

## UNIT 4

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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“What’s strange, what would be marvelous, is not that God should really exist; the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man.” (Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

## 1. Introduction

In the last two units, we have considered famous proofs for the existence of God. We will now consider the famous proof (or alleged proof) against the existence of God, the so-called proof from evil. The whole discussion surrounding this proof is often called the problem of evil.

This discussion might be somewhat treacherous for some of you. The proof itself is certainly less difficult to understand than St. Anselm’s or St. Thomas’ proofs. Some of the possible problems arise from the fact that, more likely than not, you have already been exposed to the problem and to some commonsense answers to the problem. Most of the commonsense answers to the problem of evil do not live up to the standards of philosophical discussion, however. This is why you should approach the discussion with an open mind. You will need to understand how the atheist’s proof works as well as what the responses to it are.

I sometimes hear the reaction from students that the problem of evil is not a problem at all. But this is just wrong. In saying this, those students are taking a certain stand *on the problem*. It is important, however, to understand *that* there is (and *why* there is) a *prima facie* problem of evil. This has never been denied by any serious philosopher or theologian – and they have been debating the issue for centuries.

I should also remind you that there is no party line here. This is a very difficult discussion and it is certainly not the case that there is an agreed-on resolution of the problem. In presenting some of the arguments, I try to raise questions that may help you in figuring out your own stance on the problems.

## 2. The Assumption of Religious Rationalism

I have already mentioned this in an earlier unit but it will be useful to remind ourselves that, in all our discussions, we are simply assuming that religious rationalism is true. In other words, we are assuming that it is possible to use reason and rational discourse to debate at least some religious matters.

This is the stance that has been adopted by a lot of theologians (one of the first most famous proponents was St. Thomas Aquinas) and it is a stance that is the presupposition of the proofs for the existence of God as well as of problem of evil, which is supposed to be a proof against the existence of God. Neither proofs for nor against the existence of God make any sense unless you are a religious rationalist and believe that it is *possible* to use reason (so also proofs) to inquire into religious matters.

You should be aware that we need to make this assumption for the purposes of learning about the problem of evil. You should also be aware that there are serious philosophers and theologians (fideists) who deny the assumption, who think that faith is something separate from

and in this sense incompatible with reason (arational rather than irrational, as Kierkegaard would say).

You will also see that making the assumption of religious rationalism puts some constraints on the debate. There are some responses to the problem of evil that turn out to be illegitimate in view of that assumption.

### 3. The Argument from Evil

The first formulation of the argument from evil was put forward by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341BC-270BC). The problem was also called the Epicurean paradox. Epicurus argued thus:

God either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot, or can but does not want to, or neither wishes to nor can, or both wants to and can. If he wants to and cannot, he is weak – and this does not apply to god. If he can but does not want to, then he is spiteful – which is equally foreign to god’s nature. If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful and so not a god. If he wants to and can, which is the only thing fitting for a god, where then do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them? (*The Epicurus Reader*, translated and edited by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, Hackett Publishing, 1994, p. 97)

The argument from evil has acquired many formulations. All of them rely on the fact that the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient being is incompatible with the existence of evil. The following formulation of the argument comes from a paper by Richard Swinburne<sup>1</sup> and it is particularly nice because it brings out exactly why the existence of such a being is alleged to be incompatible with the existence of evil.

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. An omnipotent being would have the power to eliminate all evil and would eliminate it if only he both knew how and wanted to do so.                    | Premise       |
| 2. An omniscient being would know how to eliminate all evil, and would eliminate it if only he both had the power to do so and wanted to do it.           | Premise       |
| 3. An omnibenevolent being would want for there to be no evil, and would eliminate all evil if only he both had the power to do so and knew how to do it. | Premise       |
| 4. Evil exists.   | Premise       |
| 5. God is an omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent being.   | Premise       |
| 6. If an omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent being existed, it would eliminate all evil.   | (1), (2), (3) |
| 7. If God existed, evil would not exist.  | (5), (6)      |
| 8. So, God does not exist.  | (7), (4)      |

It is important for you to see that *the argument is valid*, even if you do not believe that the conclusion is true! Recall that validity is a logical property of arguments: an argument is valid just in case the conclusion follows from the premises. Another way of putting it is: *if* you accept all

<sup>1</sup> “The Problem of Evil”, reprinted in *The Canon and Its Critics*, edited by T.M. Furman, M. Avila (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2000).

the premises, you *must* accept the conclusion. It follows if an argument is valid then it is rational to believe that its conclusion is false *if and only if* one believes that at least one of the premises is false. This is indeed how theists defend themselves – by trying to argue against some of the premises in the argument.

Let us first see that the argument is valid. Steps 1-5 are essentially the premises of the argument. They appear plausible on the first sight, though as we will see theists *do* (justifiably) challenge some of them. (As you will also see, the debate is often quite complex.)

Step 6. “If an omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent being existed, it would eliminate all evil.” Since an omnipotent being would have the power to eliminate all evil and would eliminate it if only he both knew how and wanted to do so, an omniscient being would know how to eliminate all evil and would eliminate it if only he both had the power to do so and wanted to do it, and an omnibenevolent being would want for there to be no evil and would eliminate all evil if only he both had the power to do so and knew how to do it, then an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient being would surely eliminate all evil. The only reason why an omnipotent being would not eliminate all evil is that it might not know how to (but an omnipotent and omniscient being *will* know how to) or it might not want to (but an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being *will* want to). The only reason why an omniscient being would not eliminate all evil is that it might not be able to (but an omniscient and omnipotent being *will* be able to) or it might not want to (but an omniscient and omnibenevolent being *will* want to). Finally, the only reason why an omnibenevolent being would not eliminate all evil is that it might not be able to (but an omnibenevolent and omnipotent being *will* be able to) or it might not know how to (but an omnibenevolent and omniscient being *will* know how to). So, an omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent being would eliminate all evil if it only exists.

Step 7. “If God existed, evil would not exist.” – Since God is an omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being, He would eliminate all evil if He exists. Thus if God existed then evil would not exist.

Step 8. “God does not exist” – If we agree with the claim that if God existed then evil would not exist, then given that evil exists, we have no choice but to agree that God does not exist (unless of course, we can find some reasons not to accept one of the premises!).

So far, we have just shown that the argument as stated is valid – someone who accepts all the premises must accept the conclusion. For the argument to be a successful proof that God exists, it must be the case not only that the argument is valid, but that its premises are true or at the very least that the premises are acceptable not only by the atheists but also by the theists. And there surely are serious disputes about that.

There are three main strategies that have been used in countering the atheist attack:

Strategy 1: Deny that God is all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing.

Strategy 2: Deny the existence of evil

Strategy 3: Deny that an omnibenevolent being would want for there to be no evil, and would eliminate all evil if only he both had the power to do so and knew how to do it.

Strategy 1 and 2 are not open to a Judeo-Christian theist. Strategy 1 implies the rejection of the Judeo-Christian idea of God. Strategy 2 is incompatible with the realism of the Bible (though St. Augustine has provided a metaphysical way out by arguing that evil does not “positively” exist – it is merely the privation of good). We will focus on pursuing the last strategy.

## 4. The Concept of Evil

First, we need to clarify the concept of evil a little. You should understand why evil is best understood as human suffering for the purposes of the debate between the theist and the atheist (§4.1) and you should know how evil is categorized (§4.2)

### 4.1. Evil as Suffering

Philosophers writing on the problem of evil have come to something of an agreement – at least for the purposes of this discussion – that we should think about evil as human suffering. Whenever someone suffers (experiences pain whether physical or mental), there is evil in the world. And indeed this is what the atheist *is* worried about. The atheist is worried about the omnibenevolent and omnipotent being allowing people to suffer so much.

There are at least two other candidates for what evil is but they are far inferior ways to understand evil in this debate.

One of the candidates is the concept of evil as it appears when we talk about people being *evil* or *vicious*. Note, however, that this is clearly not the concept at stake here in the discussion. What the atheist is worried about is not just that God would allow some people to become evil, the atheist is worried about possibly *good* people doing evil to others (e.g. an otherwise *good* person becomes so furious on the spur of the moment when she discovers her husband with her best friend being unfaithful to her, that she seriously cuts his arm causing it to be partially paralyzed) as well as, of course, evil happening to people whether caused by unintentional actions of others (e.g. again a good person might accidentally triple on the street, pushing another person in front of him and causing her to break a leg) or by natural events (think about the death, devastation and suffering that Katerina brought).

The concept of evil that is at stake in this debate is synonymous with the concept of human suffering. It is independent of the question whether anyone is evil. Clearly, there is evil in the world in the sense that people suffer. And most certainly there would be evil in the world (in the sense that people suffer) even if nobody was evil (vicious).

The other candidate for the concept of evil is the concept of sin. To commit evil is to commit sin, on this understanding of what evil is. But this understanding of evil only pushes the matter further to inquiring what sin is. Moreover, the concept of sin has itself religious meaning and the atheist is worried about something “closer” to his experience.

Frequently (sometimes this happens when people try to understand evil as sin), one might wonder whether there will be differences of opinion as to what counts as evil, especially throughout cultures. When this is admitted, we often get bogged into the discussion of cultural relativism, which is a philosophical discussion in its own right (we will get to it in Unit 9). We certainly do want to avoid engaging simultaneously in two philosophical discussions.

But note that when we understand evil as human suffering, the question of cultural relativism does not even arise. Whenever someone suffers (experience pain whether physical or mental) that person suffers and the question what culture the person belongs to is irrelevant. The fact that the concept of evil as suffering avoids being entangled in the relativism debate is a definite advantage.

A common misunderstanding is that we should conclude from all this that the concept of evil as human suffering is an atheist concept. This is not the case. It is rather a concept that has been worked out as kind of common-ground concept. Both the theist and the atheist can agree that evil involves at least this much - human suffering.

## **4.2. Moral and Natural Evil**

The major criterion for classifying evil is according to the source of the evil, whether it is inflicted by humans (moral evil) or by nature (natural evil). When people kill, hit, shout at each other, the sufferings thus caused are moral evils. When people suffer as a result of the workings of nature (hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, etc.) their suffering is natural evil.

## **5. Preliminary Responses**

Let us begin by considering some preliminary responses to the problem of evil before we consider the two major responses to the problem: the free-will defense (§6) and the soul-making defense (§7). Some of these responses are more successful than others, which, for various reasons, are unsuccessful despite appearances to the contrary. All of these responses, however, lack the depth of the two main responses just mentioned.

### **5.1. Being Evil and Inflicting Evil**

The theist might respond that the fact that one allows or inflicts evil on another person does not necessary mean that one is evil. Parents may cause the suffering of their children for good reasons (as a form of just punishment). They inflict evil (cause suffering) but this does not mean that they are evil. In fact, it may to the contrary mean that they are good (the punishment may have been necessary for a good upbringing of the children). This point throws doubt on the truth of premise 3:

3. An omnibenevolent being would want for there to be no evil, and would eliminate all evil if only he both had the power to do so and knew how to do it.

The atheist might rejoin here that while this point is certainly well taken, there is simply too much undeserved and unnecessary suffering in the world for this to be a good response.

### **5.2. The Contrast Argument**

Theists sometimes argue that God could not (or should not?) have created a world without evil because good cannot exist without evil. Evil is a necessary counterpart to good.

The atheist has a powerful (which is not to say “ultimate”) response to this argument, which essentially shows that insofar as we have reasons for believing that evil must be there as a contrast to good, we mean by it something else than we think and do not justify the existence of evil, but only our knowledge of evil. Here is the atheist response in detail:

The contrast argument could be given an ontological or an epistemological reading.

- (E) We could not know good without knowing evil.
- (O) Good could not exist without evil.

The first claim is about our *knowledge* of evil (and good), the second claim is about the *existence* of evil (and good).

Think about why we are tempted to advance the contrast argument. What are our reasons for it? If you are tempted to say things like “We could not know good if we there were no evil” then such claims support (E), for you are concerned with how you would know that something is good if you did not know that something is evil. It is in fact difficult to imagine other reasons here that would specifically justify the ontological claim (O).

If our reasons for advancing the contrast argument are epistemological, then the atheist will show us that there is a possible world where (E) we could know evil and good but where there would be no evil, where there would be only good. If God existed, he would have created such a world; since there is evil in our world, God does not exist.

What is this mysterious world where we know good and evil, but there is only good? Well, the atheist claims that there are two ways for us to know evil and good. One is that there actually be evil and good (such is the case in our world). But in this better world that the atheist imagines, instead of allowing for the actual existence of evils, God could have arranged things in such a way that evils would exist only in the minds of human beings (in dreams, nightmares, day-dreams, hallucinations, perhaps literature). All the evil there would be would be *fictitious*, none would exist actually. This would allow us to acquire the *knowledge* of what is good and evil without the evil actually being there.

So, the atheist concludes, if God existed, he would have created this better world without actual evil but where evil is accessible only to our minds. Since our world contains actual evil, God does not exist.

- ☯ Are you convinced by this argument? In evaluating the atheist’s objection to the contrast argument, you should be as concrete as you can about what such a world where evil is only imagined and does not exist would be like. It has been argued that such a world would involve deception. How? Could the atheist argue that even if deception is wrong, it will be justified in this instance since so much is at stake? Or would the deception just have to be too great?

### 5.3. The Best-Possible World Response

One of the more famous responses to the problem of evil derives from a rationalist German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). I should add that Leibniz had a very versatile mind. Aside from being a philosopher, he was also a famous mathematician who, among other things, invented the calculus independently of Isaac Newton.

Leibniz response to the problem of evil derives from a general metaphysical picture he proposed. On his view, God conceived in his mind many possible worlds and created the best, the most perfect, the most harmonious world among them. God created the best possible world – a better world is simply impossible. All the alleged imperfections (including suffering) are in fact either necessary in the grand scheme of things. A world that lacked such alleged imperfections (including suffering) would be either less perfect than our actual world or impossible.

There are lots of thoughts here that acquire a more profound meaning in terms of Leibniz's metaphysics, but some of his thoughts reverberate also in our more ordinary ways of thinking about the problem of evil, which is why it is useful to consider this response in our introduction to the philosophical treatment of the problem of evil.

The atheists have charged back at Leibniz in at least two ways. Some got involved in discussions challenging Leibniz's conception. For it might seem really strange that the suffering caused by the mosquito that bit me last night is necessary for the harmony of the world. But if it is not then we can imagine a better world – just like ours except that the mosquito did not bite me but some furry animal, for example. And of course, once one exception is let it, one can continue down this path to more serious suffering. (Leibniz for one would not be moved and would assert that the mosquito bite was indeed necessary for the grand harmony.)

The second challenge that the atheists put forward against Leibniz's picture is best put thus. If indeed God had a choice to create any of the possible worlds and it turned out – as God reviewed them one by one – that ours was the best among them, then surely an omnibenevolent God would simply refrain from creating any world.

☯ How might the theist respond here? Is there a way of using St. Anselm's Principle to help the theist?

#### 5.4. "Satan" Response

One common response on the part of the theist is to argued like this: It is true that there is evil in the world. But this does not contradict the existence of an all-good, all-mighty, all-knowing God for evil is all Satan's doing. It is Satan, not God, who is responsible for it.

This is a poor response, however. Surely Satan is powerful but he is not as powerful as God.<sup>2</sup> But if so, then God could surely stop Satan from creating the evil in the world, and He could intervene with Satan's evil ways if He only wished. Since God does not stop Satan – and since God is more powerful than Satan – evil is God's ultimate responsibility.

#### 5.5. Who Are We to Know

One sort of response to the problem of evil goes something like this: "Why is there evil? We cannot know. God is perfect has an infinite mind, while we are limited in our intellectual capacities. Thus the problem is ill put."

Well, yes and no. The problem of evil is certainly based on the assumption that one accepts religious rationalism. Recall that since Medieval times, there were two great stances on the question of whether it was possible to use reason in religious matters. The fideists believed that it was impossible to use reason, that faith was spiritual not rational (remember that "not rational" does not mean "irrational" – it rather means "beyond the grasp of reason") and that reason was therefore not to be used in religion at all, that it was something of a travesty to

<sup>2</sup> There was indeed a Medieval heresy, according to which there were two supreme beings, both omnipotent and omniscient, but God was omnibenevolent whereas Satan was omnimalevolent (all-evil). This was a remainder of some of the pagan beliefs, which frequently involved the existence of various gods (some good, some bad) who would fight with one another for the control of the world.

engage in arguing for or against the existence of God. Fideism was challenged by the so-called religious rationalists, who believed that it is possible to use reason in trying to understand religious truths. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that there is no contradiction between faith and reason since, after all, they are both faculties given to us by God. He therefore thought that we should pursue both theology (which starts with truths revealed by faith) and philosophy (which starts with the truths revealed by reason). He hoped that theologians and philosophers will reach common ground.

The debate between the fideists and religious rationalists is important in view of the question that we are asking because it is only if one assumes religious rationalism that the debate about the problem of evil (or the debate about the success of the proofs for the existence of God, for that matter) is possible. If you are a fideist, the discussion is out of place – it is a travesty because you are trying to use reason in religious matters. This is – why for the purposes of this discussion and the paper – we must assume religious rationalism, even if you might think, at the end, that it is an erroneous view.

It is thus that we also must treat it as given that we *can* only use our limited resources to try to understand why God would allow evil at all. Certainly, we should be aware of the fact that our resources are limited. But note that it is not a permissible move in the discussion to say something like “who are we to know” and that is not because it is not true (if the theists are right, it is certainly true that we are in a poor position to know God’s mind), it is rather because making this move in the discussion is tantamount to evading the discussion altogether and in this way admitting defeat. Note that the defeat in such a case might mean one of two things: it is either the defeat of theism or the defeat of religious rationalism.

### **5.6. “Evil as Punishment for Original Sin” Response**

Theist: God has punished mankind for committing the Original Sin. Evil is a part of that punishment.

Atheist: This response relies on a problematic principle that the children, grandchildren, etc. can be punished for the wrongdoing of their parents, grandparents, etc. But surely nobody adheres to this principle. A theist himself would be appalled if he were to be imprisoned for the fact that his greatgrandmother stole a couple of horses or even that his greatgrandfather killed somebody.

### **5.7. “Evil as Just Punishment” Response**

Theist: God allows and even brings suffering on his children. But it is just and necessary punishment.

Atheist 1: Many adults have surely deserved punishment, but what about little children and babies? They suffer without having deserved it.

Atheist 2: Some people who have done mostly good in the lives have suffered greatly, while others who have done wrong have led lives free of suffering.

Atheist 3: What of suffering of certain races (e.g. American slaves, Jews). If their suffering was deserved punishment then it almost seems like God is racist.

## 5.8. Summary

These and other responses vary in the degree to which they may convince the atheist: some of them carry more persuasive power, others none at all. But there are two sorts of responses that are very powerful: the free-will theodicy and the soul-making theodicy. They are capable of convincing an atheist (and they have convinced many atheists) that the existence of evil does not prove that God does not exist. (Note again that to convince an atheist that the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God is not yet to convince her that God exists, it is only to convince her that she does not have the proof, she thought she had, that God does not exist.)

## 6. The Free-Will Theodicy (Moral Evil)

The free-will theodicy is the most classic defense given to account for why there is moral evil. It does not explain why there is natural evil (we will turn to that question in the next section). But contrary to popular discussions, philosophers have treated the matter in much more detail – some of it is bound to seem far-fetched to you, but remember that we are consider all possible scenarios here.

A word about the word ‘theodicy’. It comes from two Greek words *theos* (*god*) and *dike* (*justice*). The term was first introduced by Leibniz who used it precisely in the context of the discussion on the problem of evil. The meaning of term nowadays is the same as “an account explaining the compatibility between the existence of evil and the existence of God.”

### 6.1. The Gist of the Free-Will Defense

Moral evil exists because God gave us free will and, as a result, we sometimes freely choose evil. Free will is good (it is better for us to have free will and sometimes do evil things than it would be for us to be automata who always do good but unfreely). So, the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God!

☯ Think about this for a moment. Do you agree that it is better for us to have free will and sometimes do evil things than it would be for us to be automata who always do good? Why (not)? Hint: try to imagine a world where we would be such automata.

But there is more to the dialectic.

### 6.2. Atheist Argument 1 (Mackie): Freely Doing Only Good

One of very powerful, and certainly unexpected, responses to the free-will defense has been put forward by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian philosophy J.L. Mackie (1917-1981). Mackie offers quite an ingenious argument that free-will defense does not work. The argument works in two stages. First, Mackie convinces us that a world with free will and no evil in it is possible. Second, he argues that such a world quite obviously is better than a world (such as ours), in which there is free will and evil. Third, Mackie provides the atheist conclusion: if God existed he would have created the possible world with free will but no evil in it. Here is the argument in full.

- Free beings can choose good and evil – it is up to them to choose either. Normally, in the course of their lives, free persons choose some good and some evil.
- It would surely be possible for such a free person to choose to do only good things during one day. It may be hard to do, but it is possible. (If it were not possible, she would not be free.)
- But surely, it would be possible for such a free person to do only good things during a week. It may be harder to do (perhaps even more than seven times harder), but it is possible. (If it were not possible, she would not be free.)
- But surely, it would be possible for such a free person to do only good things during a month. It would be horrendously hard to do, but it is possible. (If it were not possible, she would not be free.)
- Would be it possible for such a free person to do only good things during a year? It must be possible, for if it were not possible, she would not be free.
- Would be it possible for such a free person to do only good things during her whole lifetime? It must be possible, for if it were not possible, she would not be free.

You know where this is going, of course. By that reasoning we must accept that

- It is possible for *all* free persons to do only good things during their lifetime. It may be extremely hard to do, but it must be possible. (If it were not possible, they would not be free.)
- Remember that God, according to the theist, can do all things that are possible.
- So, Mackie concludes, since it is possible that all free persons do only good things, God could have created a world where this is so.
- God could have, and should have, created a world where free beings do only good things, for such a world is better than a world where free beings do some evil.
- If God existed then he would have created such a world. But evil exists, so God does not.

Contrary to appearances, this argument is actually not as convincing as it seems. There is a difference between it being possible that free beings choose only good and God making sure that free beings choose only good. It is possible (albeit unlikely) for a human being to do only good things freely. It is even possible (albeit astronomically unlikely) for all human beings to freely do only good things. But it is *impossible* for God to *ensure* that we *freely* do only good things. For God to ensure that free beings choose only good things would be tantamount to God controlling them, and that would annihilate all freedom of will.

So, God could not have *ensured* that we freely do only good things. However, God created a world where it is certainly possible for free beings to do only good things. We *can* freely do only good things *if* we choose to!

### 6.3. Atheist Argument 2: Minor Choices

Why does God then not allow free will but only for minor choices where not much is at stake? We can choose whether to buy ricotta or cottage cheese, whether to take a train or a plain,

whether to watch one or another channel on TV. But God could have, and should have, given us choice only in such matters, not in matters where other people's lives or major suffering is at stake.

But the theist could surely respond that giving us small choices God would withhold real responsibility from us. Here the analogy with how parents treat their children would be a good thing. At first, parents allow children to make choices in small matters but they take the major decisions for them (what school to go to, what city and country to live in, etc.). But as children grow up, good parents allow them to make more important choices, giving them greater responsibilities. It is only after the parents stop restricting the choices of their children that the children have real freedom.

☯ Think about this more. Would it be really so bad if we had a little less responsibility? Why (not)?

#### 6.4. Atheist Argument 3: Free Will and God's Interventions

Even if we need to tolerate free will, why should God not intervene and stop the suffering that will result? God could have created a world where people have freedom of the will and so we need to tolerate that they sometimes do awful things, but He could have prevented those actions from causing other people to actually suffer. So God would allow a person to fire a gun but let the bullet turn to paper or disintegrate as it is about to strike the target. God would allow a person to utter an abusive remark, but the recipient won't actually hear it for one reason or another. And so on.

☯ It is a good exercise to actually try to imagine such interventions, for the concrete situations pictured can spark some responses.

The theist's response will be in part guided by the following questions: What would such a world be like? Could we be responsible for what we do in it? What would our moral development look like?

Would it matter, for example, whether we shoot at others, or shout at others, or are negligent with respect to our children? Could the atheist imagine a world where these responses are met, and yet where the evils are substantially minimized if not liquidated? Here is again an excerpt from Swinburne to get you thinking about this:

So then the theodicist [argues] that the price of possible passive evils for other creatures is a price worth paying for agents to have great responsibilities for each other. It is a price which (logically) must be paid if they are to have those responsibilities. Here again a reasonable antitheodicist may see the point. In bringing up our own children, in order to give them responsibility, we try not to interfere too quickly in their quarrels even at the price, sometimes, of younger children getting hurt physically. We try not to interfere, first, in order to train our children for responsibility in later life and second because responsibility here and now is a good thing in itself. True, with respect to the first reason, whatever the effects on character produced by training, God would produce without training. But if he did so by imposing a full character on a humanly free creature, this would be giving him a character which he had not in any way chosen or adopted for himself. Yet it would seem a good thing that a creator should allow humanly free creatures to influence by their own choices the sort of creatures they are to be, the kind of character they are to have. That means that the creator must create them immature, and allow them gradually to make decisions which affect the sort of beings they will be. And one of the greatest privileges which a creator can give to a creature is to allow him to help in the process of education, in putting alternatives before his fellows. (Swinburne, "The Problem of Evil," p. 580)

☹ The atheist again will wonder: but why so much evil. Is this a good response? Why (not)?

## 7. Soul-Making Theodicy

Atheist: Even if we agree with the free will theodicy, there are still natural evils in the world – the suffering cause by tornados, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes etc. If God existed, He surely would have created a world without natural evils. Since there are natural evils, God does not exist.

One of the immediate responses by theist might be that we do not actually know what constraints there are on the workings of nature. Some natural evils may be required for the proper working of the natural world (some animals need to kill to survive, Earthquakes do not occur to cause grief to humans but for geological reasons, etc.). However, the atheist might charge back that while this may be true, God could intervene any time a natural disaster were to befall a person (direct the attacking tiger to an animal rather than human victim, relocate the to-be victims of an Earthquake, etc.) John Hick asks us to imagine such a world where no harm could be done:

...no one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain-climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. There would be no need to work, since no harm could result from avoiding work; there would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or dangers. (“There is a Reason Why God Allows Evil,” p. 86)

It is here that the proper soul-making response begins. The theist argues that such an almost paradise-like world where there is no suffering would actually be the worst possible world.

First, the natural laws would become too flexible – sometimes they would operate, sometimes not (in cases where God would intervene to prevent human suffering). This would mean that the very fabric of the world as we know it would disintegrate. Science would be impossible for there would be no stable regularities. Metal usually has some properties but they change in metal bullets that turn to paper or disappear. Moreover, our capacity to plan would be seriously impaired. Our planning depends on their being regularities in the world. If there are no regularities, we cannot plan. In fact, one could argue that with planning impaired our ability to do anything at all would be seriously undercut. Even if we wanted to do something, we would not know how to achieve it.

Second, in a world where no suffering would ever result, we might simply not have the incentive to do anything at all. One might argue that one of the reasons why we want to get up from a warm cozy bed to go to work is that we want to earn money to feed our children. But if the world were such that our children would not suffer no matter what then we would have no reason to get out of the bed at all.

Third, the theist argues that our moral concepts would become entirely meaningless. In a world where there is no suffering, there could be no idea of harm and so no idea of moral wrong. So also there could be no idea of right actions in distinction from wrong ones.

Four, in such a world, we could not have many of the moral virtues such as courage and fortitude. Courage presupposes that there is the possibility of danger but in a world where there is no suffering there is no danger either, and so no courage. Generosity, kindness, compassion,

unselfishness likewise *could* not be exhibited by anyone, for they all require that there be the real possibility of suffering.

All of these elements show how the very nature of our soul would have to be changed if the world had no suffering in it. This is why the theodicy is called the “soul” making theodicy. The existence of real suffering is required for us to develop our souls.

Note that in contrast to the free-will theodicy, which explains only why moral evil exists, the soul-making theodicy explains why there both moral and natural evil. It is thus a more comprehensive theodicy.

## 8. Other Atheist Charges

Here is the gist of some of the arguments assembled by B.C. Johnson. I summarize them and provide some questions that might lead to think about them some more.

### 8.1. “Baby will go to heaven”

Atheist: How could God allow the evil of a baby burning in a fire?

Theist: The baby will go to heaven.

Atheist: This is a bad excuse for God. Either it was necessary for the child to suffer or it was not. If it was not necessary for the child to suffer then God should not have allowed it. If it was necessary for the child to suffer then the fact that the baby will go to heaven does not explain why it was necessary.

- ☯ How do you think a theist could respond? (Hint: do you think that Johnson is right in supposing that the fact that the response that baby will go to heaven was meant to be a justification of the baby’s burning in a fire? If not, what other role could this claim play in the theist’s response?)

### 8.2. “Good results”

Atheist: How could God allow the evil e.g. of a baby burning in a fire?

Theist: Good will result in the end.

Atheist 1: Too vague and weak a response. (No jury would exonerate)

Atheist 2: By that token, we should also engage in a variety of evils (including murder) as long as good results will follow. (And some good results will always follow at some point.)

- ☯ How do you think a theist could respond? (Hint 1: Must a theist be able to specify what good results will follow? What kind of dialectical position does Johnson presuppose here? Hint 2: Johnson presupposes that God and we are on a par: what goes for God, goes for us. Is he right? Are there moral duties that may be associated with one’s position, say?)

### 8.3. “God as a bystander”

Atheist: When God does not save the child from fire he acts just like a by-stander who has the opportunity to save the child without any risk of harm to herself but still does not save him. We would think that such a bystander does something wrong. Why should we not think this of God?

- ☯ How do you think a theist could respond? (Hint: Consider a somewhat different scenario: one person is about to be murdered by another. In such a situation, God is in a similar “bystander” position. He does not intervene. The theist has a good explanation why. What is it? Can this response throw any light on the original question?)

### 8.4. “Better not to become dependent on God’s miraculous interventions”

Atheist: God could intervene with a miracle.

Theist: Better for us not to become dependent on God’s interventions (see also Hick’s soul-making theodicy, above)

Atheist: But we already are dependent on medical care, fire department, etc. If we should not become dependent on God, then we should likewise not become dependent on other interventions.

- ☯ How could a theist respond? (Hint: Try to find some relevant differences between the kinds of interventions offered by medical care, etc. and the kinds of interventions that the atheist suggests God should offer. For example, how do you think the two kinds of interventions would/do affect our free will?)

### 8.5. “God has higher morality”

Atheist: I cannot understand why God allows so much evil.

Theist: God has a higher morality

Atheist: And a peculiar morality it is! It turns what we perceive to be wrong actions into good! We cannot make sense of such a morality. Moreover, we only know our morality. So from the standpoint of our morality, God is evil (even if He is good from the point of view of His higher morality). But since we only know our morality and not God’s, we must conclude that God is evil.

One way a theist could respond here is by agreeing with Johnson’s arguments and rephrasing the thought attributed to the theist. She could say that God does not have a higher morality. He goes by the same morality as we do. He is, however, in a different position from us. Not only is He the creator of the world and world order, He is also the one who gave us free will – for good reasons. As such, He may allow the occurrence of a variety of evils since He can and needs to preserve the order He created. For example, it is good that He does not interfere with a murder, say, because His interference would undermine free will. By contrast, it is not good that a bystander (under appropriate conditions) does not interfere with one person trying to murder

another. But that the bystander's interference would have no chance of undermining free will either! The difference here is not the difference of morality but the difference of position. If the bystander were in God's position, her lack of intervention would be good; if God were in the bystander's position, His lack of intervention would be bad.

## 9. Reflection on the Dialectical Setting

The theist could be trying to do two things in giving a stance on the problem of evil:

1. he could be trying to *convince* an atheist that God must allow evil
2. he could be trying to *undermine* the atheist's claim that God cannot allow evil

In the former case, he is giving a positive defense, in the latter, a merely negative one. In the former case, he must establish the truth of the claim that God must allow evil. In the latter, he must only show that there are reasons for thinking that God should allow evil to exist.

How does this difference affect the various responses and counter responses (esp. the ones discussed in section 8)?

## 10. Rational Calculation vs. Compassion?

Atheist: So what you have shown me is that God has a lot of calculated reasons for letting there be evil or even wanting for there to be some evil in the world. But now look at the picture of God that thus emerges. Far from being compassionate and deeply concerned with an individual's suffering, he treats it instrumentally as something that is required for the good of all. This picture is incompatible with that of a personal God.

“I accept God and am glad to, and what's more I accept His wisdom, His purpose – which are utterly beyond our ken; I believe in the underlying order and the meaning of life; I believe in the eternal harmony in which they say we shall one day be blended. ... Yet..., in the final result I don't accept this world of God's, and, although I know it exists, I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God, ... it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept. ...I can't accept that harmony. (Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

## 11. Conclusion

As is the case in most philosophical issues, you need to make up your mind yourself whether the atheist has successfully *proved* that God does not exist. Some of you will be convinced by his arguments, others of you will not. The important point is to be clear what the reasons are for your views. I hope that, perhaps contrary to your expectations, you have actually learned some things from this debate. Remember that this is a very old debate that has been on many great minds for a long time. The responses and arguments you have been witnessing are the fruit of those intellectual efforts. Some of the theist responses have indeed convinced some atheists – not that God exists – but that there is no contradiction between the existence of evil and existence of God.