The problem of evil and the free will defence

THE ARGUMENT

God is traditionally understood to be perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient. The existence of evil causes problems for this definition. If God is good, then he has the desire to eliminate evil. If God is omnipotent, then God is able to eliminate evil. If God is omniscient, then God knows that evil exists and knows how to eliminate it. But if God wants to eliminate evil and can eliminate evil, then why does evil exist? We can conclude that since evil exists, God – at least an omnipotent, good God – does not exist.

We can express this in terms of love. If you love someone, you don't want them to suffer, and you will do what you can to prevent them from suffering. If God is all-loving, then he would prevent us from suffering if he could. Evil causes us to suffer, so if God is all-loving and all-powerful, he would prevent evil. Since evil exists, either God does not exist or God is not all-loving and all-powerful.

The logical problem

There are two interpretations of this argument. One version, called the logical problem of evil, claims that the mere existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, good God. It understands the argument deductively.

For the existence of evil to be logically incompatible with the existence of God, we have to suppose that being good, God has the desire to eliminate *all* evil. But this isn't true if some evil is *necessary for a greater good*. For example, unless we felt pain, we could never learn endurance; or again, what would love be like without sadness when we lose someone we love? But, as the old proverb says, ''Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all'. So some evil is actually necessary to make the world as good a place as it is.

A variation of this argument is that we could not *appreciate* what is good, and so would not desire it as we do, unless we experienced evil to contrast it with. So being good, God does not desire to eliminate all evil. So the mere existence of evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of God.

The evidential problem

The evidential problem of evil claims that the *amount and distribution* of evil that exists is good evidence that an omnipotent, good God does not exist. It understands the argument inductively: the way evil actually exists is good evidence for thinking that God does not exist. For example, children can die of terrible diseases or they can be brutally treated. Animals can suffer in natural disasters such as drought. This seems exactly the kind of thing an omnipotent, good God would want to eradicate. Evil is unfairly distributed, and even if it is necessary for certain goods, is *so much* evil necessary? It is this version of the problem we will discuss.

MORAL AND NATURAL EVIL

To understand the argument, we need to be clear on what 'evil' means in this context. 'Evil' usually refers to morally wrong actions or motives of human beings. So we say that Hitler was evil in trying to eradicate the Jews or that ethnic cleansing is an evil policy. This is 'moral evil'.

But this isn't the only kind of evil the problem of evil is talking about. There is also 'natural evil', which refers to suffering caused by natural events and processes, e.g. the suffering caused by earthquakes, illness, the predation of animals on each other, and so on.

The two types of evil are distinct. What people choose to do to each other is not usually the result of natural events. Sometimes it is: famine may drive people to stealing and killing; but this is the exception. And natural events are not usually the result of what people choose to do. Again, sometimes they are – the results of global warming could be an example. But nothing people did caused the tsunami in the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 (which killed hundreds of thousands of people).

We need to keep both types of evil in mind when we look at responses to the problem of evil. In particular, some responses may solve the problem of moral evil, but don't answer the problem of natural evil.

THE FREE WILL DEFENCE

A theodicy is an argument which tries to make evil compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, good God. Perhaps the most famous theodicy is the free will defence. It argues that evil is the result of our free will. God gave us free will, as something that is very good. It is better to have a universe with free will than without. Being morally imperfect, however, we do not always use our free will for good, but sometimes bring about evil. But God cannot *make* people with free will act for good. Given how good free will is, it is still better than we have free will and sometimes use it to bring about evil than that we don't have free will at all.

We can object that the argument only deals with moral evil, evil that *we bring about*, through our choices. It doesn't account for natural evil at all. There are two replies to this. First, we could argue that natural evil is the result of an evil supernatural being, such as the Devil. The traditional story goes that the Devil was an angel, created by God, endowed with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. Natural evil is the effects of his actions, so it is moral evil. The second reply comes from St Augustine.

Augustine's argument

Augustine argues that natural evil is a result of the moral evil of human beings. He claims that the choice of Adam and Eve to disobey God led to 'The Fall'. The Fall was a *metaphysical* change, altering nature, human beings, and the relationship between them: there is enmity between human beings and animals, giving birth causes pain, we must work hard to survive (Genesis 3:15-19). Nature and human nature are 'out of sorts'. So all evil, natural evil as well as moral evil, was caused by human free choice.

A first objection is that the Fall was not an actual event in human history. If it didn't happen, and if, for instance, animals were suffering long before human beings even

existed, then free will can't be the cause of natural evil. Many Christians now understand the Fall as an important myth about the relationship between human beings, nature and God. But this means that we cannot claim the Fall is *literally responsible* for all natural evil.

A second objection is that, if it were true, it seems *grossly unfair*. Why should animals and children suffer as a result of a choice made by two people a very long time ago? It is not just to punish children for what their parents do; if your dad steals something, it isn't right that *you* get sent to prison! So how could a good God make the evil chosen by two people lead to such terrible consequences for so many other people? Surely it didn't *have* to be this way, and a good God wouldn't allow it.

How good is free will?
It is central to the free will defence that free will is a great good. It is better for God to have created a world in which beings with free will (us) cause evil than a world in which there is no free will and no evil. However, we can object that even if free will is a great good, that doesn't mean we should never interfere with it. If we see someone about to commit murder and do nothing about it, it is no defence to appeal to how wonderful it is that the murderer has free will. The existence and goodness of free will is compatible with interfering with it. So why doesn't God prevent evil actions?

We can reply that God would have to interfere *very often* to prevent all the evil we cause, and this would undermine our sense of free will. But perhaps that depends on how God interferes. Couldn't God arrange it that we would be *tempted* to harm one another, and believe that we were capable of doing so, but when it actually came to acting on such motives, a strong sense of conscience prevented us?

Second, God could have given us free will without giving us the power to commit terrible evil. Is free will, as it is now, such a good thing that its existence outweighs all the evil in the world? Wouldn't a limited kind of free will have been better? Richard Swinburne replies that the value of free will depends on what one can do with it. A world in which we couldn't harm each other would also be one in which we would have very little responsibility for each other's well-being. It would be a 'toy world'.

But does this follow? We could still have a world in which we could choose to greatly benefit each other or not. Or again, we could harm each other in more minor ways, but because of a strong conscience, feel terrible about it, so be less inclined to commit harm.

(These points are all the more powerful when we consider the free will of the Devil. We referred to the Devil to extend the free will defence to natural evil. But surely a world without the Devil, and so a world without natural evil, would be better than a world with the Devil and his free will. If this is right, then the free will defence cannot answer the problem of natural evil.)

APPEAL TO IGNORANCE
The evidential problem of evil appeals to an intuition, that there is *no good reason* that *could* justify the amount and distribution of evil in the world. However, a religious believer may simply reply that we don't know this. It may be that all evil serves some higher purpose, but we simply don't, and perhaps can't, know what that purpose is or how evil serves it.

Yes, it may be, but then it may not be. This isn't enough to undermine the evidential problem of evil, because the argument isn't meant to be a *proof* that God doesn't exist. It only intends to show that it is very unlikely that God exists. So we should say this:

There is no good *that we know of* that could justify the evil that we see. Any higher good we can think of (such as free will or spiritual growth) could be obtained without God *having* to allow the evil that exists.
Whatever higher good evil is supposed to be necessary for, if it's anything we can think of already, it won't justify evil.
Therefore, evil can only be justified by a higher good that we are simply not familiar with.
It is *probable* that we know most goods.
So it is *probable* that there is no such higher good.

We often infer from what we know to what we don't know. For example, we constantly form beliefs about the future: the sun will rise tomorrow, chairs won't suddenly sprout wings, and so on. We do this because we think the future will be like the past. Inferring from 'nothing we know of will justify evil' to 'nothing will justify evil' is just the same.

When reasoning about what is *probable*, we don't usually allow the appeal to ignorance on its own. Instead, we need a *good reason* for thinking that *there is* some higher good that we don't know about. Suppose we have a revelation from God that everything is for the best. This won't really count, because if it is unlikely that God exists, it is unlikely that the revelation is genuine. But we don't know whether it is unlikely that God exists or not until we have solved the problem of evil.