

The argument from evil

Let's begin with a point that we looked at last week – the thought that one kind of problem of suffering is about *whether* or not to believe in God. The encounter with suffering might cause someone to question their belief in God, or make belief in God completely implausible for others. In reality, much of the philosophical discussion of suffering tends to be preoccupied with this particular problem. Often, much of the discussion of what is normally known as “the problem of evil” tends to be a response to what is known as “the argument from evil”, which is an argument against the existence of God. As I have already indicated, this is far from being the only kind of problem associated with suffering. Not everyone who believes in God, and who finds the suffering they encounter to be confusing or problematic, finds themselves seriously doubting the existence of God; they are more likely to ask why God permits suffering, or how we should understand the relationship between God and suffering, rather than: in view of suffering, does God exist? But it is nevertheless an important question for many people, and important to consider. It's particularly important to consider because of the way that for many people it counts as the most significant obstacle to belief in God.

So I'd like to briefly look at a couple of ways in which an “argument from evil” might work, and then explore how someone who believes in God might respond.

The logical argument from evil

Firstly, then, we find that sometimes philosophers talk as if the problem that suffering poses for religious belief is primarily a *logical* one. That is, that it's a case of conceptual incompatibility between a number of propositions.

The argument might go something like this:

- 1 Normally theists agree that part of what we mean by the word “God” is an all-powerful being, who is perfectly good. So then, it seems that the statement “there is a God” is roughly equivalent to the statement “there exists an all-powerful, perfectly good being”.
- 2 But if God was all-powerful, God would have the power to prevent evil. And if God was perfectly good, God would have the desire to prevent evil wherever possible.
- 3 So it seems that if there was an all-powerful, perfectly good God, there would be nothing bad in existence at all, because God's good desire to prevent evil would be accompanied by God's power to do so.
- 4 But we know as a matter of fact that there are plenty of bad things in existence! There is naturally occurring suffering, both mental and physical, and there is moral evil, and the suffering that is caused by moral evil, and there is the fact that both kinds of suffering are not distributed in anything like a fair way, so that many of those who do the worst evil and cause the most suffering are themselves relatively free from suffering.
- 5 So since these kinds of evil do obviously exist, it seems to follow that we can be quite certain that there is no all-powerful, perfectly good God.

This argument is trying to say that there is a logical incoherence in claiming that there is an all-powerful, perfectly good being AND that evil exists. Or, even if we don't insist that these three

beliefs are logically inconsistent, the point could simply be that, at first sight, they seem inconsistent, and theists have some serious work to do to show that they're not inconsistent.

Let's briefly explore a few points about this kind of argument. One version of the argument – in modern philosophy, the one put forward by J L Mackie, tries to show that the existence of anything bad *at all* is inconsistent with an all-powerful, perfectly good being. If God was supremely good, and the all-powerful cause of all that exists, there would be nothing bad in existence. In contemporary philosophy, very few people defend this version of the argument. It is normally assumed, now, that the argument in this form doesn't work – that is, it doesn't show us that belief in God is *logically* incoherent. One reason for this is that it seems that it would not be possible for God to create significantly free creatures, like us, who never freely did wrong. If God is to create free creatures, God cannot also determine what those free creatures do – and this is not because God is not able to do so, but because it is not coherent. So, just as the fact that God can't create a square circle is not a denial of omnipotence, we can also say that the fact that God can't create a world containing free creatures without the possibility of evil, is also not a denial of omnipotence. If that is the case, then we would need to think about whether a perfectly good, all powerful being would have reasons to create free beings, despite the possibility that those free beings would do tremendous evil, and cause tremendous suffering. That is not straightforwardly a logical question, because to answer it, we have to use moral principles, assumptions and intuitions; and these themselves are highly debatable and contentious.

But a perhaps more important problem with this kind of argument is this way of putting things fails altogether to get at the way that the problem of evil emerges in human experience: it is not the existence of anything bad at all that causes people to doubt the existence of God; it is particular things – particularly awful, destructive experience and actions; or the particular sense of unfairness of some experiences and actions. If someone claims that their mild toothache is a reason for thinking that there can be no God, then my guess is that we would not feel like they were very morally serious. But someone who seriously doubts that there can be a good God in the light of the beheading of unarmed, innocent people in a terrorist atrocity, or in the light of the sustained, fearful misery and degradation of children living in a city under military bombardment, then the situation seems very different.

So very often, arguments that begin with the idea that there is some conceptual incompatibility, such as the one pointed out just a moment ago, tend to develop into discussions that involve consideration of our moral intuitions.

So perhaps we need to think more about our moral intuitions, in order to see why 'the argument from evil' can seem so powerful. James Sterba is an American philosopher, and was for many years a member of a religious order, but recently became an atheist in the course of researching the problem of evil. He concluded that there could be no moral justification for God to permit certain kinds of horrendous suffering. So his 'logical argument from evil' is based on a specific set of bad things: not just toothache, or hangovers. There could be no moral justification for an all-powerful creator to permit *these* kinds of evils for the sake of any greater good; the only reason that humans are sometimes – under very, very specific conditions – justified in permitting horrific suffering is because of our distinctly human limitations. But these limitations cannot possibly apply to an all-powerful creator. So the argument says: horrific suffering exists; a perfectly good, all-powerful God would not permit such suffering; there is no perfectly good, all-powerful God.

And since, he believes, the only kind of God it makes any sense to believe in is an all-powerful creator (that is, all other conceptions of God are just mythological projections), the existence of such sufferings shows us that atheism is true.

Attributes of God

So if it is these attributes of God – omnipotence, perfect goodness – that provoke this kind of argument, it might be worth briefly recount why these attributes have been taken to be non-negotiable for theists. Why can't someone who believes in God just respond to the argument I've just outlined by saying that there are some things that God just can't do?

God being all-powerful seems to follow from the idea of creation, or from the idea of creation that was taken to be orthodox from around the 2nd century onwards: creation from nothing. If all that exists depends, in its entirety, on God for its existence, then even if someone wants to say that God has freely limited God's own power in certain ways, so as to allow the possibility of freedom, for example, then it would still be true in some sense that everything that exists exists because, and only because, it is willed by God. So, even if one agrees that God cannot both create a free being – let's say, Hitler – and determine what that free being will do in all cases, it would still be true that Hitler exists because of God. The doctrine of creation, as it's normally put forward, implies that everything that exists is dependent on God to exactly the same degree: God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible, and without God, nothing that does exist could exist.

Without this belief in an all-powerful creator, the problem of evil either looks very very different, or just disappears. If God is thought to have fashioned the world out of pre-existent stuff of some kind, then perhaps, for example, some kind of inherent limitation in reality means that the created world can never be perfect, or completely free of suffering. Or, perhaps there is only so much that God can do, with the materials that he is working with. Or, if we say that God is only one spiritual power, or principle, among many, then perhaps God is not responsible for all that occurs; perhaps some things can be blamed on the devil, or mischievous spirits, etc.; perhaps some events are just the result of chance, and nothing else. But if 'the earth is the Lords, and everything in it'; if God calls everything—including angelic beings, space, time, laws of nature, etc.—into being, not out of a pre-existent something, but out of nothing, then the problem of evil emerges in a much more serious way: creation seems to imply omnipotence, which seems to imply ultimate responsibility for creation. Hitler might be free, but God is ultimately responsible for the existence of that free being, and everything else. And, crucially, the doctrine of creation implies that everything is dependent on God at *all times*. This is easy to forget, and it is easy to imagine that 'creation' is the name of the moment at the beginning of everything. But the traditional doctrine of creation includes the thought that all existing things continually depend upon God.

Similarly, if God's goodness is the ultimate source and foundation of all earthly goodness, then it makes sense to say that God is perfectly good. And it is only when we think of God as perfectly good that we have the problem of evil: if God is morally ambiguous, dark and light, sometimes loving and sometimes malevolent, then existence of a morally ambiguous, troubling but beautiful world is not so surprising. There is a good deal more to say about how the idea of God's goodness is involved in these arguments, but we will defer that until a later session. For now it's enough to note that, again, it is natural for theists who believe in creation to face a difficulty in accounting for anything that seems to undermine or deform the goodness of the world. If there is, ultimately, one cause of all

things, and if that cause of everything is also the source of all goodness, there it is difficult to see why there would ever arise any evil at all.

J L Mackie, whose famous essay 'Evil and omnipotence' has been so influential, makes some very useful points about how theists negotiate these difficulties, even if the argument as he put it doesn't work in the way that he intended. Mackie emphasises the idea that normally part of what we mean by calling a person good is that they are opposed to evil. So, he says, a being who is wholly good always eliminates evil as far as they can. So we encounter the logical problem of evil when we say that that wholly good being is also all-powerful, because it seems that that an all-powerful being *would* eliminate evil completely, and there would never be no evil at all.

Mackie goes on to say that most theistic responses to the argument involve modifying one side of the dilemma. Either we say that the goodness of God is a goodness that is somehow compatible with God's allowing various kinds of evils, or we try to show that God is not able to eliminate evil completely, despite being all-powerful. But in reality, these responses end up backing away from central aspects of belief in God without facing up to what they are doing. That is, they tend to end up admitting that God is not really good in the way that we normally use the word, or they admit that God's power is limited in some really quite significant ways, ways that don't make any sense if we think of God as creator.

For example, sometimes theistic philosophers have tried to show that in human life, we *do* find that sometimes suffering is a necessary means to some good, or that something painful and unpleasant is intimately connected to something pleasurable and desirable. We very often feel that it is justifiable to allow, or even cause, some suffering, if we have in mind a goal that justifies this.

And if this is the case, it might be thought, then, that the same could be true of God: perhaps God allows suffering in view of some much higher goal: God allows suffering as a necessary means to a desirable end. Mackie's objection to this view is simple: it works for limited human beings, but it doesn't work for God. Humans are limited by what is possible given certain natural laws, or the circumstances that they happen to be in: if a surgeon wants to operate, they are going to have to use a knife; and if they happen to have no anaesthetic, they will have to cause terrible pain. Sometimes Christians philosophers say something like this: that God can be thought of as being in a situated rather like the surgeon: desiring certain goods for human beings, but constrained for some reason to use unpleasant means to bring them about. Perhaps the only way for people to learn humility is through suffering (as with Samson, perhaps); perhaps the only way for people to learn generosity is through scarcity; perhaps the only way to give humans freedom in general is to open the door to moral evil, and the suffering it causes.

But Mackie thinks that part of what it *means* to say that God is omnipotent is that God all the things that could limit what is possible for human beings, and constrained their options, are created *by* God. And how can God be said to be constrained by things that God has willed? So if we think that God is constrained to use certain means to achieve certain aims, like a dentist, or a surgeon, then really it is as if we are saying that God is not all-powerful after all. So in the end, says Mackie, the only options are to back away from one aspect of traditional belief in God, or else hold these beliefs inconsistently – thinking of God as being all-powerful when considering the creation, or miracles, or life after death; then switching to thinking of God as constrained and limited when trying to make sense of why suffering is permitted. This, he thinks, is what Christians do, for the most part.

Now Christian philosophers have written many hundreds of thousands of words in response to this kind of logical argument. The argument that is usually seen as being most successful against this

logical argument is what is known as ‘the free will defence’, which I will consider in the second part of this audio.

Evidence and explanation

Another important form that the argument from evil takes is known as the ‘evidential argument’. This is to say that, on balance, it does not seem likely, on the basis of what we see around us, that there exists a perfectly good, all powerful God.

One very well-known version of this “evidential” argument was put forward by David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume was interrogating the idea that we might be able to infer the existence of God by observing the natural world. People sometimes try to show that God must exist by pointing out the incredible complexity and order that we observe in the natural world. Not only is something like, say blood-clotting mind-bogglingly complex, but its complexity is ordered towards a particular purpose – preventing mammals from bleeding to death. Very often, theists claim that the existence of God helps to explain these kinds of features – without belief in God, we have no good explanation of why the world is the way it is: full of complex things ordered towards a goal.

Hume tried to show that this line of thinking doesn’t really work, once we start looking at the suffering in the world honestly. One of his main points in the *Dialogues* is that the reality is that the world as we experience it is very ambiguous: it contains pleasure *and* pain, goodness *and* wickedness, misery *and* fulfilment. Blood clotting *is* complicated, and extraordinary, but it is *also* the cause of heart-attacks, and strokes.

But theists say that they believe in a God who is good and *only* good. And so Hume suggests that a God who is good and only good cannot be a good way of explaining the existence of a world that contains good and evil, pain and pleasure, etc. So, Hume is arguing, if there *are* good reasons to believe in this kind of God, they can’t just be based on observation of the natural world as it is. If our aim is to explain why the world is the way it is, then whatever does this job should explain the suffering and pain, as well as the beauty and complexity. So Hume is saying that suffering rules out our being able to treat belief in God as if it is the best explanation of the world around us.

We could also express a similar line of argument in the following way:

1. A good explanation makes the facts as we observe them less surprising, not more;
2. If theism is true, the existence of some kinds of suffering *is extremely* surprising;
3. If atheism is true, the existence of this suffering would *not* be surprising at all;
4. Therefore, all things being equal, theism is not a good explanation of the world as it is.

Now again, philosophers of religion have written endless responses to these kinds of arguments, and we’re not going to be able to settle the matter here. One particularly striking example of an argument like this is helpful to consider, though, made by William Rowe. He begins with an argument like this:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. (Rowe 1996: 2)

Rowe points out that no-one is in a position to be able to prove that 1. Is true. That is, we cannot prove, of any particular case of suffering, that God could have prevented it without thereby losing some greater good, or permitting something worse. But we can certainly judge it to be very likely indeed. He gives a very striking example to make this point, and the example is very deliberately chosen to shift the debate away from the human realm, and the thorny question of how we should understand the relationship between an eternal God and human freedom.

'Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.'

The question is: does it seem likely that there is some good to which this suffering is necessarily linked, that could not be reached in any other way? Does it seem likely that there is some greater evil, that was avoided by means of the fawns suffering? Well, it's not impossible. It just seems extremely unlikely. And it's even more unlikely that *every* similar instance of suffering is somehow linked in that way to a greater good. He writes:

'It seems quite unlikely that all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad; and even more unlikely, should they somehow all be so related, than an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods (or prevented some of those evils) without permitting the instances of intense suffering that are supposedly related to them. In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that *none* of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. It seems then that although we cannot *prove* that (1) is true, it is, nevertheless, altogether *rational* to believe that (1) is true, that (1) is a rational belief.'

So in other words: it seems overwhelmingly likely that the world *does* contain gratuitous suffering; therefore there is probably no God; we have good reason, on the basis of our experience of the world, to be atheists even if we cannot prove it.

In a very interesting final section of his paper, Rowe goes onto explain what he takes to be the most fruitful theist response to his argument, and this helps us to see something important. Rowe says that in practice, many theists are likely to follow the argument that he has outlined, but in reverse. Theists tend to start with the premise that there is an all-powerful, perfectly good God; theists might have a range of reasons for holding this to be true: certain philosophical arguments that are unconnected to the problem of evil; forceful religious experience of their own, etc; reports of encounters with God, revelation, etc. These, considered separately, might well give a person reasons to believe in God. So what is the theist supposed to do with the appearance of apparently gratuitous suffering? Rowe says that they might reason like this: they might agree with the atheist that God would not permit the existence of any gratuitous suffering (irredeemable suffering without purpose or use); and conclude that therefore, despite appearances to the contrary, there are no such sufferings. In other words, theists are quite likely to reach the conclusion expressed by Julian of

Norwich: that despite all appearances to the contrary, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. Rowe still thinks that atheism is the more rationally justified, but his point is that it is quite possible for a person to see the 'moving part' in the argument as the existence of gratuitous evils, not the existence of God.

'Deliver us from evil'

As I've said, there are vast numbers of attempts by Christian philosophers to answer these kinds of arguments. But I think that Rowe's final point helps us to see an important point about how belief in God works for many people.

We can ask: why *do* people believe in God? It would probably be a mistake to expect to find one single answer. But one important part of the picture for many people *is* the existence of evil, or the experience of suffering – the thought that the world is not the way it should be. The idea that the world, and especially the people who live in, seem to be broken, or lost, or wounded in some fundamental way, this thought seems to be integral to Christianity. And therefore, part of what it means to believe in God is to believe in the hope of deliverance, or salvation: God is the one who saves. In other words, there's a good case to say that many Christians believe in God *because* of suffering, not despite it.

So one response to the kinds of arguments that we've just looked at is to admit that there really is a fundamental tension within Christian belief. On the one hand, God is thought of as the ground and source of all that exists. The Dominican philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe made this point by saying that the thing that the existence of God is supposed to explain is the existence of anything at all – the fact that there is something, rather than nothing. But on the other hand, for Christians, God's will is very obviously thought—and *felt*—to be at odds with the way things are. This is obvious in the Lord's prayer: the prayer builds from let 'your kingdom come' to 'deliver us from evil'. Or, in another one of the earliest Christian prayers, which expresses a sense of yearning for that which is something new and different and *not* yet seen: "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus." This sense of yearning does not seem to be something added on to Christian belief – rather it seems to be right at the heart of what Christian belief *is*. Belief in God, for Christians, is inseparable from the sense that there is something to come, and from the prayer to be delivered from evil.

This is one way in which we sometimes find a clash between philosophical arguments *about* belief and belief as it is actually lived. The belief as it is actually lived may well contain a very real tension. On the one hand, God is worshipped as creator, as the source of all that exists. On the other hand, God is prayed to as liberator, saviour, deliverer. If we expect that our beliefs should be completely free of such tensions, then, of course, this is a problem. But this tension seems to be very deeply embedded within the Christian worldview, so deeply that one wonders whether one would even have Christian belief at all if this tension was removed. Certainly, some theologians have thought not: the 20th century Jesuit theologian and philosopher Karl Rahner suggested that the mystery of suffering is inseparably tied to the mystery of God. In other words, it might be that the tension between belief in the goodness and power of God, and the existence of terrible suffering is a permanent fixture within Christian life and thinking.

This might mean that the deeper question is about whether the prospect of living with the kinds of tension that are embedded within Christian belief makes sense to us, or not. Or, to put the point a different way: whether it makes more sense to live with the problem of evil, than without it. But it seems to me that dealing with *that* question might require more than philosophical argument.