least very great power, knowledge, and moral goodness. If so, evil is once again a problem.

By contrast, if God is conceived of in a purely metaphysical way, and if no connection can be forged between the relevant metaphysical properties and the possession of significant power, knowledge, and goodness, then the problem of evil is irrelevant. But when that is the case, it would seem that God thereby ceases to be a being who is either an appropriate object of religious attitudes, or a ground for believing that fundamental human hopes are not in vain.

The alternative course is to grant that there are facts about intrinsically undesirable states of the world that make it prima facie unreasonable to believe that God exists, but then to argue that belief in the existence of God is not unreasonable, all things considered. This response may take, however, two slightly different forms. One possibility is the offering of a complete theodicy. As I shall use that term, this involves, first of all, describing, for every actual evil found

in the world, some state of affairs that it is reasonable to believe exists, and which is such that, if it exists, will provide an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil in question; and secondly, establishing that it is reasonable to believe that all evils, taken collectively, are thus justified.

It should be noted here that the term “theodicy” is sometimes used in a stronger sense, according to which one who offers a theodicy is attempting to show not only that such morally sufficient reasons exist, but that the reasons cited are in fact God's reasons. Alvin Plantinga (1974a, 10; 1985a, 35) and Robert Adams (1985, 242) use the term in that way, but, as has been pointed out by a number of writers, including Richard Swinburne (1988, 298), and William Hasker (1988, 5), that is to saddle the theodocist with an unnecessarily ambitious program.

7. Theodicies [Explanations of why there is Evil, even if God exists]

What are the prospects for a complete, or nearly complete theodicy? Some philosophers, such as Swinburne, are optimistic, and believe that “the required theodicy can be provided.” (1988, 311). Others, including many theists, are much less hopeful. Plantinga, for example remarks:

... we cannot see why our world, with all its ills, would be better than others we think we can imagine, or what, in any detail, is God's reason for permitting a given specific and appalling evil. Not only can we not see this, we can't think of any very good possibilities. And here I must say that most attempts to explain why God permits evil—theodicies, as we may call them—strike me as tepid, shallow and ultimately frivolous. (1985a, 35)

What types of theodicies that have been proposed? An exhaustive survey is not possible here, but among the most important are theodicies that appeal, first, to the value of acquiring desirable traits of character in the face of suffering, secondly, to the value of libertarian free will; thirdly, to the value of the freedom to inflict horrendous evil upon others; and fourthly, to the value of a world that is governed by natural laws.

7.1 A Soul-Making Theodicy

One very important type of theodicy, championed especially by John Hick, involves the idea that the evils that the world contains can be seen to be justified if one views the world as designed by God as an environment in which people, through their free choices can undergo spiritual growth that will ultimately fit them for communion with God:

The value-judgement that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptation, and thus by rightly making responsibly choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created ab initio in a state either of innocence or of virtue. In the former case, which is that of the actual moral achievements of mankind, the individual's goodness has within

it the strength of temptations overcome, a stability based upon an accumulation of right choices, and a positive and responsible character that comes from the investment of costly personal effort. (1977, 255-6)

Hick's basic suggestion, then, is that soul-making is a great good, that God would therefore be justified in designing a world with that purpose in mind, that our world is very well designed in that regard, and thus that, if one views evil as a problem, it is because one mistakenly thinks that the world ought, instead, to be a hedonistic paradise.

Is this theodicy satisfactory? There are a number of reasons for holding that it is not. First, what about the horrendous suffering that people undergo, either at the hands of others—as in the Holocaust—or because of terminal illnesses such as cancer? One writer—Eleonore Stump—has suggested that the terrible suffering that many people undergo at the end of their lives, in cases where it cannot be alleviated, is to be viewed as suffering that has been ordained by God for the spiritual health of the individual in question. (1993b, 349). But, given that it does not seem to be true that terrible terminal illnesses more commonly fall upon those in bad spiritual health than upon those of good character, let alone that they fall only upon the former, this 'spiritual chemotherapy' view seems quite hopeless. More generally, there seems to be no reason at all why a world must contain horrendous suffering if it is to provide a good environment for the development of character in response to challenges and temptations.

Secondly, and is illustrated by the weakness of Hick's own discussion (1977, 309-17), a soul-making theodicy provides no justification for the existence of any animal pain, let alone for a world where predation is not only present but a major feature of non-human animal life. The world could perfectly well have contained only human persons, or only human person plus herbivores.

Thirdly, the soul-making theodicy provides no account either of the suffering that young, innocent children endure, either because of terrible diseases, or at the hands of adults. For here, as in the case of animals, there is no soul-making purpose that is served.

Finally, if one's purpose were to create a world that would be a good place for soul-making, would our earth count as a job well done? It is very hard to see that it would. Some people die young, before they have had any chance at all to master temptations, to respond to challenges, and to develop morally. Others endure suffering so great that it is virtually impossible for them to develop those moral traits that involve relationships with others. Still others enjoy lives of ease and luxury where there is virtually nothing that challenges them to undergo moral growth.

7.2 Free Will

A second important approach to theodicy involves the following ideas: first, that libertarian free will is of great value; secondly, that because it is part of the definition of libertarian free will that an action that is free in that sense cannot be caused by anything outside of the agent, not even God can cause a person to freely do what is right; and thirdly, that because of the great value of libertarian free will, it is better that God create a world in which agents possess

libertarian free will, even though they may misuse it, and do what is wrong, than that God create a world where agents lack libertarian free will.

One problem with an appeal to libertarian free will is that no satisfactory account of the concept of libertarian free will is yet available. Thus, while the requirement that, in order to be free in the libertarian sense, an action not have any cause that lies outside the agent is unproblematic, this is obviously not a sufficient condition, since this condition would be satisfied if the behavior in question was caused by random events within the agent. So one needs to add that the agent is, in some sense, the cause of the action. But how is the causation in question to be understood? Present accounts of the metaphysics of causation typically treat causes as states of affairs. If, however, one adopts such an approach, then it seems that all that one has when an action is freely done, in the libertarian sense, is that there is some uncaused mental state of the agent that causally gives rise to the relevant behavior, and why freedom, thus understood, should be thought valuable, is far from clear.

The alternative is to shift from event-causation to what is referred to as 'agent-causation'. But then the problem is that there is no satisfactory account of agent-causation.

But even if the difficulty concerning the nature of libertarian free will is set aside, there are still very strong objections to the free-will approach. First, and most important, the fact that libertarian free will is valuable does not entail that one should never intervene in the exercise of libertarian free will. Indeed, very few people think that one should not intervene to prevent someone from committing rape or murder. On the contrary, almost everyone would hold that a failure to prevent heinously evil actions when one can do so would be seriously wrong.

Secondly, the proposition that libertarian free will is valuable does not entail that it is a good thing for people to have the power to inflict great harm upon others. So individuals could, for example, have libertarian free will, but not have the power to torture and murder others.

Thirdly, many evils are caused by natural processes, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and other weather conditions, and by a wide variety of diseases. Such evils certainly do not appear to result from morally wrong actions. If that is right, then an appeal to free will provides no answer to an argument from evil that focuses upon such evils.

Some writers, such as C. S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga, have suggested that such evils may ultimately be due to the immoral actions of supernatural beings (Lewis, 1957, 122-3; Plantinga, 1974a, 58). If that were so, then the first two objections mentioned above would apply: one would have many more cases where individuals were being given the power to inflict great harm on others, and then were being allowed by God to perform horrendously evil actions leading to enormous suffering and many deaths. In addition, however, it can plausibly be argued that, though it is possible that earthquakes, hurricanes, cancer, and the predation of animals are all caused by malevolent supernatural beings, the probability that this is so is extremely low.

7.3 The Freedom to Do Great Evil

The fact that agents could be free in a libertarian sense even if they did not have the power to inflict great harm upon others has led at least one philosopher, namely, Richard Swinburne, to argue that, while free will is valuable, precisely how valuable it is depends upon the range of actions open to one. If possible actions vary enormously in moral worth, then libertarian free will is very valuable indeed. But if the variation in the moral status of what one can do is very limited, then libertarian free will adds much less to the world: one has a 'toy world', where one has very little responsibility for the well-being of others.

This variant on the appeal to libertarian free will is also open to a number of objections. First, as with free will theodicies in general, this line of thought provides no justification for the existence of what appear to be natural evils.

Secondly, if what matters is simply the existence of alternative actions that differ greatly morally, this can be the case even in a world where one lacks the power to inflict great harm on others, since there can be actions that would benefit others enormously, and which one may either perform or refrain from performing.

Thirdly, what exactly is the underlying line of thought here? In the case of human actions, Swinburne surely holds that one should prevent someone from doing something that would be morally horrendous, if one can do so. Is the idea, then, that while occasional prevention of such evils does not significantly reduce the extent of the moral responsibility of others, if one's power were to increase, a point would be reached where one should sometimes refrain from preventing people from performing morally horrendous actions? But why should this be so? One answer might be that if one intervened too frequently, then people would come to believe that they did not have the ability to perform such actions. But, in the first place, it is not clear why that would be undesirable. People could still, for example, be thoroughly evil, for they could wish that they had the power to perform such terrible actions, and be disposed to perform such actions if they ever came to have the power. In the second place, prevention of deeply evil actions could take quite different forms. People could, for example, be given a conscience that led them, when they had decided to cause great injury to others, and were about to do so, to feel that what they were about to do was too terrible a thing, so that they would not carry through on the action. In such a world, people could surely still feel that they themselves were capable of performing heinously evil actions, and so they would continue to attempt to perform such actions.