PH1102E Week 6

The Problem of Evil

I. Theism, atheism, and agnosticism

II. The argument from evil

III. Objections to the argument

Atheist's Response

A. Free will objection - God should intervene to minimise the harm even if we are gifted with radical freedom.
B. Contrast objection - We do not need that much evil to show us the goodness
C. Spiritual development objection - We become better person from experiencing necessary evils. But some people never experience it at all.
D. Hidden goodness objection
- There is hidden goodness in the evils, but we can't thank God for giving us the bad stuff like rape right

IV. Conclusion

Argument from Evil
If God exists, there is no unnecessary evil.
There is unnecessary evil.
Therefore, God does not exist.

I. Theism, atheism, and agnosticism

Is there a God?

This question is ambiguous, because "God" means different things to different people, and across different religious traditions. But, generally speaking, there are two broad conceptions of God. First, there is the metaphysical conception of God as an intelligent but largely impersonal force or power or presence. Second, there is the personal conception of God as a being that is not only intelligent and powerful, but also benevolent and interested in our welfare.

Today we focus on the personal conception. This is a conception of God associated primarily with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, although it can also be found outside of these religious traditions. Not all personal conceptions of God are the same, but they all have some basic things in common. They are conceptions of a God who is extraordinarily powerful, extraordinarily knowledgeable, and supremely good.

What do extraordinary power and knowledge, and supreme goodness, involve?

A being that has extraordinary power and knowledge, and supreme goodness, is a being that is *worthy of being worshipped*. I.e., it is a "holy" being. While it is possible to approach a holy being in a spirit of both worship and fear, the relationship cannot be one *purely* of fear, if it is to be truly worshipful.

Since we don't worship human beings or groups of human beings, a truly holy entity must have *more* power, knowledge and goodness than any human or group of humans. At a minimum, a holy being must have enough power and knowledge to have an effect on the life of anyone who worships it. In many religions, God is considered to be *omnipotent*, in the sense of being able to do *anything* (or at least, anything that does not involve an outright contradiction), and *omniscient* (in the sense of knowing everything that can be known).

A holy being must also be good to such an extent that it never does anything wrong. This is actually just the bare minimum of goodness for a God to have. According to most religious traditions based on a personal conception of God, God is also good to the further extent that he does everything he can to promote our well-being. (So it's not just that God refrains from doing evil, he actively does great good.)

There are three positions you can take on the question of whether there is a God. You can:

- Believe that there is a God. (**Theism**)
- Believe that there is no God. (**Atheism**)
- Neither believe that there is a God nor believe that there is no God. (**Agnosticism**)

These three possibilities simply reflect the fact that when it comes to any question whether it is true that such-and-such, you can believe that it is, believe that it is not, or refrain from forming a belief either way (e.g., take a "wait-and-see" attitude). For example, if the question is whether the price of gold will reach $1200 by the end of the year, you can believe that it will (analogous to theism), believe that it won't (analogous to atheism), or suspend judgement -- neither believe that it will nor that it will not reach $1200 by year's end (analogous to agnosticism).

Today we consider an argument for atheism as regards a personal God. This argument tries to prove that there is no extraordinary powerful, extraordinarily knowledgeable, and supremely good being who cares about us.

II. The argument from evil

Nobody denies that a lot of bad things have happened in our world, and that a lot of bad things continue to happen in it. Torture, rape, and murder; fraud, war, and genocide; hunger, disease, and natural disasters -- there is no denying that such things exist, and that they are bad. Some people have taken the existence of such bad things -- such "evils" -- as a reason to think that there is no God. This argument -- that the existence of all these evils proves that there is no God -- is called the **argument from evil**.

The argument from evil is most simply posed as in the form of a (supposedly) rhetorical question: *If there's a God, why do all these bad things happen?* It can also be stated in a more expository form:

(1) It is wrong not to prevent extreme and pointless suffering when you know that you can prevent it without harming anyone.

(2) If there is an extremely powerful and knowledgeable being, then that being fails to prevent a lot of extreme and pointless suffering that it knows it could prevent without harming anyone.

(3) So, if there is an extremely powerful and knowledgeable being, that being does something wrong (by failing to prevent extreme and pointless suffering that it knows it could prevent, without harming anyone). (from 1 and 2)

(4) If God exists, he is an extremely powerful and knowledgeable being. (by Definition)

(5) So, if God exists, he does something wrong. (from 3 and 4)

(6) But God cannot do anything wrong. (by Definition)

(7) So, God does not exist. (from 5 and 6)

Today, we focus on the short, interrogative version: *If there's a God, why do all these bad things happen?*

Before moving ahead, let's draw a distinction between two kinds of bad things or "evils": moral evils and natural evils. Moral evils are bad things that result from wrongdoing. Examples include rape, murder, and various forms of neglect -- refer to the lecture slides for specific (and in some cases disturbing) examples). Natural evils are bad things that do not result from any wrongdoing. Examples include epidemics, hurricanes (at least those that hit populated areas), attacks by wild animals, the 2004 tsunami, etc.

Back to the problem of evil: if there's a God, why do all these bad things happen?

Today, we consider four answers to this question (these are, in effect, objections to the argument from evil):

> *Free will defense*: Because God created beings with free will.
>
> *Contrast defense*: Because in order for there to be good things, there must also be bad things.
>
> *Spiritual development defense*: Because suffering is good for us.
>
> *Hidden goodness defense*: Because these bad things have hidden good consequences that outweigh their badness.

A. Free will defense

We have free will -- this is an essential part of our nature. But that means that our actions are undetermined by any force external to ourselves. So, in order to create us as free beings, God has to endow us with wills over which even he has no control. Unfortunately, some people excercise their freedom of will to do great harm. But this harm is the inevitable price of human freedom.

This is the free will defense of theism against the argument from evil. It is a limited response to the argument, since it only tries to reconcile the existence of moral evils with the existence of God. (I'm assuming that natural disasters, like the tsunami, are not the result of some wicked intelligence.)

Let's assess the free will defense point by point.

The first part of the defense states that we have free will. As you know, not everyone agrees with this. Galen Strawson and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, do not. So, if you agree with Strawson and Nietzsche, you won't find the free will defense convincing.

But let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that we are free, and in a radical, non-Humean way. Does the free will defense succeed then? Not necessarily.

For one thing, God must have foreseen that by giving human beings free will, he ran the risk that many of them would excerise their wills to do great harm. Why, then, didn't God give all human beings not just free will, but highly developed consciences that would always, or almost always, prompt them to think better of their evil plans before carrying them out? A Humean would say that God could even have given us free will *and* determined in advance that we would use our freedom only to do good (or at least not terribly bad) things; this would be like the case of the mad scientist who stimulates desires in Smith, except that the desires that God would stimulate in us would presumaby be desires to do good rather than evil.

Here a theist may reply that Humean "freedom" is freedom only in name, and that true, radical freedom of will overcomes all other psychological forces -- all fear, greed, lust, tact, sense of fair play, conscience, etc. By endowing us with free will, God gave us the power to overcome our basest impulses. But by the same token, he gave us the power to overcome our noblest and kindest impulses.

A second problem with the free will defense is this: even assuming that radical freedom is possible, and that God was right to create beings with it, why doesn't he at least intervene to minimize the consequences of its harmful exercise? Surely God wouldn't be "robbing us of our freedom" just by putting out the fires we start -- literal and metaphorical -- before they spread out of control. It's hard to see how a God who cared about us would let Hitler's will have all the ramifications it actually had (particularly considering that one of the things Hitler successfully willed was the destruction of millions of beings with freedom of will).

So it appears that the free will defense fails even to achieve its limited goal of making the existence of moral evil consistent with the existence of God.

B. The contrast defense

The question is why all these bad things happen, if there is a God? Proponents of the contrast defense give the following answer:

> *"Good" and "bad" are opposites, like "uphill" and "downhill." You can't have an uphill without a downhill, and likewise you can't have good things without having bad things too.*

This is not a very effective defense.

First of all, not all opposites are like "uphill" and "downhill." You can have dry things without wet things, for example, or darkness without light. "Good" and "bad" are like "wet" and "dry," not like "uphill" and "downhill" -- or, so it seems.

A different version of the contrast defense allows that there could be good things even if there weren't any bad things, but argues that we wouldn't *appreciate* the good things unless we were exposed to bad things too. But this suggestion too has its problems.

For one, why do we need to be exposed to *actual* horrors, instead of vividly described fictional horrors that remind us of how bad things could be, and make us grateful that they aren't that way?

A theist might reply that these fictional substitutes would not be effective as the real McCoy (actual moral and natural evils). But surely it would be within God's power to give us extremely vivid and very terrible dreams; wouldn't this be enough to give us an appreciation for the good things in life?

Well, opinions may differ on this. But even if dreams and fiction are no substitute for the real thing, why do we need so much evil -- moral as well as natural -- in order to appreciate the good things? Wouldn't a much smaller amount of evil serve the purpose just as well, provided that it were amply publicized, dramatized, etc.? Does it really take 20,000 child-mutilations to teach us the difference between good and bad? Surely not.

So the contrast defense does not seem to work.

C. The spiritual development defense

According to the spiritual development defense, the reason why God allows so much evil to take place is that this evil is good for us. When we are forced to come to grips with moral or natural evil, we grow stronger, humbler, kinder, and, in a word, better people than we would otherwise be.

It is true that overcoming a great personal setback or tragedy can be the defining event in a person's life -- something that changes that person's life forever, and for the better. More generally, it is hard to imagine a really good life containing *no* suffering or setbacks of any kind. A life in which you always got what you wanted would be bland and boring. So, there is at least a grain of truth to the spiritual development defense.

Still, there are problems. To begin with, while it is true that overcoming a great personal setback or tragedy can be the defining event in a person's life -- something that changes that person's life forever, and for the better. But it can also ruin a person's life. Think of Josef Fritzl's daughter (refer to the lecture slides for details on Fritzl), or the African orphan who dies of malaria at the age of five. Where's the spiritual development here?

A theist might suggest that even though Fritzl's daughter and the orphan do not benefit from their suffering, other people who witness their suffering (or hear about it in the news) may reap spiritual benefits from contemplating it. But even if this is true -- which is extremely doubtful -- it is hard to believe that *all* cases like this do more good for onlookers than harm to the victims. And even if did more good than harm, it still looks grossly unjust to the victims.

A further objection to the spiritual development defense is that if the point of suffering is to promote spiritual development, then why is it that some spiritually under-developed people never suffer at all -- or at least, not enough to promote spiritual development? (Think of Paris Hilton.)

D. The hidden goodness defense

Proponents of the hidden goodness defense reason as follows:

> *It is true that we cannot see how a powerful, knowledgeable, and benevolent God could let all these bad things happen. But maybe that is just because we have a limited point of view. A dog cannot understand why its master takes it to the veterinarian for its shots. From the dog's limited point of view, nothing good at all comes of the innoculation -- it is just pure, pointless pain.*
>
> *And the same is true of a small child. The child cannot understand why its parents let the doctor stick it with a needle. From the child's limited point of view, nothing good comes of the innoculation at all -- it is pure, pointless pain.*
>
> *Well, maybe we (adults) are to God as the dog is to its master, and as the child is to its parents. Maybe all these horrible things that happen are somehow for the best -- albeit in a way that we cannot comprehend.*

This seems to be a more promising way to resist the Argument from Evil than the others we have considered so far. But, like the others, it is not without its problems.

For one, it is hard to see what "hidden" goodness would absolutely require the existence of so much evil in the world. Think again of the baby dying of malaria, or of Elisabeth Fritzl daughter. Where's the hidden goodness here?

A theist could argue that maybe God provides everyone with an afterlife, and that in this afterlife, all worldly evils are somehow compensated, rectified, or placed into a larger context in which the wordly evils somehow make sense.

The theist's appeal to a possible afterlife must handled with care, however. In particular, we have to pay attention to how much a human being or self can change, without simply morphing out of existence -- without simply becoming a *different* person or self altogether. If the change is too extreme, we won't have a case of survival into an afterlife: we'll just have a case in which one life ends, and another simultaneously begins (in Heaven, or wherever). Even if the newly commenced life has memories (or, apparent memories) just like those that the deceased mortal had, this doesn't necessarily guarantee that the deceased mortal has survived into the afterlife. (We'll consider this question in detail later in the term, when we discuss personal identity.)

A dilemma of sorts arises if we construe the afterlife as basically a continuation of *this* life, just in a much better place, and under much more favorable circumstances. The question that arises now is how long this afterlife (the one that I transition to *post mortem*) can continue as a good life. If memories and experiences keep accumulating *ad infinitum*, it seems likely that there'll come a point when I'm bored sick with life, no matter how "favorable" my (heavenly) circumstances. It seems that at some point my thirst for that old sense of wonder would be so strong that I'd wish I could press a "reset" button to start a new life from scratch. But if I did press reset, would the life that began from that point be my life? Hard to see how it could be, in any sense that should matter to me (i.e., to the person who is contemplating the reset button).

Perhaps these concerns are overblown. But there is another, less metaphysical objection to the hidden goodness defense. The mere fact (if it is a fact) that God provides us with wonderful afterlives is not enough to explain why he allows so much suffering in this life. Surely it would have been better for him to have given us wonderful afterlives without allowing children to be tortured and so forth in this life.

Ultimately, a theist must reply to this by saying that God allows only as much suffering as is absolutely necessary, given his desire to treat his creatures lovingly. It must be that all the evils that we find in our world, however unnecessary (or even counterproductive) they may appear to us, are, in fact, strictly necessary evils. They are analogous to the pain of a vaccination: an evil that is necessary for the sake of some much greater good.

But if this is true, think about what it means. We do not condemn the doctor for vaccinating the baby, even though this gives the baby some (temporary) pain. On the contrary, we are grateful to the doctor for doing this. We are thankful that we have vaccines and doctors to administer them.

Well, the theist is telling us that God allows children to be raped and tortured only because allowing this is absolutely necessary for the sake of some much greater good. So, just as we should thank the doctor for vaccinating the children, we should thank God for allowing some children to be raped and tortured. Sometimes one hears people of faith say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." But now we seem to be told that we really ought, in a sense, to love the sin too.

This is is hard to swallow. How can a theist respond? It seems the best response is to say that we should not thank God for these things, even though he allows them only because they are absolutely necessary for a greater good, because in order to offer such thanks, we would have to deform ourselves psychologically in ways that would be very bad. In other words, even though God's allowing all these evils is praiseworthy, it is not something that we should actually praise, since the act of praising the allowance of such evils -- praiseworthy though the

allowance is -- would have a corrosive effect on our characters, our relationships with our fellow human beings, etc.[1]

I leave it to you to decide how convincing this reply is.

IV. Conclusion

It is debatable whether the argument from evil succeeds in proving the non-existence of God, conceived of as an extraordinarily powerful and knowledgeable being who has our interests at heart. But whether or not it succeeds, the argument is one that those who believe in such a God must take seriously, at least to the extent of formulating some thoughtful objection to it. This, as we have seen, is easier said than done.

M.W.P.

[1] Analogously, a utilitarian, who thinks that the right thing to do is to maximize human happiness might consistently maintain that it is wrong to <u>believe</u> that the right thing to do is to maximize human happiness, on the grounds that people who have this belief are less likely to maximize human happiness than those who lack it.