

Three responses to the problem of evil

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?

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.

In this handout, we consider three responses to the problem of evil. For a fourth response – the free will defence – and more on the problem of evil, see the handout 'The problem of evil and the free-will defence'.

SOUL-MAKING

A theodicy is an argument which tries to make evil compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, good God. One theodicy argues that evil is necessary for us to become good people, for us to grow morally and spiritually. Virtues are impossible unless there is evil to respond to and correct. For example, we can't be courageous unless there is *real* danger, we can't be benevolent unless people have needs, we can't learn forgiveness unless people treat us wrongly, and so on. Through struggles and suffering with natural disasters, with illness, with the actions of other people, we mature and develop spiritually. So both natural and moral evil are necessary. We can understand this world, then, as a place of 'soul-making'.

Because God is good, he wants us to become good, and so he wants a world in which this possible. It turns out that such a world must contain evil. And so the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of a loving, all-powerful God.

Discussion

A first objection asks why God couldn't *create* us virtuous. Why do we need to *become* good? John Hick replies that someone who has become good through confronting and dealing with evil 'is good in a richer and more valuable sense' than someone who is simply created good. In a phrase, no pain, no (real) gain.

A second objection is that this theodicy only deals with the suffering of beings who can grow spiritually. It doesn't deal at all with the suffering of animals. One possible response is that animals have souls too, and can grow spiritually, but many religious traditions deny this.

A third objection notes that *all* evil is only justified by this argument if *all* evil leads to spiritual growth. But this doesn't seem plausible at all. Many people suffer terribly in a way that breaks their spirit, e.g. children who never recover from being abused; others suffer at the end of their lives when there is little time to develop further; people die prematurely, before they have a chance of spiritual growth; people who need to grow spiritually don't suffer much at all; others who are already leading good and mature lives suffer a great deal. If the point of evil is that people become morally good, the *distribution* of evil doesn't seem to support this purpose.

We can reply to this objection by rephrasing the argument that evil is necessarily for spiritual growth. The argument should be taken generally. It is not that the suffering of the person necessarily or always helps that very person. For instance, it is in response to the suffering of *other people* that *we* grow.

We might still object that this doesn't always occur – there is still suffering that seems to lead to no good at all. Swinburne argues that this fact is also necessary for spiritual growth. If suffering was exactly matched to spiritual growth, and we could see and understand this in every case, then that would virtually be a proof of the existence of God!

Imagine such a world in which we knew on every occasion when someone suffered that it was for the best. We would need neither faith nor hope, both of which depend on uncertainty and unpredictability. But faith and hope are two central virtues, two ways in which souls grow spiritually. So for our souls to grow spiritually, it *must* look like the distribution and amount of evil are unfair or unjustified.

We can object that this remains unconvincing. Is *so much evil* distributed in *such* an unfair way *really* necessary for our souls to become morally and spiritually mature? Is it really impossible for goodness to grow in response to more minor evils? These questions press us towards the next approach to the problem of evil: is this really the best of all possible worlds?

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

One way of phrasing the problem of evil is to say that if God is all-loving and all-powerful, then he would make the best of all possible worlds for us to live in. This is clearly not the best of all possible worlds – the removal of many evils would make the world better. Therefore, an all-loving and all-powerful God does not exist.

One response is to argue that this *is* the best of all possible worlds. We have already seen indications of this: that the world is better with free will and evil than without either free will or evil, and we cannot have a world which has free will but not evil; or again, that the world is better with souls that develop morally and spiritually, but for this, evil is necessary.

We can also give a more general argument. It is easy to pick out some event or some feature of the world that we think the world would be better off without. If someone we

know hadn't got cancer; if a particular type of parasite hadn't evolved; if Hitler had never got into power – the world would be a better place. However, we don't know what the consequences would be of removing these events or features from the world. We don't know the connections between these events and others. Removing these features or preventing these events may require all sorts of changes, which in the end would produce a worse world. Because we can't know this, we can't know that this *isn't* the best of all possible worlds.

The laws of nature

For example, the most obvious we can imagine some one event changing is for God to intervene in what caused the event. For example, he could prevent Hitler's parents from meeting, or he could kill Hitler off by a freak lightning strike. This would be a miracle – an intervention with events that are in accordance with the laws of nature. But the laws of nature are themselves a great good. For example, for free will to exist, for us to do anything at all, things need to happen in a regular way (chairs don't sprout wings, water quenches thirst, etc.). If events are going to happen in a regular way, then the world needs to be governed by natural laws. These laws will give rise to natural evil or to people who will commit moral evil. But this evil is justified because the alternative is a much worse world in which nothing takes place in a regular way.

We can object that there would still be laws of nature if God intervened *sometimes*, to prevent the very worst evils from occurring. But once again, we can appeal to our ignorance of the effects if God miraculously prevented some event from happening or some feature of the world from existing. Suppose it is true, as the soul-making argument claims, that a certain amount of evil is necessary in the world for good souls to grow. Then while God could have prevented this evil or that evil, he would then have had to allow some *other* evil to occur, or there would not be enough total evil in the world for us to grow spiritually.

Second, how can this be the best of all possible worlds given the amount of suffering of animals, which does neither them nor us any good? One response is that for *us to exist*, given the laws of nature, many other sentient animals needed to exist as well. We have evolved from them, and we cannot know that if God had created a world without animals or a world in which animals didn't suffer (but we did – how??), that this would be a better world.

Finally, for this to justify evil, we must suppose that no *alternative set* of natural laws could lead to less natural evil. But this seems hard to believe. Is it *impossible* that there are no droughts? Is it *impossible* that animals all eat plants rather than each other? Is it *impossible* that cancer didn't exist? Surely there could be natural laws that meant these things never happened; and a good God would choose those laws that didn't lead to natural evil.

The standard for 'best possible world'

The problem of evil takes the happiness of creatures on Earth as the standard for judging whether the world could be better. But we can't take the happiness of human beings (and other animals we know about) as the standard for whether the universe is the best possible world. Suppose, for example, we expanded it just to 'the happiness of all beings capable of happiness and suffering'. We don't know what other beings exist in the universe, we don't know what supernatural beings, such as angels, exist as well. It might be that our unhappiness on Earth is very small in comparison with their happiness, and that to try to remove our unhappiness would lead to greater unhappiness overall.

Perhaps we can't know that this isn't the best of all possible worlds. We could still object that we have no good reason to think that it *is* the best of all possible worlds, and we have very good reason to think that it isn't.

THE AFTERLIFE

A third theodicy takes a completely different approach. It doesn't try to justify the evil that exists in this life by other aspects of this life (free will, spiritual growth, etc.). Instead, it appeals to an 'afterlife'. The idea is that if you suffer unjustly in this life, God will make it up to you in the next life. On balance, everyone will get what they deserve in the end.

This argument has not been popular with philosophers. The difficulty is that it does not offer a *moral justification* for evil. For example, if I hit you and then give you £20, was it alright for me to hit you? Would it be alright if I gave you £1000? No, there is just something wrong with this way of thinking. At best, the money is *compensation* for something I did wrong, it does not justify what I did. The same applies to thinking about evil. If God rewards those who deserve it by eternal life in heaven, this is at best a compensation for the unjust suffering they experienced in life. It does not make it morally good or justifiable that they suffered. A loving God would not act this way.

Furthermore, if we want to bring about something good, but know that it will harm someone innocent as a result, we should at least ask their permission. If they consent, then perhaps the act and the compensation we offer is morally justified. They have agreed with our plan, and accept the consequences. But to go ahead without informing or asking them is to *use* them as a means to our end. If God has brought about a world in which evil is unfairly distributed, but this is necessary for some greater good, God has used people as a means to that end – even if they receive compensation in the afterlife.

At best, the afterlife might make us care less about the evil we suffer. But it cannot seem to offer a moral justification for how an all-good God could allow such evil in the first place.