Should the existence of extreme human suffering lead a religious believer to abandon their faith?

In this essay, I will argue that the existence of extreme human suffering should lead a religious believer to abandon their faith. I will not, however, argue that god does not exist. Instead, I will argue that a religious believer – whom I will assume believes in an omnipotent, omniscient and, most importantly, omnibenevolent god – arbitrarily believes what they believe. I will do this by arguing that the problem of evil could very well be used the different way around, the problem of good. And that all the theodicy's that I will consider – free will, higher virtues and sceptical theism – could be used to argue in favour of a maximally evil god. Therefore, the religious believer should conclude that they should be agnostic to whether there exists an omnibenevolent god.

Usually, the argument of the problem of evil goes as follows. God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient. As god is omnibenevolent, he would want to eradicate evil as far as he can. As god is omnipotent, god can eradicate evil. And as god is omniscient, he knows that there is evil. Therefore, if god was omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient, there would be no evil. Yet, evil exists. Therefore, there cannot exist a god who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient.[1]

There are two simple responses to this argument: the higher-virtues theodicy and the free will theodicy. The higher-virtues theodicy argues that evil is necessary to develop higher virtues in the people who suffer. The free will theodicy argues that evil follows from free will, and as the good gained from free will – such as a loving relationship with god – outweighs the evil which necessarily follows from it, this world is still the best world that god could have created.

However, as Stephen Law argues, it is possible to change the problem around.[2] What if one assumes that there is a maximally evil, omnipotent and omniscient god. A religious believer might object and say that there is so much good in the world, there cannot possibly exist a maximally evil god. However, please note that this is exactly the same argument as I made above (because there is evil, an omnibenevolent god cannot possibly exist). Both an omnibenevolent and a maximally evil god suffer from the same objection. One could be even more ambitious by arguing that the existence of a good god is just as probable as the existence of an evil god. As many religious believers will argue that it is highly unlikely that an evil god exists, they should, therefore, also conclude that it is highly unlikely that a good god exists.[3] I will restrain myself to the less ambitious goal, that a religious believer should be agnostic to whether an

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[1] (Mackie, 1955)
[2] (Law, 2010)
[3] (Page and Baker-Hytch, 2020)

omnibenevolent god exists, as the claim that it is highly unlikely that an evil god exists is not without contention.

The two theodicies I outlined above can also both be used to defend this evil god. It is very straightforward for the higher-order virtues/evils theodicy. Perhaps, some amount of good is necessary to cultivate betrayal, decadence, and jealousy. Without love, there cannot be heartbreak. The reverse free will theodicy is more complex. Here, Law argues that removing free will would remove the possibility of moral responsibility. A maximally evil god could have created a world with automata that always behaved morally repugnant, but these automata would not have the moral responsibility necessary to transform these actions into 'actions of the most depraved and despicable kind'.[4] Therefore, free will is necessary to create a world that allows for the most wicked of all bad things: free and deliberate evil action.

The philosophical consensus is that these theodicies are sufficient to prove the logical possibility of a good/evil god. That is why William Rowe formulated the evidential argument against the existence of an omnibenevolent god. This same argument, I argue, could also be turned around. There are so many instances where goodness does not seem to have a reason. Consider the following examples: someone being cured of cancer, a stranger complementing you on the street, or finding money in your pockets that you did not know you had. These are things where it is incredibly difficult to come up with a reason why it would, eventually, lead to more evil. Therefore, parallel to how William Rowe would argue, it is so difficult to come up with a reason that one might as well conclude that there is no reason. If there is no diabolical reason for these random acts of kindness, a maximally evil god would not have allowed them to exist. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that an evil god exists.

However, one could argue that it is even more unlikely that a good god exists. This is because the free will theodicy is more powerful in the case of an evil god than in the case of a good god. In the case of a good god, one can object by using heaven as an example of a place where, simultaneously, people have free will and there is no evil. Clearly, god was able all along to create a universe in which the benefits of free will could be enjoyed without the harms of human suffering or other evils. If god was evil, one could not simply object by pointing at hell as a place where there is both extreme evil and free will. Because of the nature of the free will theodicy in the case of an evil god, this cannot be done. In hell, it is not humans deliberately inflicting harm on others – which, as I explained, is the worst kind of evil – but it is just humans being harmed. Therefore, it is even more difficult to come up with good reasons for a good god allowing random extreme human suffering than an evil god allowing random acts of kindness.

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[4] (Law, 2010, p. 357)

However, there is a possibility that this evil god had reasons for these random acts of kindness that we simply cannot comprehend. Humans have inferior cognition, and they are incapable of understanding why these acts actually lead to an increase in evil. This approach is called sceptical theism. Therefore, because there is a possibility that there is a reason for these acts of kindness – we just cannot understand them – one is not able to deny the existence of an evil god.

I submit that this approach in particular shows the conclusion that a religious believer should draw from the possibility of the existence of both a good god and an evil god. The sceptical theist religious believer, who believes in a maximally evil god, accepts that they do not know whether there exists an evil god, for the reasons why random acts of kindness exist, could be beyond human comprehension. Likewise, exactly the same argument could be made for an omnibenevolent god. A sceptical theist religious believer who believes in an omnibenevolent god accepts that they do not know whether this omnibenevolent god exists, because the reasons why extreme human suffering exist could be beyond human comprehension. Therefore, a religious believer who recognises pointless extreme human suffering and pointless acts of kindness, is unable to decide whether it is more likely that an omnibenevolent god exists, or a maximally evil god exists. The arguments in favour of a good god can give as much support to an evil god – this is also true for many other arguments such as the first-mover argument, these arguments do not tell us whether this first-mover is good or evil. The belief in either of the two is, as a result, arbitrary. It is just as likely that an evil god exists as that a good god exists. So, the religious believer should abandon their faith and acknowledge that they should be agnostic to whether an evil or a good god exists.

In conclusion, I have shown that the theodicies defending an evil god, if not stronger, are just as strong as the theodicies defending a good god. A rational religious believer should, therefore, give up their faith in an omnibenevolent god and recognise that it is just as likely that this omnibenevolent god exists as that an evil god exist.

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