

The Problem of Evil

Introduction

The existence of a continuously undesirable state of affairs, pain and suffering in the human realm has been a long existing problem in the Philosophy of Religion. The question as once posed by Epicurus^[1] begs to ask whether the existence of such ‘evil’ makes it unreasonable to believe in the existence of a God.

In this paper, after establishing the relevant definition of God, I will talk about the contradiction that arises from the evidence of the existence of evil and the supposition of the existence of God, as it has long been discussed by philosophers such as Mackie and McCloskey. Following that, I will discuss Theodicies (a group of arguments against this line of reasoning) and attempt to evaluate what the Problem of Evil and its opposition leave us with - *does theism or atheism have the upper hand?*

While the concept of ‘God’ can have a variety of different perceptions based on the context, as for the Problem of Evil we are concerned with the notion of ‘God’ as in popular western monotheism. This mean, if God exists, then God is omnipotent (or all-powerful), omniscient (or all-knowing) and perfectly benevolent (or all-good).^[2]

Describing The Problem Of Evil

We will begin with an assumption that God indeed does exist and possess all of the qualities as mentioned earlier, that is, God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly benevolent. However, if such a being exists, the existence of evil seems trivial, in that a contradiction is involved in the existence of evil and the belief in this notion of God.^[2]

It is rather obvious from observation that evil has existed and continued to exist all around us, be it in a human form, or anything else that causes pain and suffering to either a single individual or a large sum of individuals. Such pain can range from things like murder & rape (*suffering caused mostly by the direct actions of human beings*), terrorism (*suffering caused by certain (mis)interpretations of holy text by human beings or for interests of a group of human beings*), medical issues (*suffering caused by activity of other living forces like bacteria or viruses*), natural calamities - (*suffering caused by non-living natural forces like hurricanes, etc*) and much more.

Now, since evil does exist, an omniscient, *all-knowing* God must know of it when it occurs or if it's about to happen. Such a God must also know how any kind of event which might bring pain and suffering can be stopped from happening. Being omnipotent or *all-powerful*, God must also have the power to stop such an evil from occurring. With the knowledge and power, a perfectly benevolent or *all-loving* God would also be motivated to stop his creations from encountering pain and suffering^[3] - yet, evil has existed and continued to exist.

Thus, this creates a problem for the existence of a God, in that if such a God does indeed exist, why does evil not cease to exist?

This can be summed up explicitly with the following statements:

1. God exists and is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly benevolent.
2. There has been and continues to be vast pain and suffering in the world.
3. (From 1, 2) The existence of pain and suffering is *incompatible* with the existence of God.

Thus, in order to resolve the contradiction which arises from premises 1 & 2 and reach a suitable conclusion, we need to re-evaluate the truth values of our premises.

Firstly, let's have a look at premise 2. It would simply be absurd to claim pain and suffering does not exist, as these phenomena are a part of our direct experience. In this way, they retain their 'standard' meaning in the context of the argument.^[4] Thus, this premise cannot be rejected.

It follows from the fact that premise 2 *cannot* be wrong, that premise 1 is. We can now arrive at a conclusion for our argument:

4. (From 3) God does not exist.

Arguments Against The Problem of Evil (Theodicies)

Although there are quite a few responses to the Problem of Evil, some of them are not very effective against it, in that they engage in semantic errors or do not explain certain aspects of suffering^[4]. Thus, I will only discuss the two Theodicies that, in my opinion, stand out - the Free Will Argument and the Parent Analogy. While these too are not perfect arguments, as I will deliberate later, these are both strong and perhaps the most used defences of the vindication of the goodness of God.

The Argument of Free Will

The argument of free will suggests that God has given us free will, as he wanted us to freely love him, but at the same time have the ability to choose against him. This argument implies that human free will is the source of the suffering that can be seen to exist. Thus, this makes us free to make our own choices and decisions and endows us with a great responsibility that comes with self-determination.^[5] Not only is this seen as an invaluable gift to humankind, it can be argued that free will is one of the core characteristics which makes humans 'human'. It is indeed often believed that the goodness of the virtue of free will outweighs the badness of the existence of evil.

Thus, if God were to truly interfere at points in time when evil is/was to exist, it would be a compromise in the human free will. In this way, evil is completely attributed to human actions. This

argument calls into question the premise that evil and God are incompatible, by implying that God has given us the freedom with which we cause evil.

The Parent Analogy

There have been several skeptic analogies against the Problem of Evil to explain the benevolence of God. One of the most notable ones in this group is The Parent Analogy. In this, Wykstra makes use of a comparison of the cognitive faculties and actions of God to those of a parent. He implies that a lot of human parents, in spite of their love for their children, cause them certain suffering on purpose in order to attain a greater, outweighing good.^[6] While the children might not understand at the time, or perhaps not have the capability to understand it, this suffering creates a change in them which is always for the better. For example, a parent making their children eat food which tastes bad but is good for their health or a parent letting a child fall in their attempts in trying to learn to ride a bicycle.^[4]

By drawing a comparison of the suffering that a parent causes for *entirely good reasons* to the suffering that God causes, this argument attempts to vindicate the goodness of God. This analogy implies that just as children cannot understand why parents cause them suffering even though it is actually for their own good, humans cannot understand or do not have the capability to understand the reasons for the suffering that God causes them, hence, calling into question the third premise by explaining the apparent necessity of God and evil to exist in compatibility with each other.^{[6][7]}

What does the Problem of Evil and its opposition leave us with?

Although both sides seem to have some good arguments defending their views, neither seems to provide a decisive one. However, which side has a stronger argument?

In trying to explain the reasons behind evil existing at the same time as a God who is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent, most theodicies fail to explain some specific problems.

The free will model, for example, does not explain the evils caused by non-human forces such as medical issues or natural disorders, suffering that has an effect on a great number of human beings, as it attributes all pain and suffering to be a consequence of human free will. Thus, it can be argued in opposition to this model - why is it that a perfectly benevolent God allows such suffering and pain to his creations despite the fact that it has nothing to do with free will.

Moreover, as Mackie argues, it is possible for an omniscient God to know what each human will do with his free will. Thus, the God can restrict such human beings to enter the human realm beforehand, being omnipotent.^[3] (However, this presents another issue altogether regarding the free will model - if God already knows what will happen, is free will really free?)

Mackie also debates that we can conceive of a will which is not evil but still free, which I believe is completely justified. If free will is interpreted as a completely random judgement by humans, why must it not be possible to always make a good decision and the choice still be free? While some might say that this puts a curtain over actual 'free-ness' of will, it can be argued that with human virtues such as integrity and morality, it might be possible for someone to always make good judgements which at the same time are free.

The parent analogy can be seen to have less flaws overall, but I believe it has one critical problem, in that it deals with the abstract in a rather peculiar way. In view of the this, as Hume argues, that while a sceptic cannot prove the existence of any unreasonable evil in the world, the argument presupposes the existence of God in order to justify the reasoning behind the parent analogy.^[1]

Thus, in this presupposition, it assumes that the existence of God is the cause behind all of the the pain and suffering in the world. It indicates that we, with our human cognitive faculties, haven't yet been able to or cannot understand the reasons behind this suffering.

I would argue that the fact that the Parent Analogy presupposes the existence of a God makes it a weaker response to the Problem of Evil. If, in a similar way, I was to presume that a God does not

exist, the need for the unknown and ineffable reasons behind the suffering is lost, thus making it a simpler, better argument. In this case, we can just argue that natural forces and other evils are a cause of science or human behaviour and not of an unknown force which creates such suffering for unknown reasons, thus reducing absurd assumptions to conclusive facts and pre-existing knowledge of scientific phenomena.

While a lot of theodicies try to oppose the Problem of Evil in various different ways, each of them either fails to properly explain all the kinds of evil that can be seen to exist in the world, or does not provide a better argument than the Problem of Evil itself. One of the strongest arguments against the Problem of Evil, the Parent Analogy, also loses its strength with its presumptions and premises. Besides, modern scientific evidence and discoveries have been continuously going in the favour of atheism, in that they disprove previously popular arguments in the existence of God, such as the Teleological and Cosmological arguments.^{[8][9]}

However, there are issues with the Problem of Evil as well. While it may have disproven the existence of the popular concept of a western monotheistic God, that is, an omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent God, it does nothing to argue against other notions of Gods, such as a geriatric God or a committee of Gods. It's safe to say the debate on the existence of a 'God' is far from solved; however, I believe that the Problem of Evil has proceeded well to solve the debate on the existence of a western monotheistic God as defined previously in the paper. Indeed, atheism seems to have an upper hand in the debate with more convincing arguments and seemingly improving evidence.

Bibliography

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