

GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

WEEK 8: PROBLEMS OF EVIL

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INTRODUCTION

Last week, we looked at the problem raised by the following inconsistent triad:

1. Determinism is true
2. If determinism is true, it is not the case that we sometimes act freely
3. We sometimes act freely

A structurally parallel problem is raised by the following inconsistent triad:

1. There is evil in the world
2. If there is evil in the world, God does not exist
3. God exists

EVIL is understood in a broad way to comprise both **MORAL** badness (crimes and other bad acts or traits of people) and **NATURAL** badness (natural disasters, diseases etc.)

So construed, denying (1) does not seem very promising. If we accept it (as we will in what follows), we can regard the problem that the triad raises in either of two ways.

- **ATHEISTS** will offer some argument for (2), and take the problem to show or at least strongly suggest that (3) is false: God does not exist.
- **THEISTS**, on the other hand, will accept (3) and offer a **THEODICY**: an account of the relationship between God and evil that allows us to deny (2).

We can think of theism as structurally analogous to **COMPATIBILISM** and atheism as structurally analogous to one or the other form of **INCOMPATIBILISM: HARD DETERMINISM** or **LIBERTARIANISM**.

The plan for today:

- The Logical Problem
- The Best of all Possible Worlds (or B.P.W.) Defence
- The Free Will Defence
- The Evidential Problem

THE LOGICAL PROBLEM

"Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, X, Par. 25

Hume (or, rather, Philo) is here raising a **LOGICAL** problem. He is seeking to establish the incompatibility of the existence of God with the existence of evil by means of a **DEDUCTIVE** argument from premises to which theists are committed.

J. L. Mackie's version of the argument:

1. If God exists, he is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent
2. An omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent being would eliminate any evil in the world
3. So if there is evil in the world, God does not exist

While radical theists may be happy to deny (1) here, most theists will accept it. But what is the line of thought behind (2)?

- A perfectly benevolent being would, insofar as it was able, eliminate any evil it knew about
- An omnipotent being would be able to eliminate any evil it knew about
- An omniscient being would know about any evil in the world
- So an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent being would eliminate any evil in the world

As we'll see, the main responses to this argument focus on the first two premises:

- A perfectly benevolent being would, insofar as it was able, eliminate any evil it knew about
- An omnipotent being would be able to eliminate any evil it knew about

THE B.P.W. DEFENCE

While able to eliminate it, couldn't God have a good reason for **NOT** eliminating the evil in the world?

Couldn't it be that, unless the world contained certain evils, it wouldn't contain the greatest good?

This is the central thought behind the **BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS** (or B.P.W.) defence:

1. An omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent being would create the B.P.W.
2. The B.P.W. necessarily contains evil

If these claims are both correct, Mackie is wrong to think that a perfectly benevolent being would, insofar as it is able, eliminate any evil it knew about.

Theists do not need to establish that both claims **ARE** correct, however. To respond to the logical problem, it is enough that they cannot be established to be false.

The idea behind the second claim is that certain evils are necessary for the greatest good. How is this to be understood?

One option: certain evils are **CAUSES** of the greatest good.
Thus:

- Putting in the hours in the library (an evil) causes a strong performance in your exams (a good)
- Suffering a terrible calamity (an evil) causes an increased sense of community among those affected (a good)

But if he is omnipotent, God could bring about such goods in other ways. So if this is the idea, either evil is not in fact necessary for the greatest good or God is not omnipotent.

Second option: certain evils are **CONSTITUTIVE** of the greatest good.

But this requires that evil contributes to, rather than detracts from, the overall goodness of the world. How can we make sense of this? Wouldn't a world containing an evil only be **IMPROVED** by the elimination of that evil?

Not necessarily. Arguably, the beauty of some works of art is improved by their having ugly constituent parts (dissonance and harmony; lo fi and punk aesthetics).

And for specifically moral examples, certain virtues seem to depend on the existence of evils, broadly construed: courage on fear, e.g.

Remember: all that the proponent of the B.P.W. defence needs is that it is **POSSIBLE** that the B.P.W. necessarily contains evil.

If it is possible that evil is constitutive of the greatest good, that will be enough to block the atheist's argument.

A PROBLEM

I said that all that the proponent of the B.P.W. defence needs is that it is **POSSIBLE** that the B.P.W. necessarily contains evil. But strictly speaking, what's needed is that it is possible that the B.P.W. necessarily contains the evil that **ACTUALLY EXISTS**.

But can all actual evils be coherently explained as constitutive parts of goods?

- Natural disasters, at least those that affect humans, plausibly **CAN**.
- But it's less clear that, e.g., all suffering of animals can be coherently explained this way.

THE FREE WILL DEFENCE

Need an omnipotent being be able to eliminate any evil it knew about?

Couldn't it be that an omnipotent being is **UNABLE** to eliminate the evil that is brought about by the free actions of other beings?

This is the central thought behind **FREE WILL** defences:

1. An omnipotent and perfectly benevolent being would create a world of creatures capable of free action
2. Even an omnipotent being cannot prevent evil brought about by the free actions of other beings

If both of these claims are correct, Mackie is wrong to think that an omnipotent being would be able to eliminate any evil it knew about.

Again, theists do not need to establish that both claims are correct. To respond to the logical problem, it is enough that they cannot be established to be false.

Are both claims tenable?

For the first claim to be tenable, it needn't be that the world created by an omnipotent and perfectly benevolent being would be the best possible world.

It is enough that, in containing creatures capable of free action, it is at least possible that it would be better than worlds that do not.

The second claim was that even an omnipotent being cannot prevent evil brought about by the free actions of other beings.

For this to be tenable, it must be at least possible that an omnipotent being would not be able to causally **DETERMINE** that creatures capable of free action only perform good actions.

For the second claim to be tenable, then, **LIBERTARIANISM** has to be at least possibly true.

According to Alvin Plantinga, however, something else is required in addition to this. Even if God does not causally determine our free actions, since he is omniscient, would he not **KNOW** which actions each possible free agent would make in any given circumstance?

If so, God could then decide to create only those free agents in those circumstances in which they would choose only to perform good actions.

If this is right, an omnipotent being who is also omniscient **CAN** prevent evil brought about by the free actions of other beings!

A useful distinction:

- God **STRONGLY ACTUALIZES** S's performing action X IFF he causally determines S to perform X.
- God **WEAKLY ACTUALIZES** S's performing action X IFF he creates S in circumstances in which he knew S would freely choose to perform X.

Plantinga's point is that the proponent of the free will defence needs it be at least possible that God could not have even weakly actualized the actions of creatures capable of free action. And doesn't that require that we give up God's **OMNISCIENCE?**

Plantinga thinks that the free will defence can be saved from this objection. The key thought is that, in not knowing that P, God fails to be omniscient only if it is **TRUE** that P.

For example: in not knowing that the sum of 2 and 2 is 5, God fails to be omniscient only if the sum of 2 and 2 **IS** 5.

Thus, in not knowing that a possible creature X would freely choose to perform only good actions in circumstances C, God would fail to be omniscient only if this was a fact about X that God failed to know, i.e. only if X would always choose to perform only good actions if created in circumstances C.

But, Plantinga suggests, it is at least possibly true that, for any creature X capable of free action, and any circumstances C, X would **NOT** always choose to perform only good actions if created in circumstances C.

If this is right, it is at least possibly true that God - consistent with his being omniscient - cannot know that the creatures he creates that are capable of free action will only perform good actions in the circumstances in which they are created.

So it is at least possibly true that God - consistent with his being omniscient - cannot even **WEAKLY** actualize creatures capable of free action that only perform good actions.

THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM

"Is the world, considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude that, however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference."

Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, XI, Par. 4

Here, Hume (or rather Philo) is raising an **EVIDENTIAL** problem. Even if the existence of the evil we find in the world does not conclusively show it, it nevertheless provides the basis of an **INDUCTIVE** argument for the conclusion that God does not exist.

"There may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness, *that* they are endowed with perfect malice, *that* they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, *that* they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seems to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable."

Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, XI, Par. 15

Hume's argument is an argument to the **BEST EXPLANATION**:

1. The world contains both good and evil
2. If the world contains both good and evil, the best explanation is that the world was not created by a benevolent or malevolent being
3. So the world was not created by a benevolent or malevolent being

William Rowe offers a different line of argument. It revolves around the idea that, among the evils in the world, there seems to be **POINTLESS SUFFERING**: suffering that an omnipotent and omniscient being could have prevented without thereby either preventing some greater good or permitting some greater evil.

Examples of apparently pointless suffering include the slow death of an animal from burns suffered in a forest fire (Rowe's example).

There does not seem to be any greater good that could not have been achieved without this suffering.

And there does not seem to be any greater evil that would have occurred if it had not.

Rowe concedes that examples like this might not be **GENUINE** cases of pointless suffering. But, he thinks, the number and variety of different examples constitute strong evidence that genuinely pointless suffering exists. Thus Rowe's argument:

1. The range of examples of apparently pointless suffering constitutes strong evidence that genuinely pointless suffering exists
2. Genuinely pointless suffering wouldn't exist if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent being, i.e. God
3. So strong evidence that genuinely pointless suffering exists is strong evidence that God does not exist

A RESPONSE

Can theists resist the claim that there are cases of apparently pointless suffering? Perhaps!

The following principle seems plausible:

- It appears to be the case that P only if, were it **NOT** the case that P, things would most likely have appeared differently

Theists might try to argue that, were it not the case that there is pointless suffering, things would **NOT** most likely have appeared differently.

For if the suffering in question is not in fact pointless, theists might say, (perhaps because it is necessary for some greater good,) this would not most likely be apparent to us - God's wisdom and powers being beyond our ken.

SUMMARY

The **LOGICAL** problem of evil is the problem of showing how the existence of the evil we find in the world is not logically inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent God.

The **B.P.W.** defence attempts to do this by showing that it is at least possible that the best possible world necessarily contains evil.

The **FREE WILL** defence attempts to do it by showing that it is at least possible that God is unable to eliminate the evil brought about by the actions of other free agents.

The **EVIDENTIAL** problem of evil is the problem of showing how the existence of the evil we find in the world is not strong evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent God.