

Notes On Theism and the Problem of Evil

So far, Hudson's discussions of traditional theism have consisted of attempts to analyse the concept of God, the concept of a supreme being who is worthy of worship.

In discussing the attributes of this God, the implications of these attributes have been deduced. Where these implications have seemed to present difficulties in the coherence of the concept of God, attempts were made to reasonably interpret these attributes in ways that the concept is not necessarily incoherent and, so, may have a coherent meaning.

Attempts to rationally support believing in the existence of this God were then examined. Criticisms of these arguments for the existence of God were discussed. Some of these criticisms turned out to be answerable. Other criticisms of these arguments seem to be so powerful and damaging to the arguments that Hudson does not see these arguments as providing any significant rational support for believing in God.

There is a great difference between assessing the evidence for the truth of a position and assessing evidence for the falsehood of that position. Where the position is theism, both tasks are obligatory in the Philosophy of Religion. Finding that the evidence for the truth of a position is inadequate is not the same as having evidence that the position is false. Many theists agree that the standard arguments for the existence of God are inadequate as rational supports for believing in the existence of God. They correctly point out that this result does not prove that there is no God.

Those who constructed the arguments were trying to provide strong evidence or rational grounds for believing in the existence of God. Their motive, at least, is on the side of theism. There have been many other thinkers who are not on the side of theism. They have not only criticised the standard theistic arguments but have gone on to present what they consider to be evidence that there is no God, or at least that the God of traditional theism does not exist. Hudson calls these objections to theism.

Objections to theism are of two sorts:

- 1) A priori objections. These are objections that attempt to disprove theism by means of a priori arguments. This is sometimes attempted by using standard descriptions of the essential nature of the god of theism. Given the sorts of essential attributes traditionally ascribed to God by theists, logically impossible consequences must follow. As discussed in the lecture on theism, omnipotence considered by itself as a single attribute, for example, is sometimes claimed to entail impossible consequences and, therefore, the falsehood of theism. Other kinds of a priori disproofs of theism attempt to show that when two or more essential attributes of the god of theism are considered together, impossible consequences must follow. For example, it is sometimes argued that God is both immutable and a worker of miracles, but impossible consequences follow from assuming both things. See the notes posted on incompatible properties arguments.
- 2) A posteriori objections. These are attempts at providing empirical evidence sufficient to show that theism is deeply implausible even though such evidence may not be sufficient to conclusively disprove theism. This result is often held to show that theism is far less reasonable, given such evidence, than non-theism.

The first and most common a posteriori objection to theism is known as the **problem of evil**. There is one form of the problem of evil that is similar to an attempt at an a priori disproof of theism.

Given the existence of evil, is it at all rational to believe in the God of traditional theism? It is not a question of whether it is fully and completely rational to believe in God in view of the existence of evil. It is a question of whether one who recognizes the existence of evil but still believes in God is simply irrational.

One way that the problem is presented is to maintain that asserting all of the following set of propositions involves one in a contradiction. (This is the a priori disproof version of the problem.)

1. God is omnipotent
2. God is omniscient.
3. God is morally perfect
4. Evil exists

Believing contradictions is the worst sort of irrational belief. If it could be shown that believing in God requires one to believe all four of these propositions and that it is logically contradictory to assert all four, then one would have constructed a very grave objection to theism.

#1 seems to imply that (1a) God is able to prevent evil

#2 seems to imply that (2a) God knows about the existence of evil

#3 seems to imply that (3a) God would prevent evil if he could.

Therefore, given (1a), (2a) and (3a) it seems to follow that #4 is false. Yet, can anyone seriously deny the existence of evil?

Some theists have actually tried to deny the existence of evil. Augustine argued that, since everything created by God is good, evil cannot be any positive, real characteristic. It is the lack or absence of certain positive, real characteristics such as health, knowledge, goodness, etc. No one has seriously considered this approach to solve the problem of evil because the problem can just be restated by asking how created things can be so lacking in positive qualities in a world made by God.

Other theists have tried to deny #4 by arguing that evil is not real, that what seems evil is actually good and only appears to be evil because of our ignorance. This idea is useless because ignorance and illusion themselves are evils. Why do they occur?

It is utterly implausible to anyone who has actually experienced great misfortune to maintain, to them, that evil does not exist. Yet if one accepts #4, it seems that the only way to avoid being caught in a contradiction is to deny one or more of the first three. There is no clear and obvious way to deny any of the other three, however, without posing a grave threat to Theism.

One way that theists have attempted to at least decrease the severity of the problem is to argue that God is not morally at fault for all kinds of evil. Thus, they distinguish between **Natural Evil**, evil that results from non-human processes in nature (floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, plagues and droughts) and **Moral Evil**, evil caused by human choices (e.g., pain and suffering due to such actions as political oppression, war, theft, rape, slavery, etc.).

The idea of making this distinction is that one might argue that God is not responsible for moral evil; only sinful, perverse people are to blame for that, whereas natural evil cannot be shown to be incompatible with God's goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, etc. We will consider some of the standard attempts to show that natural evil is not incompatible with God's Nature.

(1) Natural Evil results from the operations of the laws of nature. Unless the natural processes of the universe were orderly, governed by steady laws, living things, including people could not exist. Even if people could somehow exist in a disorderly, chaotic world, it would be impossible for them to figure it out, to know anything about how it operates and act on rational plans for their own good. The operation of steady laws of nature is therefore a good thing and is consistent with the nature of a good God. In a lawfully ordered natural world where principles such as those of gravity, inertia, nuclear fission and fusion, the conservation of energy, expansion and contraction from heating and cooling, the generation of new living individuals based on genetic inheritance, etc. operate constantly everywhere, it is inevitable that living things will sometimes be harmed by natural forces and events.

It was argued in a previous chapter that omnipotence cannot be reasonably interpreted to mean that God can do absolutely anything. Rather, (according to this argument) it should be taken to mean that God can do all things that are possible. Perhaps it is impossible even for an omnipotent being to create a world in which there are orderly lawful natural processes which are beneficial to living creatures but which could never allow suffering on the part of living beings.

But the opponents of theism may counter this defense by asserting that, even if some evil is unavoidable in any possible world, it is by no means clear that God could not have created a world better than this one with substantially less evil in it, as opposed to the actual world in which evil is so pervasive and devastating. This first defense is, therefore, of very limited effectiveness.

(2) Good is impossible, or impossible to appreciate without Evil.

A world in which there was no evil would be a world in which it was impossible to know what good is, since things can be known only by contrast with their opposites. A world in which it is possible to know the good is better than one in which it is impossible to know the good. Only if there is evil can the good be known. Therefore, it is better that the world contain evil than if it contained no evil.

The obvious reply to this defense is that only a tiny amount of evil would be necessary in order to provide a contrast. It seems that there is far more evil than necessary in order to make knowledge of the good possible. Also, it is not obvious why some goods could not be known even if there were no contrasting evils. Why would there have to be disease, for example, in order for us to know and understand what health is? Why could human beings not have been created with certain genes that cause us to spontaneously understand and appreciate the difference between good and evil even though no evils actually exist in the world.

Similarly, if the existence of good requires the existence of evil, only a tiny amount of evil would be required to make the existence of good possible. If one says that God can only create a certain amount of good by creating exactly the same amount of evil as well, is this not an admission that God is not able to do everything that is possible? Would this then mean that if the world were to contain slightly more good than evil God would have lost control over his creation? Would the world be worse off if there were slightly more good than evil in it? For reasons like these, it is very difficult to justify the idea that the world must contain exactly the amount of evil that it does contain. Why would it be impossible for a supremely powerful God to order the world in such a way that it is significantly calmer and more stable than it is? Why couldn't there be fewer earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, plagues, hurricanes, tornadoes, forest fires, or creatures that need to eat other animals in order to survive?

Evil is Punishment for Human sin or A Warning Not To Sin

It is extremely difficult to explain the disproportionate distribution of suffering under this assumption. If evil is intended as a warning, it is a totally ineffective warning.

The World is Better Off With some Evil In It.

Without suffering and hardship, there would be no courage, compassion or temperance. The struggle against evil builds moral character. A world with such qualities is better than any world in which they did not exist. The existence of natural evils like disease or harsh weather is justified as a precondition of these goods.

REPLY: In many cases, suffering is so severe that it does the opposite of building moral character. It simply wears people down and crushes them; sometimes makes them bitter, dejected, cynical or insane. How do a relatively small number of cases of developing good moral character justify the actual amount of apparently pointless, overwhelming suffering? The suffering of animals as well as humans ought to be considered in this debate. It is hard to see how God could be omnipotent but be unable to at least diminish the amount of suffering in the world or arrange for it to be somewhat differently distributed.

The Free Will Defense

It is impossible even for an omnipotent being to make human beings such that they are free but always do right thing and are incapable of doing wrong. Human beings would not be essentially different from robots. “Free Robot” is a contradiction in terms just as “round square” is a contradiction in terms. It is better that the world contain beings capable of rationality, creativity and virtue than that it contain only robots programmed so that they are incapable of doing bad things. Free will is a necessary condition of rationality, creativity and virtue. So, it is better that the universe contains free creatures than no free creatures, no matter what else may be the case in the world with no free creatures and no matter what else may be the case in the world that contains free creatures. What is also inevitable in a universe containing free creatures is that they are capable of doing bad things as well as good things. Unless a creature’s choice is unrestrained and in no way coerced, it is not free. God, therefore, had to allow the world to contain moral evil in order to provide for the possibility of a very great good -- free will.

Objections to the Free Will Defense

1) God could have created persons who always freely choose to do what is good. If God made persons such that they sometimes freely do what is good and this creative act of God’s does not negate the freedom of those particular human actions, then God could have made persons such that they always freely choose to do what is good.

Reply to Objection 1:

The objection assumes that it is possible to change one thing in the scheme of creation without affecting many others. To create beings who always do what is right they would have to be made such that they never give in to temptation to do

wrong. That, in turn, would require that they be made such they never desire what they should not have. So, many aspects of human nature would have to be drastically altered to assure that they always do right and never do wrong; to assure that condition, they would not even be susceptible to desires, temptations and fears. Such a being would not properly be called virtuous or good. Only those who are susceptible to desires, temptations and fears but who overcome them and control them and do the right thing can properly be called virtuous or good. A creature with a nature that excluded any such susceptibilities would not be human at all. Only a world with free, morally fallible human beings can contain moral virtue and good actions.

Rebuttal to Reply: This argument seems to imply that a person of saintly character who has superb self-control and thus never does evil or even wants to do something he/she knows to be wrong could not have free will. According to traditional theistic teaching, such persons have actually existed. Moreover, this same traditional theism teaches that God did make creatures who have free will but who never do evil, i.e. angels. The story is that only a small number of angels have ever rebelled against God. If one says that human beings of saintly character gained their saintly qualities because of a free choice of their own will, we must ask: what it was in their character that made them able to make this free choice? Whatever it was, at least a few people have it, even if most people do not. Why couldn't God have made all human beings like these few? Why couldn't God have made all human beings much more nearly like angels than they are? One need not suppose that angels or saints are incapable of feeling desires, temptations and fears. But they must have some qualities that makes them far more capable of controlling desires and fears and resisting temptation than ordinary human beings are. Why did most people have be created so morally weak by comparison with saints and angels in order to give them free will? Obviously, free will exists in saintly human beings and in most angels. Isn't this moral weakness of human beings itself one of the evils that theism has to explain?

Hudson's Solution to the Problem of Evil

This solution is a version of the claim that good cannot exist without evil. The main premise that Hudson argues for is

1) All the value that ever occurs in the universe occurs in the conscious experience of persons.

Hudson argues for this claim as a part of a strategy for refuting what he believes is an unstated fifth proposition in the allegedly inconsistent tetrad,

5) God could not under any circumstances be morally justified in allowing evil to exist.

The free will defense is one way of attempting to refute (5). But Hudson thinks that the free will defense and other theistic attempts to deal with the problem of evil do not adequately answer the question of whether the good that is made possible by allowing the existence of evil is sufficient to justify the cost in suffering.

Hudson defines persons as conscious, reasoning, knowing, feeling, valuing beings. He argues that if there were no persons, there would be no intelligible distinction between good and evil. Nothing is good or bad in itself except the experiences of persons.

The existence of persons is, therefore, a necessary condition for the existence of any sort of good. This point, he says, explains why the free will defense and the argument justifying the existence of natural evil are plausible arguments.

An orderly world governed by natural law and including moral freedom are both necessary conditions for the existence of all value in the world. God, he argues, can only create persons by creating circumstances that allow for evil. Hence, God is justified in allowing evil to exist because that is the only way to allow for any good. This argument depends on his earlier conclusions about the meanings of omnipotence and omniscience. Some things are impossible even for an omnipotent, omniscient being.

Hudson admits that this argument, even if sound, does not by itself answer the question of whether the amount and kind of good that the existence of persons makes possible is sufficient to justify the amount of evil that exists. Even if sound, the argument may not show anything more than that the allegedly inconsistent tetrad may not necessarily be inconsistent. He believes that the arguments justifying the existence of evil may show that the tetrad has not been conclusively proved to be inconsistent. That is not enough to establish the truth of theism. At most, it supports a claim that the problem of evil has not been shown to refute theism and, Hudson thinks, it may provide some part of a defense against attempts to show that believing in God is irrational.

