

Multitude of Response to the Problem of Evil

Prologomenon

How would a Muslim respond to the problem of evil (poe)?

The initial response would be that it is based on what's called "egocentric predicament", or even argumentum ad ignorantiam. This has been cleverly addressed by Dr. Joshua Rasmussen in a recent convention.[1] But this may be surprising to some that the same response was given by Muslim theologians like 10 centuries ago![2]

Traditionalist polymath Ibn Taymiyya says that, if there is no other argument, God's infinite knowledge would be enough to prevent aimless acts by Him. Furthermore Ibn Taymiyya does not see a real problem with divine wisdom in apparently evil situations in nature or human life. A lack of comprehension of the hidden purposes behind evil should not affect a broad approach regarding divine wisdom. We cannot deny our definite knowledge about many purposeful actions in the universe because of some cases, certain details of which may have not been discovered. If the being of a thing is more important than the partial harms it causes, he argues, it would not be acceptable to reject it by highlighting its harmfulness. As he wrote:

We know that God is All-Wise and everything He does and everything He commands. Our lack of knowledge in the wisdom of some particulars does not undermine what we know of Him from His being All-Wise. We do not reject what we do not know regarding the details of His Wisdom out of what we know from His Wisdom. [For example] We know that whoever knows the knowledge of the expertise of mathematicians, physicians, and grammarians, while not possessing their qualities which make them deserving to be called mathematicians, physicians, and grammarians, this will not undermine what they say because of a lacking in one's knowledge of its perspective. Therefore, the servants of God are more distant from having knowledge about God and about His Wisdom in His creation than what common people have of knowledge about mathematics, medicine and grammar.[3]

He declares that those who oppose divine wisdom are in contradiction with many verses of the Qur'an (21:17), (23:115), (75:36), and so on.[4]

In all creatures, even in harmful beings and painful situations, Ibn Taymiyya finds wise aspects, and he responds to arguments regarding the existence of absolute evils and their effects on innocents. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the extent of divine blessings minimizes all kind of evil appearances, because humans are not able to see all the facets of created beings. He considers the evilness of those apparently wicked existents, therefore, as "relative" due to their role in the universal being and the ultimate goodness of creation.[5]

The crux of the matter here is, the burden of proof is on the objector, because he has to show the entailment from not knowing the reason or meaning behind evil and there being no reason or meaning at all behind those evil.

The theist has two potential routes of escape here: either deny the reality of evil[6] or explain why God might permit evil to exist. The first approach is really no option at all for anyone with moral sense. Who can deny that pedophilia and ethnic cleansing are really evil? Well, of course, some folks do, but this only shows they are as irrational as they are dangerous. For devotees of the major theisms—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—scriptural affirmations of the reality of evil also rule out this approach. This leaves the theist with the task of making sense of divine permission of evil, which is known as theodicy. Why does God allow the world to go so wrong—where people suffer under the terrors of hurricanes, cancers, and one another? Probably the

most popular theodicy appeals to free will and the notion that we human beings have no one to blame but ourselves for our sin and suffering. God endowed us with moral autonomy that we might genuinely relate to Him, but we have tragically abused this freedom. So evil is our fault, not our Creator's. We act immorally of our own volition, and all of our suffering (from human malice to natural disasters) is the consequence of those choices—if not our own, then someone else's—ultimately tracing back to the first humans who brought about the fall.[7]

The objection from evil does pack some punch, and it is a genuine problem for theists. But it could never count as grounds for atheism. Even if successful, it only undermines certain beliefs about the nature of God. It does not—nor could any argument—disprove the existence of a world creator and designer. This is because one cannot—whether by appeals to evil or anything else—eliminate the need to explain the existence of the universe. Nor does the problem of evil eradicate the abundant physical and biological evidence for design, but discussing those is outside the scope of this paper. At most, evil should prompt us to reconsider what kind of God exists, not whether God exists. To give up belief in a world creator because of the existence of evil is a blatant non sequitur.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, from a naturalist standpoint the objection from evil is incoherent. This is because naturalists have no grounds to call anything evil. Why? Because evil is a privation of good, a departure from the way things ought to be. "Good" and "ought" are values, not physical facts. But naturalists only believe in physical facts. They have no foundation for a standard of goodness, without which the naturalist cannot judge any state of affairs, even the Nazi Holocaust, to be "wrong" or "evil." [8] And without a standard for goodness, the problem of evil cannot be posed. [9]

A lot more can be said, but for further reading, the reader can read: Islamic Theology and The Problem of Evil by Dr. Safaruk Chowdhury or Ibn Taymiyyah's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism by Dr. Jon Hoover.

Conclusion

To conclude, the problem of evil is not even a problem, because the generally transcendent meaning or reason behind evil is far overwhelming to those afflicted with such evils. It's a problem for atheists or naturalists, because they can't even account evil. They have to shoulder the burden of proof.

Notes

[1] Difference between not seeing an entailment & seeing a non-entailment:

"You always have to be careful like about not confusing those like in the problem of evil like there's a difference between like not seeing why God might allow suffering, and then seeing that God has no reason. Like that inference is a substantial inference, and they don't just automatically follow."

[2] All Muslim theologians accepted that the actions of God were purposeful and meaningful and that they did not happen accidentally or for no reason.

[3] Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū' Fatāwā, vol. 6, p. 128.

[4] Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū' Fatāwā, vol. 16, pp. 297–299.

[5] The part from after the 2nd note to this point is taken from Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, p. 41.

[6] The funny thing is, naturalists cannot account evil without God:
<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/9/687>

[7] Now one might ask why did God create such people then? But the reader should be sensing that God doesn't hyper determine anyone to do any specific action, that's the whole point of freewill. Now, why doesn't god just not create people he knows will go to hell? Or why not just make these people cease to exist? Asking this question is same as to ask that why didn't God create only those who always choose right given morally significant freedom? It might be that free will doesn't proceed in this way. There maybe some sort of transworld depravity- that in every possible worlds at least one agent goes wrong way whatever world God would have been actualised. This can provide a defence of the above claim. Another reason might be that behind creating bad people God has some wise purposes e.g., manifestations of his names and attributes. They are sometimes necessary for soul making of righteous, for example, persecutions against sahaba by arab pagans. Ultimately God will cleanse the heart of these bad people by hell fire and if the universal salvation/ cease of hell fire is plausible then the whole problem would be solved since all will have an blissful eternal existence at the end.

[8] For a good recent presentation of this criticism, see Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, Naturalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Chapter 4.

[9] The part from after note 6 to this point is taken from The Making of An Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief, Chapter 1.