

Midgley on human evil and free will¹

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.

Perhaps the most famous attempt to defend belief in the existence of God in the face of evil appeals to free will. Without free will, our lives would not be morally significant, because we could not choose to do what is morally good or evil. Furthermore, we would be unable to have a meaningful, personal relationship with God, because any relationship would not be willingly and freely entered into. God therefore creates us with free will. However, we do not always use our free will for good, but sometimes bring about evil. Evil is the price that must be paid for free will. This argument is known as the free will 'theodicy'.

Without going any further in this argument, it is worth thinking in more depth about how we should understand the evil done by human beings and what free will is. In this handout, we discuss Mary Midgley's account of these concepts in her book *Wickedness*.

HUMAN EVIL

There are two ways of attempting to explain the evil that human beings do which are both much too simple. The first is to refer simply to free will. Someone does something evil because they choose to do so. If they make such a choice repeatedly, this shows that they are an evil person. The second is to think that people are only caused to do evil as a result of their environment and upbringing.

Midgley argues that neither takes proper account of human nature and the complex interaction between individual human choices and society. Suppose we say that evil only arises from social causes, such as bad teaching, upbringing, or examples available to children, or from certain kinds of social organization, such as tyranny or political repression. Then how do any of these causes start? How do they spread? Suppose we explain evil just in terms of free will. Would evil develop unless we were prone to such emotions as spite, resentment, envy and cruelty? Neither explanation is complete.

To understand evil in human beings, we need to think carefully about how it works through individual psychology. Three points are central. First, evil is not aggression. Some aggression is good, e.g. in friendly competition and in the

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. 127-30, 132-8

protection of what one needs to live. And much evil is brought about through motives such as fear, greed or laziness.

Second, someone who does evil need not be thoroughly evil or think of themselves as evil. Very often, people do evil actions on the basis of intentions that they understand as good. And they can act in good ways in other contexts. Likewise, political movements that end up causing much suffering, even Nazism, are typically mixed in their motivation, and seek to do some good even if their conception of that good and how it can be brought about is very misinformed.

Third, Midgley argues that evil is the result of a failure to live as we are capable. It arises out of our natural capacities, which can give rise to both good and evil. Human beings are, by nature, concerned with power. This concern is expressed in our capacities for aggression, for defending on our territory and possessions, our competitiveness and desire to dominate others. All of these 'animal instincts' have good aspects and can contribute to a flourishing human life. But each on their own does not aim at the overall good for a person, and the conflicts between people that they give rise to need to be carefully considered and resolved.

How is evil a 'failure' then? Our positive capacities for doing good logically entail the capacities for evil. For example, if we have a capacity for courage, then we have the capacity for cowardice. If we have a capacity to help others, we have the capacity to harm them. Evil is the absence of good. In fact, in our moral thinking, the idea of the evil comes first. Virtues are needed for a good life because of the dangers of vice. It is only because human beings have certain weaknesses - to self-indulgence, to greed, to fear - that certain traits of character - temperance, justice, courage - count as virtues and need to be actively developed.

Evil is often thought of as a positive force, something that motivates a person to act. And undoubtedly it can be powerful. But its motivating power does not make it positive - cold and dark are powerful motivators, yet they are also essentially negative, an absence of heat and light. Evil involves saying 'no' to what is good, as Goethe expresses it in the speech of the devil Mephistopheles in his drama *Faust*:

The spirit I, that endlessly denies
And rightly too; for all that comes to birth
Is fit for overthrow, as nothing worth;
Wherefore the world were better sterilized;
Thus all that's here as Evil recognized
Is gain to me, and downfall, ruin, sin,
The very element I prosper in.

To argue that human beings have a 'nature' that inclines them to evil (and to good!) is not to deny that people have free will. Midgley argues that our motives concerned with power are natural, not that they are overwhelming. They don't make evil inevitable, but it is impossible to explain evil without referring to them. The fact that we are naturally inclined to aggression, say, does not mean that when someone acts aggressively, they cannot be held morally responsible. To act on one's motive is not to act involuntarily! There is an important moral difference between being hurt as a result of an accident and being hurt by someone's deliberately cruel action.

Midgley's approach connects the two types of evil with which the problem of evil is concerned. 'Natural evil' normally describes unavoidable, non-human disasters. 'Moral evil' describes deliberate evil-doing. But between the two is human nature. Human nature is natural, it is not chosen. And the natural impulses that can lead to evil cause great suffering. So moral evil has a 'natural history', a causal story about how and why it tends to occur in the species *homo sapiens*. Being aware of this connection can enrich our understanding of the problem of evil.

FREE WILL

The free will theodicy only works if it is, in fact, true that we *have* free will. But do we? And if we do, what is it?

The most important argument against free will claims that free will is incompatible with determinism. Determinism is a view about causality. In its most common form, it holds that everything that happens or occurs has a cause ('universal causation'). Our idea of causality includes the idea of *regularity*, that the same cause will operate in the same way on different occasions. This allows us to formulate laws of nature. More controversially, many philosophers want to develop the idea of regularity into the stronger claim that, given a particular cause in a particular situation, only one outcome is *possible* ('causal necessity').

For example, suppose there is water on the kitchen floor. We assume that there is a causal explanation of how the water got there, even if no one knows what it is. If the mess was not caused at all, then we would consider it a miracle. Suppose a pipe burst. So we say 'The burst pipe caused the kitchen floor to become wet'. This claim is about this one occasion. But we expect that on other occasions if a pipe burst in the kitchen, the floor would be wet. This is the idea of regularity. The same cause will lead to the same effect, and if the effect is different, then the cause must be different too. So if on another occasion, a pipe burst, but the floor remained dry, there must be something which is different between that situation and our original one. (For example, it might be that the whole house is well below freezing, so that the water in the burst pipe is and remains ice - so it stays where it is, and the floor remains dry.)

The idea of regularity can lead to the stronger thought that, given this cause - in exactly this situation - only one outcome is *possible*. In a different situation, a burst pipe might not lead to water on the floor; but in this situation, not only does the burst pipe lead to a wet floor, but it had to. For instance, it is not possible that in this situation, and any other situation exactly like it, the pipe could burst but the floor not become wet. The situation determines a unique effect. This is the idea of causal necessity.

It is worth pointing out that determinism is not an empirical discovery, something that science has proven true. We can't show that every event has a cause. It isn't an analytic truth and we can't investigate every event to establish that the event does, indeed, have a cause. However, as science has progressed, it has explained more and more events, and discovered more and more general regularities in how

the world works. Determinism is best understood as a commitment or an assumption that we make in doing science.

How does determinism threaten free will? Determinism is a completely general doctrine, which could be just as true of human beings, our choices and actions, as it is of physical objects. The argument runs something like this:

- P1. Determinism is true.
- C1. Therefore, our choices have causes. (For instance, those causes might be part of human nature, part of the external environment, our upbringing or social situation, or even previous states of the brain.)
- C2. Therefore, each choice we make has a particular set of causes and takes place in a particular situation.
- C3. Therefore, given those causes and situation, no choice is possible other than what we actually choose.
- P4. If we couldn't make any other choice, then we do not have free will.
- C4. Therefore, we don't have free will.

On the understandings of determinism and free will here, free will requires us to be able to choose and act outside or independent of causation. If our choices are caused, then they are not free.

If determinism is true and incompatible with free will, then the free will theodicy doesn't succeed. One defence of free will is to accept that free will and determinism are incompatible in this way, but to reject determinism. However, Midgley argues that 'incompatibilism' misunderstands both free will and determinism.

Determinism and fatalism

We can and should accept determinism if we understand it properly, says Midgley. Determinism says we should view events as intelligibly connected and occurring according to laws. As a result, events are predictable in principle in advance, given suitable evidence. But determinism should not be understood as claiming that events are *forced* to happen. Saying that 'only one outcome is possible' can encourage a false picture of the regularity that connects events. It can lead us mistakenly from determinism to 'fatalism'. (In a different sense of fatalism, the term means a resigned acceptance of things that one cannot change. This can be rational, e.g. accepting that one will die.)

Fatalism, as the term is being used here, is the belief that human action is useless - that whatever one does, the outcome will be the same. It is the thought that human choices and action have no influence on how things are or future events. If we think determinism is incompatible with free will, we turn determinism into fatalism. We shift our responsibility onto the laws of nature - 'There was nothing else I could do, I was made to do it, it wasn't me but the laws of nature'.

It is true that we cannot change the laws of nature, but if we understand them, we can use them. Through our actions, things become possible that would not be possible otherwise. For example, a farmer who lives by the Nile cannot change the regular flooding of his land, but he can use the flooding to his advantage. By

planning when to plant, he can grow more crops rather than having the crops destroyed. The regularities of nature enable human action. This is not fatalism, but its opposite.

The confused fatalist interpretation of determinism has appeared in various forms in Western thought. An early debate concerned God's omniscience. If God knows the future, then God knows what we will do. But - and here is a direct implication for the problem of evil - God created us, knowing that we would do evil. And so God is responsible for the evil that we do. 'God' is later replaced with various forms of scientific determinism - natural laws, evolutionary theory and human nature, history and the external social environment. In each case, the implication is drawn that we are helpless in the face of such forces (natural, evolutionary, historical or social). But, once again, Midgley argues, the fact that we cannot change some law or situation does not mean that we have lost all ability to choose how to act in response to it.

Compatibilism

The argument so far shows that Midgley does not accept that free will involves acting outside causation. So how is free will compatible with determinism?

The opposite of free will, she says, is slavery to external forces or internal constraints on our capacity to choose. Free will doesn't require omnipotence, nor is it random. We expect normal people to act in ways that stem from their life and character so far. Not to do so, to act in a way that doesn't grow from one's previous life, is a kind of psychological disorder. Even as people change, we expect them to change in ways that result from their previous motives and to preserve some form of continuity with who they already are. Free will is rational - it involves understanding and overcoming difficulties, whether they are external or psychological. To be free is to think and act in this way.

All this shows that we assume psychological regularities as well as physical ones. We should not try to defend free will by thinking that human actions are unpredictable. Without accepting that we have a nature, we would have no idea how people would be like in other cultures or epochs. We could make no general claims about people, and history and social science would be impossible. Being able to predict what someone will do is compatible with free will if the prediction rests on good reasons for acting in a certain way and/or appeals to general truths about human nature.

Someone who holds that determinism and free will are incompatible can try another line of argument. If determinism is true, then each state of someone's brain can be predicted in advance. Assuming that their thoughts and choices depend on the physical states of their brain, this means that we can predict their thoughts and choices in advance, not on the basis of their reasoning, but by using neurophysiological laws. This isn't compatible with free will.

Midgley replies that things are more complicated than this. Take the example of Pythagoras coming up with his famous theorem. Here's the problem he's thinking about: how long is the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle? From knowing the

state of his brain, could we predict his solution, that the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the two other sides? Midgley argues that

*even if we could make the physical prediction [of what brain state followed next] we would still not be able to read off the theorem from it, unless we had a complete account of the relation between brain-states and thought. But if we had that, we would already have a complete description of Pythagoras' thoughts, as well as of his brain-states. And this is what we should have to use to discover the theorem, because accounts of brain-states simply do not mention matters like triangles and hypotenuses at all. In trying to predict thought, we should have to use existing thought as our only possible starting-point. And in order to do this, we should have to drop the attempt at prediction and start instead to work out the problem for ourselves. Given all Pythagoras' data, we might even come up with his solution. But this would be quite a different feat from predicting that *he* would come up with it... In this ways, we would have become colleagues in his enterprise, instead of mere predictors. If we had stuck only to the physical data, we would have made no headway with his problem at all.*

There are two key points in this passage. First, the physical processes of the brain do not 'force' our thoughts to occur as they do, as though thoughts are only along for the ride and contribute nothing. Rather, mind and brain (if we think of them as distinct at all) are interdependent - we can predict physical states of the brain on the basis of thought and thoughts on the basis of the brain. Thinking - the process of one thought leading to another - is not an illusion. Second, when it comes to reasoning - which is where free will shows itself - we can only understand it if we move from trying to predict it to joining in with it. The creativity of Pythagoras in discovering his theorem is a creativity we all share in every decision we make, albeit usually in a lesser degree. This individual creativity isn't at odds with the general regularities discovered by science.