

The Problem of Evil

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'Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?'--David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Pt. X.

Introduction

Undoubtedly the greatest intellectual obstacle to belief in God is the so called **problem of evil**. That is to say, it seems unbelievable that if an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God exists, He would permit so much pain and suffering in the world.

The amount of human misery and pain in the world is, indeed, incalculable. On the one hand, there are all the evils that are the result of man's own inhumanity to man. Such **moral evil** is bad enough, but perhaps even more difficult to reconcile with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God is the suffering brought on by natural causes in the world, disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or tornadoes; different sorts of diseases such as smallpox, polio, cancer, or leukemia; congenital disabilities such as muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, or encephalitis; accidents and injuries such as being burned, crushed, or drowned. Sometimes these **natural evils** are intertwined with human evils: for example, millions of East Africans face famine and starvation, not because there are inadequate relief supplies to meet their need, but because dictatorial governments use food as a political weapon to crush rebel resistance by interdicting those supplies. In light of the quantity and nature of the suffering brought on by human or natural causes, how can it be that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists?

During the last quarter century or so, an enormous amount of philosophical analysis has been poured into the problem of evil, with the result that genuine philosophical progress on the

age-old question has been made. We may begin our inquiry by making a number of distinctions to help keep our thinking straight. Most broadly speaking, we must distinguish between the **intellectual problem of evil** and the **emotional problem of evil**. The intellectual problem of evil concerns how to give a rational explanation of the co-existence of God and evil. The emotional problem of evil concerns how to comfort those who are suffering and how to dissolve the emotional dislike people have of a God who would permit such evil. The intellectual problem lies in the province of the philosopher; the emotional problem lies in the province of the counselor. It is important to keep this distinction clear because the solution to the intellectual problem is apt to appear dry, uncaring, and un comforting to someone who is going through suffering, whereas the solution to the emotional problem is apt to appear superficial and deficient as an explanation to someone contemplating the question abstractly. Keeping this distinction in mind, let us turn first to the intellectual problem of evil.

Intellectual Problem of Evil

Here again, further distinctions will be helpful. Contemporary thinkers recognize that there are significantly different versions of the intellectual problem of evil and have assigned various labels to them, such as 'deductive', 'inductive', 'logical', 'probabilistic', 'evidential', and so on. Although there is no uniformly accepted terminology on this score, it seems to us that it will be most helpful to distinguish two ways in which the intellectual problem of evil may be cast, either as an **internal problem** or as an **external problem**. That is to say, the problem may be presented in terms of premises to which the Christian theist is or ought to be committed as a Christian, so that the Christian worldview is somehow at odds with itself. On the other hand, the problem may be presented in terms of premises to which the Christian theist is not committed as a Christian but which we nonetheless have good reason to regard as true. The first approach tries to expose an inner tension within the Christian worldview itself; the second approach attempts to present evidence against the truth of the Christian worldview.

Internal Problem of Evil

Now the internal problem of evil takes two forms: the **logical version** and the **probabilistic version**. In the logical version of the problem, the objector's goal is to show that it is logically impossible for both God and evil to exist. There is no possible world in which God and evil co-exist, any more than there is a possible world in which an irresistible force and an immovable object both exist. The two are logically incompatible. If one exists, the other does not. Yet the Christian faith (unlike certain types of Hinduism, for example) is committed to the reality of evil, just as it is to the reality of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. Since we know that evil exists, the argument goes, it follows logically that God must not exist.

In the probabilistic version of the problem, the admission is made that it is possible that God and evil co-exist, but it is insisted that it is highly improbable that both God and the evil in the world exist. Thus, the Christian theist is stuck with two beliefs which tend to undermine each other. Given that the evil in the world is real, it is highly improbable that God exists.

Let us examine each of these versions of the argument in turn.

Logical Version

As we have noted, the logical version of the internal problem of evil holds that the two statements

1. An omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists.

and

2. Evil exists.

are logically incompatible. This has for centuries been the form usually assumed by the problem, going back, as Hume notes, as far as Epicurus and, in Hume's opinion still unresolved in his day. Indeed, as late as the mid-twentieth century atheists like J. L. Mackie propounded the problem in this form.

It is due largely due to the work of Alvin Plantinga that discussion of this version of the problem of evil was pushed significantly forward. Plantinga distinguished between what he called a 'defense'

and a 'theodicy.' As he employs these terms, a theodicy aims to provide an account of why God actually permits the evils in the world. By contrast a defense offers no such account but seeks merely to show that atheist has failed to carry his case that evil is incompatible with God's existence. The advocate of a defense thus seeks merely to undercut the atheist's case, not to explain why the evils in the world exist. If successful, he will have defeated the atheist's argument, while still leaving us in the dark as to why God permits evil and suffering in the world.

Plantinga believes that the proponent of the logical version of the problem of evil has assumed an enormous burden of proof which he cannot sustain. For at face value, statements (1) and (2) are not logically inconsistent. There is no explicit contradiction between them. If the atheist thinks that they are implicitly contradictory, then he must be assuming some hidden premises that would serve to bring out the contradiction and make it explicit. But what are those premises?

There seem to be two:

3. If God is omnipotent, then He can create any world that He desires.

and

4. If God is omnibenevolent, then He prefers a world without evil over a world with evil.

The atheist reasons that since God is omnipotent, He could create a world containing free creatures who always freely choose to do the right thing. Such a world would be a sinless world, free of all human, moral evils. By the same token, being omnipotent, God could as well create a world in which no natural evils ever occurred. It would be a world free of evil, pain, and suffering. Notice that the atheist is not saying that people would be mere puppets in such a world. Rather he is saying that there is a possible world in which everyone always freely makes the right decision. Such a world must be possible, for if it were not, that would imply that sin is necessary, which the Christian cannot admit. Thus, whenever a moral decision is made, it is logically possible for the person involved to decide to do the right thing. So we can conceive a world in which everyone freely chooses every time to do right, and, since

God is omnipotent, He must be able to create it.

But since God is also omnibenevolent, the objector continues, He would, of course, prefer such a world to any world infected with evil. If God had the choice between creating a flawless world and a world with evil in it like this one, He would surely choose the flawless world. Otherwise, He would Himself be evil to prefer that His creatures experience pain and suffering when He could have given them happiness and prosperity.

David Hume summarized the logical version of the internal problem of evil nicely when he asked concerning God, 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?'^[i]

Plantinga opposes this version of the problem of evil with what he calls the Free Will Defense. He argues that if it is even *possible* that creatures have libertarian freedom (even if in fact they do not), then the two assumptions made by the objector are not necessarily true, which they must be if the atheist is to show that there is no possibility of the co-existence of God and evil. In the first place, if libertarian free will is possible, it is not necessarily true that an omnipotent God can create just any possible world that He desires. As we saw in our discussion of divine omnipotence, God's being omnipotent does not imply that He can do logical impossibilities, such as make a round square or make someone freely choose to do something. For if one causes a person to make a specific choice, then the choice is no longer free in the libertarian sense. Thus, if God grants people genuine freedom to choose as they like, then it is impossible for Him to guarantee what their choices will be. All He can do is create the circumstances in which a person is able to make a free choice and then, so to speak, stand back and let him make that choice. Now what that implies is that there are worlds which are possible in and of themselves, but which God is incapable of creating. Recalling our discussion of divine middle knowledge, we may say that such worlds are not feasible for God. Suppose, then, that in every feasible world where God creates free creatures some of those creatures freely choose to do evil. In such a case, it is the creatures themselves who bring about evil, and God can do nothing

to prevent their doing so, apart from refusing to actualize any such worlds. Thus it is possible that every world feasible for God which contains free creatures is a world with sin and evil.^[ii] Moreover, as for natural evils, Plantinga points out that these could be the result of demonic activity in the world. Demons can have freedom just like human beings, and it is possible that God could not preclude natural evil without removing the free will of demonic creatures. Now one might think that such a resolution to the problem of natural evil is ridiculous and even frivolous, but that would be to confuse the *logical* problem of evil with the *probabilistic* problem of evil. Admittedly, ascribing all evil to demonic beings is improbable, but that is strictly irrelevant here. All one needs to show now is that such an explanation is possible and that, as a consequence, the objector's argument that God and evil are logically incompatible fails. So the first assumption made by the objector, namely, that an omnipotent God can create any world that He desires, is just not necessarily true. Therefore, the objector's argument on this ground alone is invalid.

But what about the second assumption, that if God is omnibenevolent, then He prefers a world without evil over a world with evil? Again, such an assumption is not necessarily true. The fact is that in many cases we allow pain and suffering to occur in a person's life in order to bring about some greater good or because we have some sufficient reason for allowing it. Every parent knows this fact. There comes a point at which a parent can no longer protect his child from every mishap; and there are other times when discipline must be inflicted on the child in order to teach him to become a mature, responsible, adult. Similarly, God may permit suffering in our lives in order to build us or to test us, or to build and test others, or to achieve some other overriding end. Thus, even though God is omnibenevolent, He might well have morally sufficient reasons for permitting pain and suffering in the world. Consequently, the second assumption of our objector, that an omnibenevolent God prefers a world with no evil over a world with evil, is also not necessarily true. The argument is thus doubly invalid.

Those who propound the logical version of the problem of evil can regroup and return for a

second wave of attack. They can admit that there is no inconsistency between God and evil in general but still argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with the quantity and quality of evil in the world. In other words, although abstractly speaking there is no inconsistency between God and evil, there is an inconsistency between God and the amount and kinds of evil that actually exist. For example, even if God's existence is compatible with, say, the fact that innocent persons are sometimes murdered, it is not compatible with the fact that so many people are killed and that they are killed in such tortuous, gruesome ways. An omnibenevolent and omnipotent God would not permit such things to happen.

But the crucial assumption behind this reasoning is the notion that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the amount and kinds of evil that exist. But it is again not clear that this assumption is necessarily true. Consider first the amount of evil in the world. As terrible a place as the world is, there is still on balance a great deal more good in the world than evil. Despite life's hardships, people generally agree that life is worth living, and when things are going bad, people characteristically look to the future in the hope that things will get better. Now it is possible, given creaturely freedom, that in any other world of free creatures feasible for God, the balance between good and evil would have been no better than in this world. That is to say, any world containing less evil might also have contained less good. Maybe the actual world has in it the most good God could get for the least amount of evil. The same goes for the kinds of evil in the world. It is possible that God has overriding reasons for permitting the world's most terrible atrocities to occur. It might be objected that God could have created a world of free creatures in which they committed fewer atrocities. But then the same answer applies as before: it is possible that if the world had fewer atrocities then it would also have been lacking in important, overriding goods.

Now one might say that that seems pretty unlikely. But then one would be confusing once again the logical problem of evil with the probabilistic problem of evil. To refute the logical version of the internal problem of evil, the theist does not have to suggest a plausible or

likely solution -all he has to do is suggest a possible one. All he needs to do is undercut the objector's claim to have shown that God and the amount of evil in the world are not compossible, and that he seems to have done. The point is, if the atheist aims to show that it is logically impossible for both God and the evil in the world to exist, then he has to prove that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the amount and kinds of evil that exist. And he has not offered any proof for that assumption.

Plantinga argues that we can go even further than this. Not only has the atheist failed to prove that God and evil are inconsistent, but we can, on the contrary, prove that they are consistent. In order to do that, all we have to do is provide some possible explanation of the evil in the world that is compatible with God's existence. And the following is such an explanation:

5. God could not have created a world that had so much good as the actual world but had less evil, both in terms of quantity and quality; and, moreover, God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil that exists.

The 'could not' in (5) should be understood to mean that such a world is infeasible for God. There are doubtless logically possible worlds which are sinless and exceed the actual world in goodness, but such worlds may not be feasible for God. So long as this explanation is even possible, it proves that God and the evil in the world are logically compatible.

The difficulty with this further move emerges when we recall the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical possibility discussed in connection with the ontological argument. While (5) is clearly epistemically possible (for all we know, it may be true), the atheist might insist that it has not been shown that (5) is metaphysically possible (that there is a possible world where [5] is true). The atheist could insist that perhaps (1) and (5) are after all logically incompatible in some way which we cannot discern. Perhaps in every possible world in which God exists the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which are true in that world permit Him to create a world having more good but less evil than the actual world. Now this might strike us as an

extraordinarily bold hypothesis; indeed, most atheists today do concede that (5) is metaphysically possible. Nonetheless, the dogmatic atheist cannot be forced, it seems, from his stronghold.

But this short-coming of the argument is of little significance. For it is the atheist who bears the burden of proof to show that there is no possible world in which (1) and (2) are true. For it is the atheist who claims to have discerned within theistic truth claims a contradiction. That is an enormously heavy burden which has proved to be unbearable. After centuries of discussion, contemporary philosophers, including most atheists and agnostics, have come to recognize this fact. It is now widely admitted that the logical problem of evil has been solved.

Probabilistic Version

When we consider the probabilistic problem of evil, however, things are not so easy. For even though the account of evil given above is possible, still it seems wildly improbable. Explaining all natural evil as the result of demonic activity, for example, seems ridiculous. And could not God reduce the evil in the world without reducing the good? The world is filled with so many seemingly pointless or unnecessary evils that it seems doubtful that God could have any sort of morally sufficient reason for permitting them. Accordingly, it might be argued that given the evil in the world, it is improbable, even if not impossible, that God exists.

Now this is a much more powerful argument than the purely logical problem of evil. Since its conclusion is more modest ('It is improbable that God exists'), it is much easier to prove. What shall we say about this argument? Is it improbable that God exists?

Four points present themselves in response.

1. *Relative to the full scope of the evidence God's existence is probable.* If the logical version of the internal problem of evil were a sound argument, then God would not exist, case closed. But probabilities are relative to one's background information. Thus, with a probability argument, we have to ask: *probable with respect to what?* To give an illustration: suppose that Joe is a college

student. Suppose, further, that 90 percent of college students drink beer. With respect to that information, it is highly probable that Joe drinks beer. But suppose we find out that Joe is a Biola University student and that 90 percent of Biola students do not drink beer. Suddenly the probability of Joe's being a beer drinker has changed dramatically! The point is that probabilities are relative to the **background information** one considers.

Now apply this principle to the probabilistic problem of evil. The objector claims to prove that God's existence is improbable. But with respect to what? To the evil in the world? If that is all the background information one considers, then it is hardly surprising if God's existence should appear improbable relative to that alone. Indeed, it would be a major philosophical achievement if theists could demonstrate that relative to the evil in the world alone, God's existence is not improbable. But the Christian theist need not be committed to such an arduous task. He will insist that we consider, not just the evil in the world, but all the evidence relevant to God's existence, including the cosmological argument for a Creator of the universe, the teleological argument for an intelligent Designer of the cosmos, the axiological argument for an ultimate, personally embodied Good, the ontological argument for a maximally great being, as well as evidence concerning the person of Christ, the historicity of the resurrection, the existence of miracles, and, in addition, existential and religious experience. When we take into account the full scope of the evidence, the Christian theist might maintain, then the existence of God becomes quite probable. Hence, the theist could actually admit that the problem of evil, taken in isolation, does make God's existence improbable. But he will insist that when the total scope of the evidence is considered, then the scales are at least evenly balanced or tip in favor of theism.

Indeed, the theist might insist that insofar as the probabilistic problem of evil is taken to be an internal problem for the theist, there is nothing whatsoever objectionable or irrational in believing statements which are improbable with respect to each other, so long as one knows them both to be true. For example, relative to the background information of human reproductive

biology, one's own personal existence is astronomically improbable. Yet there is nothing irrational about believing both the facts of human reproductive biology and that one exists. Similarly, if one is warranted in believing that God exists, then there is no problem occasioned by the fact that this belief is improbable relative to the evil in the world.

2. *We are not in a good position to assess with confidence the probability that God has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils that occur.* Whether God's existence is improbable relative to the evil in the world depends on how probable it is that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil that occurs. What makes the probability here so difficult to assess is that we are not in a good epistemic position to make these kinds of probability judgements with any sort of confidence. As finite persons, we are limited in space and time, in intelligence and insight. But the transcendent and sovereign God sees the end of history from its beginning and providentially orders history so that His purposes are ultimately achieved through human free decisions. In order to achieve His ends God may well have to put up with certain evils along the way. Evils which appear pointless or unnecessary to us within our limited framework may be seen to have been justly permitted from within God's wider framework.

To borrow an illustration from a developing field of science, Chaos Theory, scientists have discovered that certain macroscopic systems, for example, weather systems or insect populations, are extraordinarily sensitive to the tiniest perturbations. A butterfly fluttering on a branch in West Africa may set in motion forces which would eventually issue in a hurricane over the Atlantic Ocean. Yet it is impossible in principle for anyone observing that butterfly palpitating on a branch to predict such an outcome.

The brutal murder of an innocent man or a child's dying of leukemia could send a ripple effect through history so that God's morally sufficient reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries later or perhaps in another country. Our discussion of divine middle knowledge (chapter 26) stressed that only an omniscient mind could grasp the complexities of directing a world of free creatures toward one's pre-visioned goals. One

has only to think of the innumerable, incalculable contingencies involved in arriving at a single historical event, say, the Allied victory at D day. This has relevance to the probabilistic problem of evil, for we have no idea of the natural and moral evils that might be involved in order for God to arrange the circumstances and free agents in them requisite to some intended purpose, nor can we discern what reasons such a provident God might have in mind for permitting some evil to enter our lives. Certainly many evils seem pointless and unnecessary to us but we are simply not in a position to judge.

To say this is not to appeal to mystery, but rather to point to the inherent cognitive limitations that frustrate attempts to say that it is improbable that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting some particular evil. Ironically, in other contexts non-believers recognize these cognitive limitations. One of the most damaging objections to utilitarian ethical theory, for example, is that it is quite simply impossible for us to estimate which action that we might perform will ultimately lead to the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure in the world (see chapter 21). Because of our cognitive limitations, actions which appear disastrous in the short term may redound to the greatest good, while some short term boon may issue in untold misery. Once we contemplate God's providence over the whole of history, than it becomes evident how hopeless it is for limited observers to speculate on the probability of God's having morally sufficient reasons for the evils that we see. We are simply not in a good position to assess such probabilities with any confidence.

3. *Christian theism entails doctrines that increase the probability of the co-existence of God and evil.* The objector maintains that if God exists, then it is improbable that the world would contain the evil it does. Now what the Christian can do in response to such an assertion is to offer various hypotheses that would tend to raise the probability of evil given God's existence: $\text{Pr}(\text{Evil}/\text{God}\ \&\ \text{Hypotheses}) > \text{Pr}(\text{Evil}/\text{God})$. The Christian can try to show that if God exists and these hypotheses are true, then it is not so surprising that evil exists. This in turn reduces any improbability which evil might be thought to throw upon God: $\text{Pr}(\text{God}\ \&\ \text{Hypotheses}/\text{Evil}) > \text{Pr}(\text{God}/\text{Evil})$. Now, of course, the Christian cannot beg the question here by simply taking as his

hypothesis the statement 'Evil exists,' which would trivially make evil more probable on God&Hypothesis than on God alone! Rather he will appeal to certain key Christian doctrines in order to show that evil is not so improbable on Christian theism as on some bare-boned theism. Thus, it turns out that answering the probabilistic problem of evil is easier from the Christian perspective than from the perspective of mere theism. Since the problem is being presented as an internal problem for the Christian theist, there is nothing illicit about the Christian theist's availing himself of all the resources of his worldview in answering the objection. We shall mention four Christian doctrines in this connection:

First, the chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God. One reason that the problem of evil seems so intractable is that people tend naturally to assume that if God exists, then His purpose for human life is happiness in this world. God's role is to provide a comfortable environment for His human pets. But on the Christian view, this is false. We are not God's pets, and the goal of human life is not happiness *per se*, but the knowledge of God--which in the end will bring true and everlasting human fulfillment. Many evils occur in life which may be utterly pointless with respect to the goal of producing human happiness; but they may not be pointless with respect to producing a deeper knowledge of God. Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer or those around him. Of course, whether God's purpose is achieved through our suffering will depend on our response. Do we respond with anger and bitterness toward God, or do we turn to Him in faith for strength to endure?

Because God's ultimate goal for humanity is the knowledge of Himself--which alone can bring eternal happiness to creatures--, history cannot be seen in its true perspective apart from considerations pertinent to the Kingdom of God. The British divine Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written,

The key to the history of the world is the kingdom of God.... From the very beginning, ... God has been at work establishing a new kingdom in the world. It is His own kingdom, and He is calling people out of the world into that kingdom:

and everything that happens in the world has relevance to it.... Other events are of importance as they have a bearing upon that event. The problems of today are to be understood only in its light....

Let us not therefore be stumbled when we see surprising things happening in the world. Rather let us ask, 'What is the relevance of this event to the kingdom of God?' Or, if strange things are happening to you personally, don't complain but say, 'What is God teaching me through this?'... We need not become bewildered and doubt the love or the justice of God.... We should ... judge every event in the light of God's great, eternal and glorious purpose.[iii]

It may well be the case that natural and moral evils are part of the means God uses to draw people into His Kingdom. A reading of a missions handbook such as Patrick Johnstone's *Operation World* reveals that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe hardship that evangelical Christianity is growing at its greatest rates, while growth curves in the indulgent West are nearly flat. Consider, for example, the following reports[iv]:

China:

It is estimated that 20 million Chinese lost their lives during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Christians stood firm in what was probably the most widespread and harsh persecution the Church has ever experienced. The persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since 1977 the growth of the Church in China has no parallels in history. Researchers estimate that there were 30-75 million Christians by 1990. Mao Zedong unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history.

El-Salvador:

The 12-year civil war, earthquakes, and the collapse of the price of coffee, the nation's main export, impoverished the nation. Over 80% live in dire poverty. An astonishing spiritual harvest has been gathered from all strata of society in the midst of the hate and bitterness of war. In 1960 evangelicals were 2.3% of the population, but today are around 20%.

Ethiopia:

Ethiopia is in a state of shock. Her population struggles with the trauma of millions of deaths through repression, famine, and war. Two great waves of violent persecution refined and purified the Church, but there were many martyrs. There have been millions coming to Christ. Protestants were fewer than 0.8% of the population in 1960, but by 1990 this may have become 13% of the population.

Examples such as these could be multiplied. The history of mankind has been a history of suffering and war. Yet it has also been a history of the advance of the Kingdom of God. Fig. 1 is a chart released in 1990 by the U.S. Center for World Mission documenting the growth in evangelical Christianity over the centuries.

Fig. 1: Ratio of evangelical Christians to non-Christians over history. Neither category includes merely nominal Christians. Even if all of these were included with the non-Christians, there would still today be only about nine non-believers for every evangelical believer in the world.

According to Johnstone, 'We are living in the time of the largest ingathering of people into the Kingdom of God that the world has ever seen.'[\[v\]](#) It is not at all improbable that this astonishing growth in God's Kingdom is due in part to the presence of natural and moral evils in the world.

2. Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and His purpose. Rather than submit to and worship God, people rebel against God and go their own way and so find themselves alienated from God, morally guilty before Him, groping in spiritual darkness, and pursuing false gods of their own making. The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God. Moreover, there is a realm of beings higher than man also in rebellion against God, demonic creatures, incredibly evil, in whose power the creation lies and who seek to destroy God's work and thwart His purposes. The Christian is thus not surprised at the moral evil in the world; on the contrary, he *expects* it. The Scriptures indicate that God has given mankind up to the sin it has freely chosen; He does not interfere to stop it but lets

human depravity run its course (Rom. 1. 24, 26, 28). This only serves to heighten mankind's moral responsibility before God, as well as our wickedness and our need of forgiveness and moral cleansing.

3. God's purpose is not restricted to this life but spills over beyond the grave into eternal life. According to Christian theism, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer opening up into the great hall of God's eternity. God promises eternal life to all those who place their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. When God asks His children to bear horrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond all comprehension. The apostle Paul underwent a life of incredible suffering which included both natural and moral evils. His life as an apostle was a life punctuated by 'afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger' (2 Cor. 6:4 5). Yet he wrote,

We do not lose heart.... For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look, not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16 18).

Paul lived this life in the perspective of eternity. He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God. The longer we spend in eternity, the more the sufferings of this life will shrink toward an infinitesimal moment. That is why Paul called the sufferings of this life a 'slight, momentary affliction': he was not being insensitive to the plight of those who suffer horribly in this life- on the contrary, he was one of them -but he saw that those sufferings were simply overwhelmed by the ocean of everlasting joy and glory which God will give to those who trust Him. It may well be that there are evils in the world that serve no earthly good at all, that are entirely gratuitous from a human point of view, but which God permits simply that He might overwhelmingly reward in the afterlife those who undergo such evils in faith and confidence in God.

4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable

good. The passage cited from Paul also serves to make this point. Paul imagines, as it were, a scale, in which all the suffering of this life is placed on one side, while on the other side is placed the glory which God will bestow upon His children in heaven. And the weight of glory is so great that it is beyond comparison with the suffering. For to know God, the locus of infinite goodness and love, is an incomparable good, the fulfillment of human existence. The sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. Thus, the person who knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, 'God is good to me!', simply in virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.

These four Christian doctrines increase the probability of the co-existence of God and the evils in the world. They thereby serve to decrease any improbability which these evils might seem to cast upon the existence of God.

So it seems that the probabilistic problem of evil is far from unanswerable. Even if God's existence is improbable relative to the evil in the world alone, that does not make God's existence improbable, for balancing off the negative evidence from evil is the positive evidence for God's existence. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to establish from the evil in the world that God's existence is improbable, for God could have morally sufficient reasons for permitting such evil. We do not find ourselves in a good epistemic position to judge with any confidence that this is improbable. Finally, we can render the co-existence of God and evil more probable by adopting certain hypotheses inherent in the Christian world view, for example, that the purpose of life is the knowledge of God, that mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and His purpose, that God's purpose extends beyond the grave to eternal life, and that the knowledge of God is an incommensurable good. Taken together, these considerations make it not improbable that God and the evil in the world should both exist.

External Problem of Evil

But if the problem of evil fails as an internal problem for Christian theism, does it present an insuperable external problem? In recent years, the debate among philosophers has turned to

examining this question. The versions of the problem thus far discussed have tried to show that two beliefs held by Christians, namely that God exists and that the world contains the evils which we observe, are either inconsistent or improbable with respect to one another. Most non-theists have now abandoned that project. Instead they claim that the apparently pointless and unnecessary evils in the world constitute *evidence* against God's existence. That is to say, they argue that

6. An omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists.

and

7. Gratuitous evil exists.

are incompatible with each other. What makes this an external problem is that the Christian is not committed by his worldview to admitting the truth of (7). The Christian is committed to the truth that *evil exists*, but not that *gratuitous evil exists*. The objector is therefore presenting an argument against (Christian) theism of the form

8. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.

9. Gratuitous evil exists.

10. Therefore, God does not exist.

The key question will be the warrant offered for (9). The theist will readily admit that much of the evil we observe in the world appears to be pointless and unnecessary and, hence, **gratuitous**. But he will challenge the objector's inference from the appearance of gratuitous evil to the reality of gratuitous evil. Here much of what has already been said with respect to the probabilistic internal problem of evil will be relevant. For example, the objector must assume that if we do not discern God's morally sufficient reason for allowing certain evils to occur, then it is probable that there is no such reason, that is to say, that such evils are gratuitous. But we have already seen how uncertain and tenuous such probability judgements on our part are. Our failure to discern the morally justifying reason for the occurrence of various evils gives very little ground for thinking that God - especially a God equipped with middle knowledge - could not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils we observe in the world. Moreover, our insistence

on considering the full scope of the evidence is also relevant. For in asking whether the evil we observe really is gratuitous, the most important question to consider is, ironically, whether God exists. That is, the theist may argue:

8. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
11. God exists.
12. Therefore, gratuitous evil does not exist.

It has been said that one man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens*. Thus, the conclusion which follows from (8), which is the same in both the atheist and the theist's arguments, will depend on whether (9) or (11) has the greater warrant. As Daniel Howard-Snyder points out, the problem of evil is thus a problem only for "the theist who finds all its premises and inferences compelling and who has lousy grounds for believing theism"; but if one has more compelling grounds for theism, then the problem of evil "is not a problem."[\[vi\]](#)

These same sorts of consideration will doubtlessly be relevant to the various permutations assumed by the external problem of evil as the discussion continues among philosophers. For example, Paul Draper has argued that naturalism is more probable than theism relative to the evolution of biological organisms and the distribution of pain/pleasure in the world. But Draper's argument hinges on three probability estimates which seem dubious in light of our discussion. First, he assumes that naturalism and theism are equally probable with respect to our general background knowledge ($\Pr(N) = \Pr(T)$), which we have seen reason to dispute. Second, he believes that the probability of the distribution of pain/pleasure in the world is greater on naturalism and evolution than it is on theism and evolution ($\Pr(P/E\&N) > \Pr(P/E\&T)$). But we have seen reason to question whether we are in an epistemic position to make justifiably this sort of probability judgement. Finally, he argues that the probability of evolution on naturalism is greater than the probability of evolution on theism ($\Pr(E/N) > \Pr(E/T)$). For if naturalism is true, evolution is the only game in town; but if theism is true, God had more alternatives. But this assessment is confused. What Draper's argument

supports is the assessment that evolution is more probable relative to naturalism *and* the existence of biological organisms than to theism and the existence of biological organisms ($\Pr(E/N\&B) > \Pr(E/T\&B)$). But we have seen from our discussion of the teleological argument (chapter 23) that the existence of biological organisms (and, hence, their evolution) is virtually impossible relative to naturalism alone and that we should therefore expect a lifeless world given naturalism, which cannot be said of theism. Without his three crucial probability estimates Draper's evidential argument from evil founders.

It should also be noted that premise (8) itself is not obviously true. Some theists have suggested that while God could eliminate this or that specific evil without decreasing the goodness of the world, nevertheless there must exist a certain amount of gratuitous evil in the world if the goodness of the world is not to be impaired. Thus the probability that a certain specified evil is gratuitous would not adversely affect theism. Considerations pertinent to divine middle knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom also arise at this point. It is epistemically possible that only in a world in which gratuitous natural and moral evils exist that the relevant counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true to enable God to bring the optimal number of persons freely to salvation and the knowledge of Himself. The atheist might say that in that case the evils are not really gratuitous after all: they serve the greater good of securing people's eternal salvation. But if one allows a greater good of that sort to count against the gratuity of some evil, then that makes it all the more difficult for the atheist to prove that truly gratuitous evil exists, for how could he possibly surmise what in God's providential plan for history does or does not contribute to the ultimate salvation of the greatest number of people?

Finally, there is one last point which needs to be made which constitutes a defeater of any argument from evil against the existence of God, namely, that moral evil proves that God exists. For in our discussion of the axiological argument for God's existence, we saw that it is plausible that apart from God objective moral values do not exist. But then we can employ the atheist's own premise as part of a sound argument for the existence of God:

13. If God did not exist, then objective moral values would not exist.

14. Evil exists.

15. Therefore, objective moral values exist. (from 14 by definition of 'evil')

16. Therefore, God exists. (MT, 13, 15)

Premise (13) was the key premise of the axiological argument, which is accepted by many theists and non-theists alike. Premise (14) is furnished by the problem of evil itself. (15) follows by definition from (14), for if one grants that some things are truly evil, then one has admitted the objectivity of moral truths. Since objective values cannot exist without God and objective values do exist (as shown by the evil in the world), it follows that God exists. Therefore, evil in the world actually proves that God exists. This argument demonstrates the co-existence of God and evil without attempting to give any explanation at all for why evil exists—we, like Job, may be totally ignorant of that—but it nonetheless shows that the existence of evil in the world does not call into question, but on the contrary, implies God's existence.

In summary, the intellectual problem of evil - whether in its internal or external versions - can be satisfactorily solved.

Emotional Problem of Evil

But, of course, when one says 'solved' one means 'philo-sophically resolved.' All these mental machinations may be of little comfort to someone who is intensely suffering from some undeserved evil in life. This leads us to the second aspect of the problem mentioned earlier: the emotional problem of evil.

For many people, the problem of evil is not really an intellectual problem: it is an emotional problem. They are hurting inside and perhaps bitter against a God who would permit them or others to suffer so. Never mind that there are philosophical solutions to the problem of evil—they do not care and simply reject a God who allows such suffering as we find in the world. It is interesting that in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, in which the problem of evil is presented so

powerfully, this is what the problem really comes down to. Ivan Karamazov never refutes the Christian solution to the problem of evil. Instead, he just refuses to have anything to do with the Christian God. 'I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I am wrong*,' he declares. His is simply an atheism of rejection.

What can be said to those who are laboring under the emotional problem of evil? In one sense, the most important thing may not be what one says at all. The most important thing may be just to be there as a loving friend and sympathetic listener. But some people may need counsel, and we ourselves may need to deal with this problem when we suffer. Does Christian theism also have the resources to deal with this problem as well?

It certainly does! For it tells us that God is not a distant Creator or impersonal ground of being, but a loving Father who shares our sufferings and hurts with us. Alvin Plantinga has written,

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. So we don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that He was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception. [vii]

Christ endured a suffering beyond all understanding: he bore the punishment for the sins of the whole world. None of us can comprehend that suffering. Though He was innocent, He voluntarily underwent

incomprehensible suffering for us. And why? - because He loves us so much. How can we reject him who gave up everything for us?

When we comprehend his sacrifice and his love for us, this puts the problem of evil in an entirely different perspective. For now we see clearly that the true problem of evil is the problem of *our* evil. Filled with sin and morally guilty before God, the question we face is not how God can justify Himself to us, but how we can be justified before Him.

When God asks us to undergo suffering that seems unmerited, pointless, and unnecessary, meditation upon the cross of Christ can help to give us the moral strength and courage needed to bear the cross that we are asked to carry. So, paradoxically, even though the problem of evil is the greatest objection to the existence of God, at the end of the day God is the only solution to the problem of evil. If God does not exist, then we are locked without hope in a world filled with gratuitous and unredeemed suffering. God is the final answer to the problem of evil, for He redeems us from evil and takes us into the everlasting joy of an incommensurable good, fellowship with Himself.

CHECKLIST OF BASIC TERMS AND CONCEPTS

background information

emotional problem of evil

external problem of evil

gratuitous evil

intellectual problem of evil

internal problem of evil

logical version of the problem of evil

moral evil

natural evil

probabilistic version of the problem of evil

problem of evil

NOTES

, ed. with an Introduction by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), pt. X, p. 198.

[ii] Does not the sinlessness of the blessed in heaven show that the Christian is committed theologically to the feasibility of a world without sin? No, for heaven is only part of a world, so to speak, not a maximal state of affairs, and in any case the will of the blessed may no longer be free to sin once they are beatified.

, pp.23-24.

(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 164, 207-8, 214.

[v] Ibid., p. 25.

, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996), p xi.

, ed. Jas. E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 36.