

Marianne Talbot student essay comp: Michaelmas term 2024

1st prize: Rena MacLeod (Australia)

Confronting Theism: Reconciling the Problem of Evil and Unattributable Suffering

Evil, understood as the presence of pain and suffering in our world, is unquestionably ubiquitous. Its manifestations include ‘moral evil’ caused by human choices and actions, and unattributable ‘natural evil’ comprising occurrences like environmental disasters, biological disease, and animal predation, resulting in excessive and seemingly gratuitous suffering. The problem of evil subsequently presents a significant philosophical and theological challenge to classical theism, as the proposed existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God appears incompatible with the reality of prolific evil. If God is all-knowing, then God must be aware of this evil. If God is all-powerful, then God could prevent evil. Moreover, if God is all-good, then God would surely desire to eliminate evil. From a deductive logical perspective, the existence of evil ostensibly contradicts either the knowledge, power, or benevolence of such a God (Mawson, 2005, pp. 198-199). Though attributing blame, necessity, or even benefit to humans may help explain some evil, the magnitude of unattributable affliction provides, for many, inductive probable evidence against a theistic God (Bayne, 2018, pp. 64-65). This essay proposes, however, that even if the problem of evil is unsolvable, it does not invalidate God’s existence and may even serve to highlight the unfathomable nature of divinity that ultimately underpins theistic conceptions.

Philosophers and theologians have long crafted nuanced theodicies to defend the theistic conception of God in response to the existence of evil. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) proposed that evil is a consequence of ‘the Fall’ of Adam and Eve, an event so existentially calamitous to God’s intended harmony of creation that it instigated natural evil as well (Cary, 2019, pp. 31-36). Whether understood literally or as symbolic of the human condition, evil, for Augustine, is the absence of good stemming from human misuse of free will; consequently, God is absolved from responsibility for creating it (Augustine, 2000, pp. 592-598). Critics rightly argue, however, that attributing naturally occurring evil to flaws in human nature is unfounded and at odds with modern scientific understandings of the physical processes underlying these phenomena (Cary, 2019, p. 38). Problems also persist concerning perceived limits to God’s supposed omnipotence and benevolence, for seemingly God either cannot or will not manifest a world where free human beings tend to choose good and where natural suffering is alleviated (Mackie, 2000, pp. 587-589).

For Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202 CE), the presence of moral and natural evil is not solely attributable to humans misusing their free will. Instead, Irenaeus conceived of evil as integral to God’s design for humanity’s spiritual growth. God is thus partly responsible for the existence of evil, by creating imperfect humans and allowing them freedom to choose whether to cultivate their moral character in alignment with God’s will. Distinguishing between the ‘image’ and the ‘likeness’ of God, Irenaeus asserted that while Adam had the form of God, he did not possess God’s full content. Accordingly, this imperfect earthly realm presents a ‘soul-making’ context, where humans can freely strive to become more like God. Here, encountering anguish and making choices in response to moral and natural evil can facilitate people’s growth in virtue and relationship with God (Van Woudenberg, 2013, p. 178). This view was similarly shared by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE), who reasoned that

evil is an undesirable privation of good, not directly caused by God who is wholly good and the source of all goodness. Rather, Aquinas argued, God permits evil to exist for the greater purpose of motivating individuals to develop virtuous reliance on God's grace (Matthews Grant, 2019, pp. 43-48).

Contemporary philosophers like Alvin Plantinga, John Hick, and Richard Swinburne continue to defend theodicies that reconcile the problem of evil with God's goodness and power, by emphasising the importance of allowing humans full freedom. Plantinga's Free Will Defence posits that God values human free will so much that evil is permitted to exist as a consequence of human choices. In other words, true freedom entails the option to inflict evil and suffering upon others (Howard-Snyder, 2013, pp. 21-22). Hick also argues that a world with both human and natural evil provides a greater range of opportunities for people to develop their moral and spiritual character. For Hick and Swinburne, the challenges posed by moral and natural evil enable humans to become more like God through their free will responses to suffering. In keeping with earlier theist positions, God has allowed a world conducive to cultivating and testing virtues like compassion and selflessness in response to multifaceted evil and adversity (Speak, 2013, pp. 206-207; Swinburne, 2000, pp. 599-613).

For many critics, such perspectives are understandably still unsatisfactory. Echoing Hume's scepticism, a significant inconsistency remains in conceptualising an omnibenevolent deity who allows the unjust suffering of innocent beings as a means to the 'soul-making' ends of others. The notion of an all-good, all-powerful God is further undermined, as Hume contends, by the excessive degree and concurrent futility of moral and natural evil (Hume, 1779, Part X). The disturbing prevalence of child abuse, for example, is not required to teach humanity the value of loving and protecting the vulnerable. Moreover, the magnitude of natural suffering is superfluous to the purposes of human development. Thousands of hectares of bushfire-incinerated wildlife are not necessary to inspire environmental stewardship and care for biodiversity (Coghlan & Trakakis, 2006, p. 9). Given these challenges, Hume's questioning of the limits of human reason to make sense of such phenomena remains relevant. So too does his scepticism about attributing the existence of evil to divine design, rather than alternate or natural causes (Hume, 1779, Part IX).

In contrast to Hume's scepticism, some philosophers propose that the natural laws governing our world reflect divine creation, as they provide optimal conditions for life and free-willed humans. This perspective holds that human-inflicted and natural evils are inherent consequences of these laws, which simultaneously ensure a stable and ordered universe (McCabe, 2000, p. 620). Furthermore, these evils are part of an acutely fine-tuned universe that has made possible the extraordinary diversity of life on Earth, including human consciousness. While the anthropic principle and multiverse theory offer alternative explanations for this fine-tuning, the delicate precision of physical laws and life-sustaining conditions appear so exact as to reflect the hand of a divine creator (Craig, 2003, pp. 170-175). From this vantage point, the fine-tuned universe not only gives rise to and supports life but also facilitates evolutionary progress towards advanced complexity. Thus, even with the existence of unattributable suffering, this world signals an optimal creation seemingly reflective of the qualities of the God of classical theism.

Irrespective of such defences, the problem of prolific, excessive, and seemingly gratuitous moral and natural evil presents an abiding challenge to the belief in an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God. After all, if we concede that humans are morally obligated to prevent suffering where they can, how much more might we reasonably expect this of the theistic deity. Such a God could surely intervene, unbeknown to us and/or by miraculous means, to mitigate such suffering. Yet, even if the problem of evil remains an irresolvable

quandary for theism, it does not definitively disprove God's existence. Perhaps God does intervene to alleviate suffering. Conceivably our world could be one of far greater suffering and devastation as vividly imagined in dystopic literature. Correspondingly, we must not forget the vast evidence of goodness, compassion, and thriving in the world; and how belief in the God of theism inspires profound transformative ideals, hope, and a bulwark against encroaching despair and apathy.

Navigating the tension between the problem of evil and conceptualisation of the theistic God seems itself a spiritual exercise of 'faith seeking understanding' in a context of final and unfathomable mystery. To confront and reflect upon the presence of so much worldly suffering is perhaps to encounter what Emmanuel Levinas refers to as the wholly transcendent Other that bespeaks the infinity beyond our comprehension. In this very tension, we encounter a reality so complex it defies explanation, even as we are called to respond in ways that transcend our egoism and self-interest to face the needs of suffering others (Levinas, 1969, pp. 79-81).

Certainly, our inability to comprehend the mind of God is inestimable and inherent to humanity. As Thomas Nagel (1974) conveyed, it is challenging enough for us to imagine the subjective experience of a bat, let alone to comprehend the perspective of an omnipotent and omniscient deity. In this context, it is conceivable that the existence of evil may align with God's intention to maintain an epistemic distance from humanity to ensure benevolent, authentic, unaffected freedom. Furthermore, all suffering including the most extreme instances that we perceive as unjustifiable, may finally be redeemed and rendered inconsequential in light of the eternal, perfect life with divinity envisioned within theistic conceptions. Consequently, while the problem of evil may indeed challenge our understanding of God, it does not finally disprove God's existence. Rather, it serves as a reminder for us of the unfathomable nature of divinity that lies at the heart of theistic beliefs.

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