Asbury Theological Seminary

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE NATURE OF GOD: A STUDY OF THEODICY

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By:
Benjamin D. Kickert
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Few people would argue against the existence of evil in the world, yet for theists who believe in an omnipotent, entirely good God, the presence of such evil serves as a particularly difficult conundrum. Throughout the ages people have sought to reconcile these concepts. This paper examines historic approaches to the problem of evil in an attempt to sketch an explanation that is logically consistent with the author's experiences and beliefs about God.

The first task in addressing the problem of evil is to establish definitions. Following the lead of others, this paper will not seek to defend the existence of evil, but only define it as events, attributes, or circumstances that are inherently negative or destructive.[1] That is to say, evil exists where the accepted positive social order is disrupted. Within this, two broad categories emerge: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil includes, "wrongful and hurtful acts as well as the bad character traits of free human being" while natural evil "covers the physical pain and suffering that result from either impersonal forces or human actions."[2]

Next, the elements that contribute to the paradox of God and evil must be defined. Three broad maxims, which cannot stand without reconciliation, need to be addressed. These are: God is entirely good; God is omnipotent; There is unnecessary evil in the world. Nearly every attempt to address the problem of evil in light of the existence of God does so by modifying one of these maxims. The classic dilemma is how can a loving, entirely good God, who has the power to change the world allow for unnecessary evil. By looking at the ways in which various people have sought to reconcile this as well as flaws in their arguments, we will be better able to develop a framework of our own.

Historic Approaches to God and Evil

Far and away the most common approach to this question is to wrestle with the final maxim: there is unnecessary evil in the world. This is understandable since it does not require a

[1] Michael Peterson et al., *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. 3rd Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 129.

[2] Ibid.

person to alter their understanding of God. Gottfried Leibniz argued the world we live in is "the best of all possible worlds."[3] Essentially he argues evil is necessary to have an optimum world. This argument fails to address the question of creation: if this is best world possible, why create it at all. Another approach is to question whether what we deem as evil is in fact evil. Those who argue this point tend to point to the divergent nature of God and humanity; they argue since God's understanding of the world is so much greater than our own, we should not question the motives of God, nor the makeup of the world.[4] This may be true, but it is not helpful in constructing a logical understanding of God and evil since it effectively dodges the question at hand. A similar approach to understanding evil looks at the end result: evil is justified if it leads to greater good.[5] For most people, life experiences and a keen eye on history shows this approach to be flawed. It is distasteful to argue the Holocaust brought about a greater good that outweighs the over 11 million people killed in the Holocaust or to argue the 230,000 deaths from the 2004 tsunami (or on a grander scale, the 2-4 million killed by the 1931 floods in China) made the world a better place. Some have argued natural evil is unavoidable because it is inherent in a natural system.[6] However, if one argues for the omnipotence of God, they must believe God could create a natural system without hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes.

Two historic theodicies deserve to be explored: the Augustinian and the Irenaen approach. Saint Augustine believed evil to be the lack of good. Furthermore, he argues God created the universe as good, but when Adam sinned it introduced evil into the world. Therefore the fall of humanity in Genesis brought about the fall of the natural world.[7] The thrust of Augustine's argument is that evil and good (God) do not stand as eternal opponents, but rather

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[3] Peterson, 140.

[4] Ibid., 141.

[5] Ibid., 142.

[6] Ibid., 142-3.

[7] Augustine. Excerpt from *Augustine: Confession and Enchiridion*. In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson, William Husker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, 251-255. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

evil is a flaw in the original plan.[8] The Irenaen approach is technically a general framework, but people like John Hick have developed it into a full theodicy. Hick contends Adam and Eve were created as innocent (not pure) and as a part of their moral maturation they encountered evil. Evil then serves as a necessary element for the development of humanity. That is to say, evil must be overcome and wrestled with in order for a person to be whole. This leads to a state of creation wherein humanity can genuinely have faith in God.[9] Both of these historic theodicies contend God created the world in a perfect state and evil then entered the world. Augustine argues it came through Adam while Iraeneus, and Hick through him, argue it was essential for the progression of creation.

Alvin Plantinga's offers a different approach in what is commonly referred to as the "Free Will Defense."[10] Put simply, he argues evil is possible because God has created a people with free will. He is not trying to justify or explain evil as much as he is offering an explanation that logically allows for God to coexist with evil. In the end, Plantinga explanation adequately covers the issue of moral evil. After all, if humans are truly free, we must have the freedom to commit atrocities like the Holocaust and have the freedom to make choices that lead to untimely deaths. One weakness of this argument comes when considering natural evil. Plantinga argues two points: some natural evil is caused / heightened by moral evil; and, it is possible non-human entities contribute to natural evil through their freewill.[11] The first argument is valid and one must concede the blurred line between natural and moral evil (especially in cases such as birth defects, disease, etc.); however, the second argument, while fulfilling the author's intent, only allows for the possibility of non-human influence – it is too flimsy to adequately explain natural

[8] Peterson, 144.

[9] John Hick, Excerpt from *Encountering Evil*. In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, 301-314. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[10] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 29-49.

[11] Ibid., 57-59.

evil. Additionally, Plantinga's Free Will Defense requires one to believe in free will. If that point is rejected, the entire argument falls apart.[12]

Thus far each of the approaches to answering the question of the coexistence of God and evil have chosen to address the issue of evil in the world rather than explore the nature of God. Two examples of approaches that attempt a different strategy are found in process theodicy and protest theodicy. Process theology encompasses an entirely different understanding of God and the world. While many unique aspects of the philosophy could be highlighted, the most important for this paper concerns understanding the character of God. Process theologians reject the idea that God is omnipotent in the way the word is typically defined. Instead, God's divine powers lie in persuasion rather than coercion. Essentially "God can try to lure creatures toward the good and away from evil, but he cannot force them to choose the good."[13] In terms of developing a theodicy, process theology shifts the thinking of the nature of God and thus reconciles the problem. If God is not all-powerful, it cannot be expected that God rid the world of evil. As with all approaches thus far this one too has its problems. First, it certainly skirts the edge of orthodoxy by reexamining the power of God. Second, it does not address the source of evil.

Wherein process theodicy challenges the absolute power of God, a protest theodicy is willing to question the goodness of God. Daniel L. Migiliore explains this approach as such: "Assuming with the Bible a very strong view of the sovereignty of God, the tendency of this theodicy is to question the total goodness of God. There is simply too much tragedy, injustice, and murder in history. We must be honest to our experience and to God and thus quarrel with the all-too familiar refrain that God is love."[14] Not all protest theodicies reject the goodness of

[12] I understand the author is not seeking to develop a full theodicy here, but rather offer logical possibilities to counter the claim God and evil cannot coexist. However, many elements of his defense are important in the development of the framework put forth in this paper.

[13] Peterson 136.

[14] Daniel L Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 128-129.

God outright, but they do all express a painful tension between God's actions and what humanity understands as goodness. Like the process theodicy before, protest theodicies answers the question, but raises other issues in light of orthodox thinking.

In light of the aforementioned theodicies and defenses, a different approach has been proposed by people like Kenneth Surin and can be called "practical theodicy."[15] Rather than spend time debating the reason evil exists, Surin and others contend more needs to be done to change the evil in the world. Basically, practical theodicy argues other attempts to reconcile the existence of God and the existence of evil provide a justification for doing nothing. Instead of working through the philosophy of evil, Christians should focus on praxis and the removal of evil in the world. While Surin's points are valid, they overlook the legitimate quest to understand the ways of God. N.T. Wright does an excellent job of emphasizing the importance of being discontent with evil without completely rejecting the need to understand evil. This tension serves as an appropriate compromise.[16]

Developing a Personal Framework

The limited survey provided above reveals a wide diversity between various approaches to the question of God and evil. Each focuses on a different aspect of the problem and brings certain presuppositions. It becomes obvious no single theodicy or defense of evil will ever be unanimously accepted. Instead, it must be personal and answer the specific questions an individual brings; it must also fit within the experiences and beliefs of that person. The following approach to God and evil is not intended to be universal, but rather answers the question of how God and evil can coexist in light of the current beliefs and life experiences of this author.

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[15] See Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil. Signposts in Theology*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

[16] N. T. Wright, "Lecture: Evil is Still a Four-Letter Word: The New Problem of Evil," Allelon, http://archives.allelon.org/articles/article.cfm?id=152&page=1 (accessed December 2, 2008).

Earlier we discussed three broad maxims that must be reconciled: God is all-powerful; God is good; and unnecessary evil exists in the world. For Christians it is easiest to approach this problem by examining the third maxim because it does not require a person to alter their views of God. So then, we will begin our process there. In addressing evil, the distinction between moral evil and natural evil is essential. If one believes God has given humanity free will then Plantinga's Free Will Defense is especially helpful for answering the question of moral evil; it is possible to rest the responsibility of even the most heinous situations on the shoulders of humankind. For Hitler to be truly free he must have been able to commit the atrocities of the Holocaust. While some may argue God should have intervened, it can convincingly be argued to do so would violate free will. Thus, in Plantinga's defense a great percentage of evil is accounted for: everything from drug overdoses and drunk drivers to exploitation and genocide. As noted earlier, Plantinga's Free Will Defense does not adequately explain natural evil; therefore, the framework provided here will seek to reconcile this concept in particular.

Of the theodicies mentioned above, several attempt to provide an answer to explain the presence of natural evil. Unfortunately, explanations that argue for the appropriateness or necessity of evil are unconvincing. While God's ways are certainly higher than humanity's ways, it cannot be conceded that in all cases a greater good comes from natural evil or that evil is an essential part of maturation. If God is truly all-powerful, there is no reason to think he needs evil to assist in maturing humanity or in bringing about a greater good. Furthermore, theodicies that rely on the biblical narrative of the Fall neglect to account for the mythical genre of the primeval prologue.[17] That is not to say the myth of the fall cannot hold truth even if it is not historical. However, even if one were to argue the Augustinian point that humanity's sin (even apart from the Adamic Fall) brings about natural evil, there are still issues. Most importantly, while this identifies a source of blame, it does not identify the source of causation. Practically

[17] See Tremper Longmam III, *How to Read Genesis*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005). This book provides an excellent introduction into the genre of Genesis and argues for a formative text that is not primarily historical.

speaking, sin does not cause tsunamis (birth defects maybe, but not natural disasters). Therefore, even with the explanation, God is still ultimately responsible for the presence of natural evil. If one were to argue a non-human power was responsible (either independently or because of humanity's fall) for natural evil, they must also conclude God either does not have power over these entities, or is allowing it to exist.

In developing a personal understanding of evil in the world Plantinga's argument that free will causes moral evil serves as cornerstone, but natural evil is still unexplained by the approaches explored above. The only other option is to begin discussion of the nature of God. In the face of natural evil God is either incapable of removing it or unwilling. Put another way, God is either not omnipotent as is typically described, or is not entirely good. Surely the more disturbing of these options is a belief in a God that is all-powerful, but not entirely good as protest theodicy contends. There are certainly biblical examples to support this view. Take for instance the genocide God orders as Israel enters the Promised Land.[18] If the holocaust often leads people to adopt a protest theodicy, it is all the more difficult to grapple with the Bible's own accounts of ethnic cleansing. Even in the New Testament, a person could argue a God who sends people to Hell could not be inherently good.[19] The weight of this discussion cannot be overlooked. If a person rejects the basic tenant that God is good, there is no longer a reason to worship, or respond to God – except for self-preservation. While a case could certainly be made for a God that is not good, one wonders why a person would choose this explanation over atheism. If satisfactory explanations do not lie in an understanding of the goodness of god or the necessity of evil, perhaps an answer can be found by examining the power of God.

While process theology entails a much larger conversation about the nature of God, for our purposes, we will focus on the assertion that God is not omnipotent in the historic

[18] See Deuteronomy 7:1-2.

[19] I reject the concept of Hell altogether so this point is moot; however, a much longer discussion than is allowable for this paper would be required.

understanding of the word.[20] As noted earlier, this option pushes the edges of orthodoxy even to the point of negating the opening lines of the Apostles Creed; however, in light of the options explored, if evil cannot be explained in light of the nature of God, the existence of God must then be questioned. We must either revise our understanding of the divine or rejecting the concept altogether. As we shall see, a theology centered on a God of goodness and love who does not act coercively actually provides a framework for understanding the universe that not only explains the presence of evil, but also provides a driving narrative to live by.

Defining the actions of God is not an easy task. Many examples of God's interaction in history are defined by the Bible, which blurs the line between myth and history.[21] Likewise, modern day examples such as miracles are subjective at best. Many have chosen to take a deistic approach to understanding God, and while that approach may go to far, this paper contends God is only active in a limited way. For this author, personal experience has revealed a God who is not overtly active in creation, but relies on a chosen people to bring about the *telos* of the world. Put another way, God's activity in creation always comes through individuals and groups that have chosen to embody his will. This is seen practically in the prayers of people. When we pray for comfort, it comes through the words and a touch of fellow people. When we pray for assistance in devastated areas, it comes through people willing to go to help. When we pray for the salvation of another, it comes through conversations with believers. If we affirm free will, it is hard to imagine God has the power to "send" someone, unless that sending is seen as the will of God, which is ultimately optional. The goal of this paper is not to provide an explanation that fits within orthodoxy, but instead to provide an explanation that fits within the author's experience. As such, the explanation from process theodicy that claims God is not all-powerful

[20] For a more in depth discussion see John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

[21] The issue of historic reliability of Scripture lies outside the breadth of this paper. While I do believe the Bible details the work of God in the midst of humanity, I cannot in any definitive way argue the acts of God described in scripture are historical accounts of God's action in creation.

not only explains the presence of evil, but also affirms this author's current belief of limited deism.[22]

Thus far, this paper has concluded natural evil exists in the world not because God does not desire to change it, but because God does not have the power to change it. This leaves one major question unanswered: From whence does this evil come? Natural evil is a part of the created universe. If God created the universe, God must have created the natural evil. Instead of affirming this conclusion, another explanation is possible: God did not create the universe. Once again, this skirts the edge of orthodoxy, but provides a consistent and favorable view of God. The scope of this paper only allows this idea to be briefly sketched. Instead of arguing God created the universe, let's assume God and the universe are both eternal. Classic theology does not attempt to answer the question "Who created God?" and is instead comfortable assuming God exists apart from a creator. It is the contention of this paper that the universe falls into a similar category – it is without creator. The universe is not inherently good or evil, but possesses elements of both (or neither).[23] Within this universe, God is constantly seeking to bring about a redeemed state.

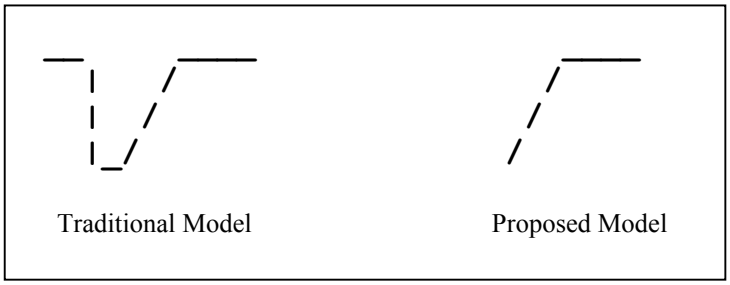
Theologians from many walks understand the trajectory of redemptive history to start with perfection, include a fall, and move to redemption with a final goal of perfection re-attained.[24] This model is appealing because it shows God's intent is a perfect world, it promises things are always getting better and it shows the final destination as being perfect. However, the issue of the fall remains a problem. Is it necessary, especially if we reject the historical nature of the Adamic Fall? If we believe the universe has always existed in a less than perfect state, we can still affirm God's desire is a perfect world, we can still affirm things are an upward

[22] Once again, this is a topic too broad to be covered in a paper of this length. Simply put, I believe God's primary action in the world came in the form of the incarnation and resurrection. After that, I find little evidence of God's active involvement beyond God's power of persuasion.

[23] This is in contrast with a strong dualistic view of Good and Evil constantly being opposed.

[24] For a discussion of this see Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), esp. 92-136.

trajectory, and we can affirm a final perfected destination. This view is not only more consistent (after all, the movement here would be entirely towards improvement); it portrays a God whose actions are always positive. We no longer have to struggle with the troublesome question of why God would allow natural evil to enter the world with the Fall of humanity. Instead, we logically conclude this natural evil always existed in the universe that God did not create. Essentially, we have redrawn the trajectory of redemptive history. See figure below:



The framework provided above, which depicts God as entirely good, but not omnipotent and rejects the classic idea that God created the universe, requires a drastic shift in thinking for many Christians. Admittedly, none of the options explored are ideal. One would like to keep an orthodox view of God; however, in light of natural evil that is no longer possible for this author. Rather than assume God is powerful but not good, it is the conclusion of this paper that God is good but not all-powerful. This portrayal of a persistent, patient, God of love seems to be the best option available. With this in mind, the conclusions of practical theologians like Surin and Wright carry additional weight. If it is God's will that all things be redeemed and reconciled and those who seek God's will are the primary instruments of that work, Christians in particular need to be on the forefront of solving societal and global issues. Natural evil is inherent in the universe and moral evil is the result of human free will. While nothing can be done concerning natural evil, either from divine action or human action, the reduction and movement towards elimination of moral evil should be the ultimate goal of all those who seek to be persuaded by God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

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