

Phil 3303 Phil Religion
Problem of Evil¹

Defense and Theodicy

1. Definition of defense:

Establishes that a given formulation of the argument against God from the problem of evil fails; defensive strategies are designed to show that evidential arguments against God on the basis of evil are unsuccessful in establishing that theism is improbable, unlikely, or implausible.

2. Definition of theodicy:

A more positive task of offering credible reasons to think that theism makes plausible sense of suffering and evil. They attempt to justify the ways of God to man by showing how or why God allows evil.

3. Theodicy as unnecessary or impossible:

For reformed epistemologists who hold that God is a properly basic belief and who are able to offer a successful defense against objections to that belief, say on the basis of evil, then a positive theodicy is unnecessary.

For those who believe that God is wholly other and that an immeasurable gap exists between God's infinite mind and the finite human mind so that we cannot know God's reasons for permitting evil, then theodicy would be impossible.

If theodicies are in fact impossible, then the only task left for theists is to offer a defense and show that arguments against God on the basis of evil fail.

4. Evil is a punishment for wrong-doing, the theodicy of Job's comforters.

- God punishes sinners with suffering.
- Job is suffering.
- Therefore, Job is a sinner

Response:

1. Job insisted on his innocence, to which the book of Job also testifies.

¹ Summarized from Michael Peterson, et. al. *Reason and Religious Belief*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford, 2003), pp. 137ff.

2. A more sophisticated view of the world, advocated by Job himself, is that the benefits and burdens of life are not equitably distributed and certainly not based in every case on merit or demerit.
 3. People must have a purer motive for serving God and pursuing righteous than merely to earn a reward or avoid punishment.
 4. This kind of theodicy cannot account for the suffering of innocents such as infants who die unexpectedly or tragically, or explain why complete families are destroyed in auto accidents, etc.
5. This is the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz)
- God is all-powerful and can create any possible universe.
 - Being perfect, God would want to create the best possible universe.
 - Thus, this universe as God's creation is, with all its evils, the best possible universe.

Response:

1. Perhaps the notion of a best possible world is as incoherent as the idea of the highest possible integer. Just as there is no highest possible integer, so there is no best possible world. (?)
 2. If our world is always and everywhere the best of all possible worlds, then the world is not capable of improvement, and in fact, shouldn't be. But this is counter intuitive and contrary to our best moral sentiments.
 3. Why, if God is really good, would He even choose to create a world at all, if it had to have this much suffering? A morally good God would not create this world at all, even if it was the best possible.
6. The ultimate harmony solution to the problem of evil: all is well with the world from God's perspective.
- Since God's knowledge of the world is complete (omniscience), and human knowledge of the world is partial, only the divine estimate about the state of things is valid. Only God sees how the totality of events constitutes a favorable arrangement; we puny humans cannot.
 - Response: This frustrates and eliminates the value of all human judgments since they are always made from a limited perspective.
 - Since God's morality is higher than human morality, and since His ways are higher than our ways, His evaluation of evil, even its most heinous forms, is different from our evaluation of evil; what is unacceptable to us is

in fact acceptable to Him since His moral perspective is superior to our own.

- Response: if this so, then all our moral judgments may be mistaken, and we would not even be able to say what God's higher morality was since our moral concepts are so flawed and inferior.
- There cannot be such a serious discontinuity between God's morality and ours, else the result be moral agnosticism or skepticism. We have no way of knowing what true morality really is.
- See quote to this end from J. S. Mill, p. 141.

7. The ultimate harmony solution to the problem of evil: all is well that ends well.

- All evils will eventually result in greater goods, either in temporal life or in the afterlife.

Response:

1. How do such future goods, in time or eternity, justify the present occurrence of such evils? Does the fact that an orphaned child becomes a great humanitarian in a 3rd world country justify the fact that her parents were brutally murdered for no reason whatsoever? Can the bliss of heaven justify the excruciating pain of a cancer patient?

2. Can we justify evil because a good can *outweigh* an evil, *compensate* for an evil, or *justify* an evil?

3. Is it adequate to be able to say that even though we don't know how future goods make up for present evils, God does? Is that an adequate solution?

8. Natural law theodicy: that's the way the cosmos works.

- As part of his creative program, God brought about a natural order.
- In the natural order, objects behave according to physical laws.
- The operation of physical laws makes possible a number of benefits (feelings of pleasure, pain that warns, etc).
- A stable natural order that operates according to physical laws supports a moral order in which rational deliberation and choice can take place and in which free choices can be carried out in action.
- But the possibility of natural evil is also inherent in a natural physical system: water that quenches thirst also can drown; fire that warms can burn; neurons that transmit pleasure can also transmit unbearable pain.

Response:

1. God could reduce the number of natural evils by miraculous intervention or by creating a different natural system.

Response to the response:

1. God, as a perfect creator, would not have created a world that had to be interfered with often, if at all.
2. A natural system runs on its own accord, and would be abrogated by repeated divine interference.

9. Free will theodicy

- It is possible that God would create significantly free creatures who would choose moral evil. God did indeed create free creatures who went wrong.
- God created significantly free creatures who might willfully commit evil, because such a world is more valuable than a world of automatons.
- Significant free will is an important reality that generates the grandeur as well as the peril of being human.

Response:

1. God could have created free creatures with stronger dispositions to do what is right. Response: God imparted the strongest possible disposition to do what is right without interfering with genuine freedom.