

The problem of evil through the eyes of moral theory

[Environment](#), [Ecology](#)



Deliberating on the 'problem' of evil involves discussing its theodicy, the aim of which may be characterized in the celebrated writer John Milton's words as the attempt to "justify the ways of God to men." That is, a theodicy endeavors to vindicate the justice or goodness of God in the face of the existence of evil found in the world, through reasonable explanation(s) of why God allows evil to exist among his creation (Griffin 1976). For it to qualify as reasonable, such explanation must conform to (a) a commonsensical world view, e. g. there exists other people in the world; (b) widely accepted scientific and historical views, e. g. Plate Tectonics theory and the theory of evolution; and (c) plausible moral principles, e. g. punishment in general needs to be significantly proportional to the offense committed (Griffin, 1976).

For Richard Swinburne (1987, 143) in his contribution to theodicy, 'an omnipotent being can prevent any evil he chooses, but I deny that a perfectly good being will always try to do so.' That is, a perfectly good being such as a God who is claimed to be both omnipotent and omniscient, has the right to allow evil to occur as such action brings about some greater good.

He expounds on several moral views, such as the most basic good of all – the satisfaction of desire, and above all, pleasure, which he considers 'a good thing' (Swinburne, 1987). However, for Swinburne (1987), the satisfaction of certain desires is not good if this is done for things which are bad in themselves, as pleasure no longer becomes good where the belief needed to sustain it is false.

His reasoning follows that God has reason to bring forth into existence creatures with desires for good states of affairs which are satisfied, as desires in themselves are good, except when they are desires for what is bad. If God wants to make creatures sensitive to what is good He will allow them to have desires which are permanently frustrated.

It follows that God will not give man endless pain, failure and loss in order to allow one to show proper compassion and grief, but he ' may well give us some pain, failure... in order to allow us to be involved with each other in ways and levels we could not otherwise have' (Swinburne, 1987, 145). Good action derives its goodness not merely from intention but from its effects. Conversely, an unsuccessful action aimed at something good is also good for the agent, which is better if done freely or not being fully caused. Thus, it is good for the agent to have free choice as an autonomous ' mini-creator' (Swinburne 1987) not totally beholden to the mercy of forces in the universe.

The choice of ' forwarding the good' becomes a lot better if the agent has free choice between good and evil, and not merely between alternate goods. Free choice of action only comes in choosing between two actions the agent regards as equally good, or between two actions which he desires to do equally, or between one he desires to do more and one he believes is better to do (Swinburne, 1998). God cannot give us the great good of the possibility of intentional, efficacious, free action involving a choice between good and evil without at the same time providing the natural probability of evil which he will not prevent so that the freedom he grants us may truly be efficacious

freedom. Thus, the “ free will defense” remains a central core theory of theodicy.

In addition, a world where agents can only benefit but not harm each other is one wherein they have only a limited responsibility for each other, and in this sense God would not have given much because he would have then refused to share that responsibility with us. Even more so, it is a blessing for a person if his suffering makes possible the good for others of having the free choice of hurting or harming him, and if the actual suffering would make possible the good for others of feeling compassion for him and choosing to show or not show sympathy, or through providing knowledge for others, i. e. ‘ blessed is the man or woman whose life is of use’ (Swinburne, 1998).

Various evils and the possibility of their existence, including both moral (the harm we do to each other or negligently allow to occur) and natural evils (animal and human suffering) are thus deemed logically necessary for the attainment of good states. In general, the claim is that we need a similar amount of evil if we are to have the similar amount of good by way of satisfaction of desire, significant choice and serious beneficiary action.

Furthermore, God does not inflict endless suffering for there is a limit in time and intensity to the suffering of any individual, i. e. the length of human life.

From the perspective of eternity, the evils of the world occur narrowly in terms of number and duration, and more importantly, God allows them to occur for the sake of the great goods they make possible (Swinburne, 1998).

Getting the evils of this world into the right perspective involves lengthy

long-term and long-distance reflection – things outside of life, e. g. cause and effects, makes a greater difference to the value of that life if one does not arbitrarily confine those things near to life in space and time.

Given all these, is such a theodicy adequate to account for the existence of evil in this world? Swinburne (1978, 1987, 1991, and 1998) does raise some valid points and offer convincing arguments yet the researcher is of the opinion that in its entirety, traditional moral theory and this particular theodicy by their lonesome cannot stand alone and fully account for the problem of evil. Various objections could still be raised against this theodicy, such as questioning the intelligibility/empirical adequacy of the argument's underlying notions - i. e. of free will.

Others such as Tooley (1980) and Rowe (1996) propose that just as we have a duty to curtail another's exercise of free will when one is aware of its use to inflict suffering on innocents, God as well has a duty of a similar nature. Furthermore, it provides brilliant insights but still an inadequate account for the existence of natural evil and its ensuing logical arguments and evidential problem, i. e. the problem of determining whether and (if so) to what extent the existence of evil would constitute evidence against the existence of God.

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