

The Perennial Problem of Evil

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The essence of the problem: the parable of the nursery

Imagine that we are given a tour through a massive nursery – a place for the care, supervision, and education of children. We are impressed by its magnitude, but we quickly become alarmed at the conditions prevailing inside, for although some of the children live in safe, comfortable, and supportive environments, a great number of them are unsupervised, desperate, malnourished and thoroughly miserable. Worse yet, many of the nursery's rooms and corridors are of a faulty and even dangerous construction, and have regularly caused children to be maimed and killed. But perhaps worst of all, the nursery is infested with criminals who not only physically harm many of the children, but morally corrupt them as well, to such an extent that those children who are corrupted in turn go on to corrupt other innocent children in what seems to be a ceaseless process of contamination. At the end of our tour we read the nursery's records, and we discover that although some of its history has been laudable, the fact remains that the more deplorable conditions have existed from the nursery's establishment. And as if this were not enough, it is even rumored that the criminals who infest the nursery are led by a deviant of surpassing wickedness who lives in the nursery's lowest basement, from where he orchestrates his constant and pervasive villainy.

After taking this tour, how would we respond if we were told that the nursery had been designed and constructed by the world's greatest and most beneficent architect, who not only built it, but in fact continues to oversee its day to day operations with only love for the children at heart? 'Nonsense!' we would angrily reply. 'That is an outrageous claim, and a sick joke. We know what goodness is, and we know what safe design is, and this nursery, on the whole, lacks both. This overseer of whom you speak either can't stop these atrocities – in which case he is impotent, and ought to be replaced – or he knows about them but doesn't wish to stop them – in which case he is a thoroughly wicked man, and ought to be jailed. Or perhaps,' we might conclude, 'there is no overseer at all.'

Now translate the analogy: the nursery is the world in which we live. We tour through it. Many parts of the world are excellent in all aspects, being safe and nurturing, and supportive of the highest ideas and endeavors; but as our tour continues, we cannot help but conclude that a great deal of the world and human society, in fact the majority, are lacking in these respects, and often very seriously. Ignorance, desperation, misery, and want are rife in the great majority of the world's peoples. Moreover, much of the environment is extremely dangerous, and death and suffering caused by calamitous natural events are commonplace. But by far the worst element is the influence of the wicked found in every human society, who cause in their fellows the most barbaric pain and insidious moral corruption imaginable. We walk through the slums and watch people freeze to death in filth-infested alleyways. We visit the disease wards, and see beautiful, innocent children reduced to corrupted husks of suffering. We are shown the gas chambers and the mountains of corpses they produced; and the torture-rooms, so perfectly designed for creating

agony; and the battlefields, choked with humanity literally torn apart, often for the most meaningless reasons; and the drug-houses, infested with the beaten, the enslaved, and the hopeless. We watch screaming women and children suffer rape at the hands of depraved, conscienceless men; and we witness the execution of the innocent by the wicked. At the end of our tour we read the world's history, and though we see that there have been many instances of love and nobility, we are further horrified to realize that all of the abominations which we have seen are in fact very common, and have plagued every generation in some form or other; and faced with this, we can do little else but stand numb – simply *numb* – before the combined anguish of millions upon millions of sufferers. And as if this were not enough, we are even told that the world is preyed upon by a being of pure evil (the Devil), who dwells in the deepest and darkest regions of reality, from where he orchestrates his constant and pervasive villainy.

After taking this tour, how would we respond if we were told that our world and everything in it had been designed and created by a divine being of *pure goodness and absolute power*, who not only fashioned it, but in fact continues to oversee its day to day events with only the purest love and care for humanity at heart? 'Nonsense!' we would angrily reply. 'That is an outrageous claim, and a sick joke. We know what goodness is, and we know what safe design is, and this world, on the whole, lacks both. This divine being you speak of either can't stop these atrocities – in which case he is certainly not all-powerful – or he knows about them, but doesn't wish to stop them – in which case he is certainly not perfectly good. Or perhaps,' we might conclude, 'this divine being of pure goodness and absolute power doesn't exist at all.'

This is one of the most ancient and powerful arguments against theism. It is known as the *problem of evil*.

The logic of the problem of evil

We can restate the problem of evil in more formal terms. The claim that the world was created by a God that is both all-powerful and perfectly good (that is, desirous of precisely what most of us consider goodness to be: health, safety, fulfillment, personal integrity, love, peace, and happiness) would seem to be refuted by the existence of evil. Consider the following:

- (i) a perfectly good God, by definition, would want to create a perfectly good world
- (ii) an all-powerful God, by definition, would be able to create a perfectly good world
- (iii) and thus if a perfectly good, all-powerful God exists, we would exist in a perfectly good world, a world with no evil (think of the idea of Heaven)
- (iv) and yet evil exists in our world in tremendous quantity, and includes both physical evil (the suffering caused by the blind catastrophes of nature: disease, flood, drought, etc.) and moral evil (the suffering caused by the intentions of wicked people: murder, adultery, rape, deception, theft, etc.)

Thus it seems we must conclude the following: Either (v) God exists, but is not perfectly good, and/or (vi) God exists, but is not all-powerful, or (vii) God does not exist.

It should be noted, however, that the problem of evil only arises for those who claim that God is both *all-powerful* and *perfectly* good. Those who believe either that God is very powerful but not all-powerful, or that God is very good but not perfectly good, can avoid the problem of evil by saying that evil is either out of God's control or is somehow part of God's plan. But if one wishes to maintain that God is both all-powerful and perfectly good, the problem exists.

Responses to the problem of evil

Most people who believe in God accept as an essential truth that God is both all-powerful and perfectly good, and are thus not willing to accept any of the conclusions which logically follow from the problem of evil. Consequently there have arisen a number of attempts to respond to the problem. Some of these responses are little more than an admission of puzzlement about the paradox, combined with a profession of ignorance as to how to solve it; and in this vein it is quite common to hear people respond to the problem of evil by saying that its existence and its place in our lives is a great mystery which one must simply accept, usually for the sake of maintaining one's religious beliefs. For example, according to Pope John Paul II, 'Suffering is certainly part of the mystery of man. Perhaps suffering is not wrapped up as much as man is by this mystery, which is an especially impenetrable one.' Karol Wojtla (*On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, Pauline Books & Media, 1984, ch. 8.) Yet it is unsurprising that few serious thinkers have taken this route, for it essentially amounts to an acknowledgment that evil does indeed present a very strong argument against God's existence, one which cannot be answered with any kind of compelling theoretical response. Put differently, responding to the problem of evil by saying that 'God moves in mysterious ways' is comparable to intellectually shrugging one's shoulders in the face of potent evidence against one's ideas. But there have been attempts to formulate a theory which justifies the perfect goodness and absolute power of God in the face of evil. Such attempts are called 'theodicies', and they have traditionally taken three general forms:

(i) Some thinkers have tried to defuse the problem altogether by contending that evil is not real; rather it is said to be indicative of a lack, or privation, of being – or even an illusion, in the strongest accounts. In much the same way that blindness can only exist where the positive reality of vision has ceased, evil is said to only exist where the positive, naturally good reality of things ceases. And thus if evil does not have real being, the problem of evil does not arise. (See Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, chs. 12, 18.)

(ii) A number of thinkers have claimed that God wills and/or allows evil in order that certain goods might come out of it which wouldn't have been possible without the evil. For example, one might hear a person argue that God allowed the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States because of the great benefits of American national solidarity and increased global awareness of terrorism it has brought about - benefits that wouldn't have been possible without the evil of the attack. Thus the problem of evil is said to be solved by showing that evil actually conduces to greater good. (See John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957, ch. 7.)

(iii) And lastly, the most common theodicy is the 'free-will defense', which answers the problem by claiming that evil is not caused by God, but rather by humans abusing their free will. God, it is argued, wished to create a world containing moral goodness, but could not do so without

creating people possessing genuine free will, for only if the good is freely chosen can it be a case of genuine moral goodness. The unfortunate corollary of this, however, is that our possession of free will gives us the capacity to choose evil – and choose it we have, to our great detriment. In this scenario, evil is an unfortunate side-effect of God's justified desire to create free beings capable of genuine moral goodness; and all evil existing in the world is said to be caused by those free beings (we humans), and not by God. (See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, pt. 1a)

Criticisms of the theodicies

As one would only expect, these attempted solutions of the problem of evil have attracted their own share of criticisms.

(i) The claim that evil is unreal has had little appeal to most thinkers, as it is glaringly counterintuitive. Are we to take seriously the idea that the evil associated with the Holocaust or the September 11 terrorist attacks can be understood as having not been 'real'? And even if it could somehow be shown that the evil of such events is 'unreal' in some abstract metaphysical sense, would that take away the reality of our feeling that it was evil? Would it take away the reality of our suffering?

(ii) The claim that God allows evil in order to bring about greater good is much more popular, but it suffers from two especially problematic lines of criticism:

a) While it might make sense for God to allow some instances of evil in order to bring about greater good, it is very difficult to see how a perfectly good God could allow great atrocities such as the holocaust or the black plague. It seems absurd to suppose that a perfectly good being would consider these horrors justified for any supposed 'greater goods'.

b) Secondly, the theodicy is basically claiming that God finds it necessary to use evil as a means for the achievement of a greater good – in much the same way, for example, that one might be forced to upset an alcoholic friend with a painful intervention in order to achieve the greater good of their future sobriety. Yet it should be asked: would a God that is truly all-powerful need to use any kind of evil as a means to a greater good? It seems, rather, that an all-powerful God, by definition, would be able to achieve the end (the greater good) without using the means (the evil). It is not necessary for us to understand how God could do this, for we are not ourselves all-powerful; but the point remains: it seems reasonable to think that an all-powerful being would not be shackled by any necessity to use evil as a means to achieving certain goods. And an all-powerful, perfectly good God would not do so.

(iii) The free will defense is generally considered to be the most potent response to the problem of evil, mostly owing to the fact that it explains evil in a way which seems both to justify its existence (as a valuable gift from God which allows for genuine moral goodness to exist) and absolve God of any responsibility for the evil that it causes (because it is a matter of our choice). But this line of reasoning is by no means free of its own difficulties, among which the following four are noteworthy:

a) An obvious initial problem with this defense is that it only accounts for the existence of moral evil, not physical evil. The free will theory might explain how suffering arises from our sinful misuse of it, but it doesn't explain why we should be made to suffer from the catastrophes of our natural environment. Thus even if one accepts the free will defense, one must still seek a solution to the problem of physical evil.

b) The free will defense implies that God could not have created humans who both possess genuine free will and yet always choose the good – but it should be asked: why couldn't an all-powerful God do such a thing? Why couldn't God create genuinely free humans that invariably freely choose the good? Detractors might respond that such a suggestion is tantamount to making us robots, in effect taking away our free will (and thus depriving us of the capacity for genuine moral goodness), but there appears to be nothing self-contradictory in the notion of a moral agent possessing genuine free will and perfect moral goodness. After all, isn't God said to be a being who has genuine free will and yet always chooses the good? And if so, why couldn't God have created humans precisely in that image? Surely an all-powerful and perfectly good God would have done so.

c) Another objection maintains that an all-powerful God would have foreseen our abuse of the gift of free will before we were created, along with all of the horrors to which it would lead, and would thus have been fully aware that in creating humans with free will, evil was being created at the same time – a statement which is tantamount to saying that a perfectly good being would have knowingly created evil, which seems absurd.

d) And lastly, it is often stated that God preferred to create a world containing genuinely free moral agents who are capable of evil over a world containing unfree agents or 'robots' who are forced to act in accordance with the dictates of perfect goodness. Foregoing for the moment the question of why an all-powerful being would be limited to these two options, it can be asked: why is the former a better alternative? Why would a perfectly good being prefer a world of freedom and evil to a world of unfreedom and perfect goodness? Defenders of the argument will respond that God values the benefits of genuine moral goodness so greatly that a world of freedom with evil is acceptable. Yet the very idea that God would so greatly value the moral goodness that comes with free will is at least questionable, for it seems very reasonable to ask: would a perfectly good being actually value it so highly if it meant such horrible suffering in the world?

The perennial problem of evil

In general, the great challenge presented to those seeking to provide a theodicy is to explain the actions of God in such a way that God's absolute power and/or perfect goodness are not compromised in some subtle way in the course of the argument. Yet even if we grant that there are theodicies that seem to answer the problem of evil in a logical way, it remains unclear whether they do justice to the depth of our suffering. I would like to suggest that the key to a deep appreciation of the problem of evil does not primarily lie in one's ability to come to an understanding of its logic, for this is easily achieved; rather it lies in the intensity and sincerity with which one's imagination is used to make as vivid as possible the true horrors that lie behind the all too common word 'evil'. Theodicies might be developed which seem to provide a rational

account of God's allowance of evil, but can we really *believe them* when confronted with the deepest atrocities? Can we sincerely affirm that evil is unreal when we tour through the Nazi concentration camps? Can we genuinely convince ourselves that God allows evil for the sake of some greater good when the evil in question is the rape of an innocent child? Can we truly believe that God values free will enough to accept the evils it spawns when faced with the reality of willful infanticide? The parable of the nursery is perhaps especially appropriate when asking such questions, for are we not said to be God's children? And if so, we must ask: what kind of father would create such a world for his children, if it could have been otherwise?