The evidential problem of evil[1]

The problem of evil is widely considered to be the most powerful argument against the existence of God. The central issue is whether evil, as it occurs in this world, either proves that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist or at least makes the belief in such a God unreasonable.

AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

God is traditionally understood to be supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient. The existence of evil causes problems for believing that such a being exists. Here's the argument:

P1. If God is supremely good, then he has the desire to eliminate evil.
P2. If God is omnipotent, then he is able to eliminate evil.
P3. If God is omniscient, then he knows that evil exists and knows how to eliminate it.
C1. Therefore, if God exists, and is supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, then God will eliminate evil.
C2. Therefore, if a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God exists, evil does not exist.
P4. Evil exists.
C3. Therefore, a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God does not exist.

There are two versions of this argument. The *logical problem of evil* claims that the mere existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God. In other words, the following claims cannot all be true:

1. God is supremely good.
2. God is omnipotent.
3. God is omniscient.
4. God exists.
5. Evil exists.

If any four of the claims are true, the fifth *must* be false. On this version, the argument above is deductive.

The *evidential problem of evil* makes a weaker claim. It claims that the *amount and distribution* of evil that exists is *good evidence* that God does not exist. On this version, the argument above is inductive, and we need to replace 'evil' with something like 'unnecessary evil'.

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 124-7, 141-8

TWO TYPES OF EVIL

To understand the argument, we need to be clear on what 'evil' means in this context. 'Evil' usually refers to the morally wrong actions or motives of human beings. So we say that Hitler was evil in trying to eradicate the Jews from Europe or that ethnic cleansing is an evil policy. This is *moral evil*.

But this isn't the only kind of evil the problem of evil is talking about. There is also *natural evil*, which refers to *suffering* caused by natural events and processes, e.g. the suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases, the predation of animals on each other, and so on.

In the first instance, the two types of evil are distinct. What people choose to do to each other is not usually the result of natural events. Sometimes it is: famine may drive people to stealing and killing. And natural events are not usually the result of what people choose to do. Again, sometimes they are – the results of global warming could be an example.

We need to keep both types of evil in mind when we look at responses to the problem of evil. In particular, some responses may solve the problem of moral evil, but don't answer the problem of natural evil.

THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The evidential problem of evil argues that the amount of evil, the kinds of evil, and the distribution of evil are good evidence for thinking that God does not exist. Put another way, we can grant that evil as we know it does not make it impossible that God exists. But the fact that it is possible doesn't show that it is reasonable to believe that God exists. Planets made of green cheese are logically possible; but it isn't reasonable to think they exist. The evidential problem of evil tries to show that belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good God is unreasonable, given our experience of evil.

The problem of evil more naturally arises, as a challenge to belief in God, when we consider specific examples of evil. In wars and ethnic cleansing, people kill each other in the millions, perhaps the worst example being the Holocaust of World War II. People who have already suffered terribly may suffer more, without reprieve. Innocent children suffer agonising deaths. Natural disasters, such as the tsunami of December 2004, kill hundreds of thousands of people. Who suffers and how much, whether as a result of moral evil or natural evil, is very unfair. Animal suffering is also an issue, as they are eaten alive or develop chronic debilitating illnesses.

The examples are intended as illustrations of the kind, amount or distribution of evil that an omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good God would eliminate. We might respond that without evil, we could not be free or develop important virtues, such as courage and compassion. The evidential problem accepts that. But it challenges such a response. Are *all* these evils necessary for free will and virtue? It seems that a better world is possible, one that contains free will, virtues and

some evil, but less – and less terrible – evil than exists. This is a good reason to believe that God does not exist.

PLANTINGA'S FREE WILL DEFENCE

In *God, Freedom and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga develops a response to both the logical and evidential problems of evil, which he calls the free will defence. It is possible, he argues, that the moral evil that occurs could only be eliminated by God if free will is also eliminated. He doesn't claim that this is true, but that it is possible. Furthermore, it is possible that natural evil is the result of moral evil, the result of the free will of Satan and demons. The traditional story goes that the Devil was an angel, created by God, endowed with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. So natural evil is actually a form of moral evil. Again, Plantinga does not claim this story is true, but that it is possible.

A different way of developing the thought is that it is possible that this is the best possible world. It is possible that a world which contained less evil would also be a world in which there is no free will.

The evidential problem accepts that it is possible, but is very unlikely. But, Plantinga asks, why think this? How are we to assess how probable it is that there is no better balance between good and evil? Do we really have any evidence against the claim that evil cannot be reduced? Plantinga argues that we don't. In particular, the amount of evil that exists, on its own, neither supports nor opposes the claim that a better balance of good and evil is possible. Therefore, it does not make it less likely that God exists.

Discussion

Plantinga's argument only considers the amount of evil, and in a very abstract way – the total amount in the universe. But the evidential problem also appeals to the kinds and distribution of evil. We may object that these are more difficult to dismiss as not providing evidence that a better balance of good and evil is possible.

In particular, we can consider whether free will is so good that it outweighs all the evil that exists. Even if free will is a great good, that doesn't mean we should never interfere with it. For example, if we see someone about to commit murder and do nothing about it, it is no defence to appeal to how wonderful it is that the murderer has free will. To eliminate some evils, one has to eliminate certain instances of free will. But this type of selective interference is compatible with the existence and goodness of free will; it doesn't eliminate a greater good. So God would interfere in this way.

We can challenge this. If God always interfered to prevent us from causing evil, then this is equivalent to his causing us to do good. In that case, we don't have free will at all.

We can refine the objection. God could interfere just on those occasions on which we would bring about terrible evil. Or again, God could have given us free will

without giving us the power to commit terrible evil. The point is that free will doesn't seem such a good thing that each occasion of choosing freely is a good thing. Some choices are better eliminated. Wouldn't a limited kind of free will have been better?

One response, from John Hick, in *Evil and the God of Love*, is that the value of free will depends on what one can do with it. A world in which we couldn't harm each other – either because we didn't have the power to do so or because God always interfered to stop us – would also be one in which we would have very little responsibility for each other's well-being.

Whether or not this justifies the moral evil that human beings do, we can raise the objection again regarding natural evil. Appealing to free will to justify all the suffering not caused by human beings requires us to accept the story of Satan. But is the free will of Satan so good that it outweighs all the natural evil that he has caused? Surely a world without Satan would be a better world, and a world that God could have created. When it comes to natural evil, we can argue that appeals to free will fail against the evidential problem of evil.

HICK'S 'SOUL-MAKING' THEODICY

In seeking to explain why evil exists, theodicies seek to justify it in terms of some greater good that evil enables, such as free will or the development of virtue. John Hick develops the argument that the existence of evil is necessary for us to become good people, for us to grow morally and spiritually.

Hick argues that we shouldn't think that God has finished creating human beings. We are unfinished. The first stage of our creation is given by evolutionary history, which brings into existence creatures – us – who are capable of conscious fellowship with God. The second stage of our creation is both individual and more difficult. It involves bringing each person freely towards personal, ethical, and spiritual virtues and a relationship with God. This work of perfection is individual, rather than collective. It does not entail that the world as a whole is getting better, morally speaking.

The response to the problem of evil is that such virtuous development is impossible unless there is evil to respond to and correct. For example, we can't be courageous unless there is danger, we can't be benevolent unless people have needs, we can't learn forgiveness unless people treat us wrongly, and so on. Through struggles and suffering, not only with natural disasters and illness, but also with our own motives and the actions of other people, we mature and develop spiritually. Both natural and moral evil are necessary. Defenders of the problem of evil often assume that God would seek to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Such an environment may be suitable for perfected creatures, but it is no good for helping unperfected creatures like us develop. We can understand this world, then, as a place of 'soul-making'.

God does not seek to reduce suffering. Instead, God seeks our development of virtues, and this requires suffering. Because God is good, he wants us to become good, and so he wants a world in which this is possible. It turns out that such a

world must contain evil. And so the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God.

God could have created creatures that had some version of the virtues immediately. But the virtues we achieve that result from challenges, discipline, and overcoming temptation, are 'good in a richer and more valuable sense' than the qualities of someone simply created good. In addition, Hick argues that there are some attitudes that God could not create, but must come through freedom. It is impossible to create free human beings that can be guaranteed to respond to God in authentic faith and love. Setting up human nature in this way would be tantamount to a form of manipulation, and so the attitudes would be inauthentic.

CHALLENGES FROM THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM

We may object that the argument addresses the logical problem, but hasn't yet offered a response to the amount, kind or distribution of evil. In essence, the theodicy only justifies all evil if all evil leads to spiritual growth. So we can object:

1. What about animal suffering? Animals don't grow spiritually, so how is the natural evil that they suffer justified?
2. Is it plausible that terrible evils are really necessary for our moral and spiritual growth?
3. A great deal of evil doesn't (appear to) contribute to spiritual growth. Many people suffer terribly in a way that breaks their spirit, e.g. children who never recover from being abused; others suffer at the end of their lives when there is little time to develop further; people die prematurely, before they have a chance of spiritual growth; people who need to grow spiritually don't suffer much at all; others who are already leading good and mature lives suffer a great deal.

Hick discusses each objection in turn. But we first need to understand the value of pain and its distinction from suffering. Physical pain is valuable not primarily in the information it provides when we are ill, but in the lessons we learn about how to preserve ourselves, about risks and dangers. Life without pain would not be better – it would not be life as we know it at all, and it certainly would not be a life in which we were able to develop morally and spiritually. Pain and suffering are not the same thing. We endure pain without suffering in experiences of adventure, triumph over obstacles, etc. Much of our suffering – in its self-centredness, self-pity, desire to avoid weakness and mortality – is a result of our response to pain. Our response to pain needn't be like this (which is not to say it is easy to respond differently!), and these aspects of our response can be understood as a result of our going wrong morally.

Bearing these points in mind, we can now turn to the objections.

1. Animals: We shouldn't misrepresent the experience of animals. They live in the present without fear of death or of future pains or dangers. And, as just argued, to be alive is to be subject to pain. But why, if they don't have souls to be perfected, should they exist (and so feel pain) at all? Wouldn't a world without animals and their pain be better? Hick's reply is that if we were the

only living things or clearly set apart from the rest of nature, we would lose some of our cognitive freedom. If God proved that he exists, we would not really be free to choose whether or not to develop a relationship with him. For us to develop the best form of faith and love, there must be 'epistemic distance' between us and God. So the world needs to be one which we can understand as though God did not exist. The existence of animals and our close relationship to them serves that purpose. We have an account of our origin and place in nature independent of God. This provides the justification of animals and their pain – it is a necessary part of a world in which our souls may be perfected.

2. Terrible evils: Terrible evils are terrible in contrast to more 'ordinary' evils. If we remove the terrible ones, the next-to-terrible ones will seem exceptional and we will wonder why those are permitted. If we continue to remove the worst evils, eventually we arrive at a world in which there is little evil but also very little human freedom, moral responsibility, or the development of moral and spiritual virtues.

3. Pointless evil: What about the distribution of evil, evil that seems to fail to contribute to the purpose of soul-making? We cannot rationalise such evils, says Hick. They must remain a challenge and a mystery. However, we can understand that the existence of such irrational evils is part of the process of soul-making. Imagine a world in which we knew, on every occasion when someone suffered, that it was for the best. This would leave us without deep sympathy, the kind that is evoked precisely in response to suffering that is unjust and excessive. We may add that we would need neither faith nor hope, both of which depend on uncertainty and unpredictability. But faith and hope are two central virtues, two ways in which souls grow spiritually. So for our souls to grow spiritually, it must look like the distribution and amount of evil are unfair or unjustified.

None of Hick's theodicy succeeds as a response to the problem of evil unless our souls are perfected. But we can object that this is frequently not the case. People die undeveloped, morally and spiritually immature or corrupt. Hick accepts the point. The theodicy only works if we also believe in a life after death. Indeed, we must believe in universal salvation as well: if there are wasted lives or unredeemed sufferings, he claims, then either God is not supremely good or not all-powerful.