**THE SHORT WAY WITH THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Ever since J.L. Mackie published his landmark article “Evil and Omnipotence” in 1955, the problem of evil has been the central issue in the philosophy of religion. Of course, Mackie did not invent this argument. Although canonically formulated by Lucretius as a dilemma in the first century, awareness of the problem can be found in Plato and Xenophon, and no doubt goes back well before their time. What Mackie, Flew, and other analytic philosophers of religion did was popularize the problem of evil in such a way that it became part of public awareness and the first line of objection to belief in God on the part of people who have an antipathy to religious belief. It has thus attained the status of an obvious, even common-sense, ground for rejecting religious belief in all its forms.

The main outlines of the argument are so well known as to not need much, if any, restatement. It is taken as an obvious fact that a great deal of evil exists in the world, that evil is apparently randomly distributed, and is to be found to take a large variety of forms. God is characterized as an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being who (as such) would be capable of knowing all of these evils, preventing them, and would presumably be motivated to do so as well. Yet evil exists, as it presumably would not if such a being existed. The suggested conclusion is that God, so described, does not exist.

Even if one stops short of claiming that there is a logical contradiction in affirming the existence of God and admitting the fact of evil – it is at least barely logically possible that God has a good reason for permitting all the evils we observe in the world – it is far from abundantly clear, even on reflection, what those reasons might be. Even so, the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the world, as well as the many apparently gratuitous evils that we can point to, seems to be at least strong *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God as traditionally characterized and, as such, a plausibly truth-connected ground for atheistic belief. More than this, it at least appears to establish an experiential presumption in favor of atheism so far forth.

I

Theistic responses to this argument from evil vary. The first, traditional approach is the theodical one, which (at least tacitly) admits that evil is (at least) *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God but denies that it is conclusively so. Augustinian theodicies attempt to provide, at least in general outline, an account of the reasons that might permit God to allow the evils we see around us and, in so doing, justify God’s permission of those otherwise impermissible evils and so explain them away. A second, more recent theodical approach is to deny that we possess any plausible explanations for the existence of evil in the world and so no plausible grounds for any sort of positive theodicy. Instead, we are told that there is no reason for us to suppose that, if God had good reasons to permit evil in the world, we would be privy to them, so that theists carry no burden of proof in this regard.

The approach of this essay is different and, for all I know, may be unique. I deny that evil is *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God and thus that there is any such thing as a general *philosophica*l problem of evil. I do not deny that both ontic and moral evil exist or that they exist in the quantity, variety, and distribution that we observe them to exist. I do deny that this fact, or facts, have any implications whatsoever for the question of whether God exists. The existence of evil is simply irrelevant to the question of God’s existence.

This may come as a surprise to some because I above all other recent philosophers have been at pains to argue that we possess reliable, self-correcting cognitive faculties and that, as a consequence, most of our spontaneous judgments about the world are true. In that case, if the judgment that there exists either too much, too many kinds, and improperly distributed or gratuitous evils in the world is the product of our reliable, self-correcting cognitive faculties, has plausibly truth-connected grounds, and lacks any defeaters arising from lived experience, it will count as a properly basic belief so far forth. However, I contend that this judgment is not (or at least not solely) the product of the operation of those reliable cognitive faculties.

Instead, it is the product of the cognitive effects flowing from the skewed perspective on the world produced by our fallen natural bent, which is itself the product of original sin. This perspective on things, rooted in our disordered motivational system, is one that alienates us from reality and of our own nature as rational beings. As a consequence of this, the evil in the world is misapprehended by us in a way that creates a bogus “problem” of evil that is then laid at the door of believers who are then told that solving this “problem” is life-or-death for religious belief. That this is not necessarily so I will now endeavor to show.

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, just as the problem of the external world proves, on examination. not to be a general philosophical problem, but instead simply a metaphysical puzzle, the artifact of a particular philosophy of nature (Galilean physicalism about the external world) that can be dissolved simply by rejecting that mistaken point of view, so too does the problem of evil prove to be merely the consequence of the false perspective of things flowing from our inherent, because inherited, sinfulness.

II

Let us suppose that God’s existence is *formally* (or *intrinsically epistemically*) possible – there is no contradiction in the very conception of such a being. In that case, the argument from evil amounts to the claim that God’s actual existence in this world is either logically or evidentially excluded by the fact of the evil we see around us in this world. God’s existence thus proves to be *extrinsically epistemically impossible* – excluded by some fact that we know with certainty sufficient to warrant the judgment that God’s existence is either logically impossible or so highly improbable as to beggar belief.

The difficulty with this, however, is that it simply is not obvious that either of these claims are true. Like all positive theoretical claims, they must be *proven* or justified by evidence, not simply asserted as undeniably true on their face. Requiring this burden of proof on the part of the atheist is neither logically equivalent to the denial that evil exists nor the product of some sort of “moral insensitivity” on the part of believers – who generally do much more to relieve the sufferings of others than those who self-righteously carp about the evil in the world and either blame God for their troubles or use evil as a pretext for unbelief. Believers are, of course, committed to the claim that the evils we see around us in the world are neither logically nor evidentially incompatible with the existence of the God of living religion. That, however, is the very question at issue and one that cannot be surreptitiously begged in the process of making the case for the claim that the observed evil in the world either disproves or is conclusive evidence against the existence of God.

What would be required to make the case? First, we need to have an analysis of the concept of evil – something that proponents of the argument from evil are generally loath to give, instead being content to list a standard set of stock examples, generally given without context, intended to act as “intuition-pumps” evoking shock and awe and giving rise to resentment against the order of things and its supposed Author. This is a rhetorically powerful appeal but it is not, in itself, proof or evidence for anything.

Believers are also aware of all of these examples, but do not regard them in the same way. Rather, they respond in faith and trust in God while doing what they can to be the instruments by means of which God graciously redeems these evils by providing aid and comfort to the afflicted, exemplifying virtue, and providing an example for others to follow in responding to the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Rather than seeing these evils as a challenge to faith, they see them as opportunities to do good and regard their efforts as the fruits of faith made possible through God’s grace. They accept in gratitude the good things of life as gifts from the hand of God and turn to God in times of trouble for strength and comfort in the face of sorrow, pain, and loss. They believe that suffering bravely borne and offered up for their own sins and those of others is neither pointless nor useless, but redemptive. If the Christian God exists, this is precisely the proper attitude to take to the evils in the world.

The believer thus continues to trust that God will bring good out of evil, not as a matter of moral duty but instead as a supererogatory act of love for us. For the Christian believer, then, there is no “problem of evil” considered as a theoretical question to which a response is required. This is quite compatible with the believer having, in many cases, no ready answer to the question of why God permits these evils or the manner in and extent to which such evils can be turned to the greater good. Again, if God exists, this is a perfectly rational attitude to take toward the evil we encounter in the world.

II

More than this, if God exists, then He is a logically necessary being, one who exists in all possible worlds. Let us further suppose that there is some world order (say, one in which every rational being endures an interminable existence every moment of which is subjected to unendurable pain) that is logically incompatible with the existence of God as classically characterized. It follows that *if* God exists, such a world cannot exist and that, since God is a necessary being, that the envisaged world-order does not represent a possible world after all. Instead, this world-order, even if *formally* (or *intrinsically epistemically*) possible, is not logically possible after all since, on the above supposition such a world is *extrinsically epistemically* impossible – the existence of God positively excludes the existence of any such world.

By the same token, if God exists and is a logically necessary being, no conceivable world-order containing an amount, variety, or distribution of evil that is incompatible with the existence and complete innocence of God is, after all, a possible world. The actual world, however, clearly is a possible world, one that instantiates the world-order we observe around us – after all, actuality proves possibility. It follows straightaway that, since this world actually exists and no world-order incompatible with the existence of God is, after all, a logically possible world, on the supposition that God’s existence is formally possible and that God is a logically necessary being, the world-order instantiated by the actual world is not one in which the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in that world is incompatible with the existence and perfect innocence of God.

III

It will be objected that whether or not God’s existence is extrinsically epistemically possible, and hence logically possible, thus depends on whether or not the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the actual world is logically compatible with the existence of God. This is true so far as it goes, but this is at best a logical point. It is not dispositive. Although we do know that this world exists and that it contains the amount, variety, and distribution of evil it does, we neither know (nor is it obvious) that the amount, variety, or distribution of evil in the actual world is either logically incompatible with, or conclusive evidence against, the existence of God. Nor so far as I can see is there any way of establishing that this is *in fact* the case – we have no way of objectively determining how much evil is compatible with the existence of the Christian God. In that case, to appeal to the amount, variety, or distribution of evil in the actual world as evidence that God does not exist or as a proof that God’s existence is logically impossible simply begs the question in favor of atheism.

Whether or not the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the actual world is either proof of or evidence against the existence of God thus crucially depends on whether or not God exists – an otherwise open question that has to be decided on other grounds.

IV

Many will respond to the foregoing with incredulity, anger, and disgust, because they take it to be obvious and beyond question that evil in the world represents a serious and probably insurmountable challenge to religious belief. My seemingly cavalier and dismissive attitude towards this “challenge” will strike them as the height of temerity and moral insensitivity. Surely, they will say, the author is merely being provocative and his claims no more than audacious bluff and bluster.

Not so. I am in earnest. Our natural tendency to see what we see as evil in the world, to judge events and states-of-affairs as evil, and the respects in which we are inclined to those events and states-of-affairs as evil, has been seriously skewed by our fallen natural bent, itself the product of original sin. Since our motivational structure is fundamentally skewed away from what is in fact best for us and focused instead on the lesser good(s) that lie closest to our unregenerate hearts, it will not be surprising that our spontaneous judgments about what is evil and what makes those things evil are systematically flawed and in need of serious critique and correction.

Elsewhere, I have noted this tendency in relation to the Natural Moral Law. We inevitably see moral obligation in relation to the human will in Kantian terms – as a foreign imposition on the will, one as though imposed by an outside force, possessing deontic force that binds the will contrary to the promptings of “self-love.” The Natural Moral Law faces us as a categorical imperative, as something that we *have to do* regardless of whether we want to do it or not. More than this, because we are fallen, for the most part, *we don’t want to do* what morality requires of us, so that we perceive the deontic force of moral obligation as an onerous burden, one that we must steel ourselves to submit to or, more often, ignore or evade, risking the burden of guilt and fear should our derelictions be discovered. That is, unless like many moderns, we have convinced ourselves that morality is merely conventional, relative, and dispensable and are working hard to see to it that statute law reflects the blandishments of our natural bent as legitimate, fully worthy of respect and loving protection.

The tendency to perceive God as cosmic lawgiver as an Hobbesian sovereign, a cosmic tyrant whose will to punish sinners simply for defying His will is inherently unjust and unfair, is part and parcel of the same general attitude towards morality. From the traditional Natural Law perspective, however, this is a completely skewed perspective both on morality and on God’s purpose in promulgating that law and accompanying it with appropriate sanctions. The Natural Moral Law is the blueprint for achieving our end as rational beings, fully exemplifying our nature, achieving our natural end or *telos*, and acquiring and enjoying both genuine human happiness and eternal life. As such, this law is inherent in our nature as rational beings and such that it should both naturally guide our behavior and be embraced by us as something good and, indeed, a gift from God expressive of what we truly are. It is the law of our nature, decreed by God for our sakes out of love for us. That we see it as something foreign and onerous is merely the result of our fallenness, which estranges and alienates us from our true nature as rational beings.

Because our fallen natural bent alienates and estranges us from that nature, both the Natural Moral Law and the ideal inherent in that law have no savor for us. Instead, as guided by our disordered appetites, unruly passions, and disproportional emotional reactions to events and circumstances we encounter in everyday life, we invariably prefer the lesser to the greater good, identify our happiness with the possession and enjoyment of that good, and feel ourselves to be unhappy if we are denied the possession and enjoyment of that good. For the same reason, we shun and contemn the teachings of religion and traditional morality as false, wrong, and intolerable.

Where evil is concerned, we naturally fall into certain palpably false views about the nature of evil. One prominent one is the assumption that pain (considered as a bodily sensation) and suffering are internally related, so that “pain” and “suffering” refer to the same phenomenon and are best aspectually distinct from one another. Further claims include the assertions that pain is intrinsically evil and pleasure intrinsically good, and indeed, the only things that possess intrinsic value-qualities. None of these claims can survive even a cursory rational examination (as I have shown elsewhere) but we naturally assume these as commonsensical because of the distorted perspective produced by our fallen natural bent. Once these blinders are removed, we are much better able to understand the nature of evil in relation to the good and to understand why God permits many of the evils that our fallen perspective perceives in an exaggerated light.

Our natural bent also corrupts our understanding of love, constituting it as an arbitrary, sentimental attachment between persons grounded in proximity, acquaintance, and sexual attraction – though in the latter case we are rapidly outgrowing the idea that there is any intrinsic connection or natural progression from sexual attraction to love in some more substantial sense. For modern people, love is a self-centered emotion and one focused largely on one’s own “needs,” so that love between persons largely becomes a matter of dominance, manipulation, and inseparable from the presence of sentimental feeling for others we are said to love. The value and significance of our relationships with others are seen from the perspective of one’s getting what one wants for oneself from those others, and the test for other-love in relation to ourselves merely a matter of the degree to which others are willing to indulge us and become our enablers and co-dependents by being “supportive” of our plans and schemes for ourselves regardless of what they happen to be and regardless of whether they are the least bit feasible.

Genuine love is not a feeling, a passion, or an emotion, but instead a disposition to seek the good of the other in accordance with our nature as rational beings, even if and even though they do not desire that good. Genuine love is thus a severe love, one that it likely to be seen as hatred by others and to be resisted on their part insofar as they do not desire what is objectively best for them. Contrary to what Mill supposes, people are far better judges in the case of others than they are in their own cases as to what will make them genuinely happy. Despite this, they would rather be happy by their own lights than pursue genuine human happiness. This is the real cause of all the evil in the world and the traditional name for this is sin.

Sin is the only truly irredeemable evil in the world because it flows from our disordered motivational structure and is self-reinforcing. Like MacBeth, any initial misgivings we may have about our sinful acts and practices we dismiss due to the fact that we are, as yet, young in deed – knowing that long usage will deaden the voice of conscience, especially if we can win public acceptance and legal recognition of those acts as both permissible and even to be celebrated. It is this, the only true evil, for which God in His mercy and out of love for us has provided a remedy through the atoning death of Christ. This is a supererogatory act of charity on His part and the primary proof of His love for us, one that seeks what is our true good and provides the means by which it can be pursued and attained: the Grace of Christ given through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In so doing, God has done much for us in circumstances in which He was not required to do anything at all for us, once again out of love for us and solely for our benefit rather than His own.

One may reject the Christian analysis of the human condition and the proper response to the evil inherent in it because it does not suit the preconceived ideas and assumptions arising from our fallen natural bent, to which one might find oneself committed through its influence. However, one ought to be able to discern that the gulf between the Christian understanding of evil and that that consonant with our fallen natural bent, while hardly incommensurable, are nevertheless different enough that there is no necessity in our adopting that latter view as the starting point for the discussion of evil in relation to God’s existence. In particular, there is no reason for assuming that the latter perspective is either the true or even the most credible one for framing and discussing that issue, let alone the source of a problem for or challenge to Christian religious belief.

V

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, just as the problem of the external world proves, on examination. not to be a general philosophical problem, but instead simply a metaphysical puzzle, the artifact of a particular philosophy of nature (Galilean physicalism about the external world) that can be dissolved simply by rejecting that mistaken point of view, so too does the problem of evil prove to be merely the consequence of the false perspective of things flowing from our fallen natural bent.

I contend that, considered in itself or just as such, the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the actual world is therefore irrelevant to the *philosophical* question of God’s existence. Whether or not the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the actual world is either proof of or evidence against the existence of God thus crucially depends on whether or not God exists – an otherwise open question that has to be decided on other grounds.

Of course that is hardly the last word on the subject. Elsewhere, I have given a metaphysical demonstration of God’s existence that has, as a corollary, that the amount, variety, and distribution of evil in the actual world cannot be logically incompatible with God’s existence since, if it were, this world would not exist – as it manifestly does. I have also written two books in which I explore, among other topics, the ways in which our fallenness, rooted in our disordered motivational structure, alienates us from our true nature as rational beings and distorts our vision of the good, of the nature of evil, morality, happiness, and God. I recommend these further discussions to any who might be inclined to pursue this topic further.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. These books include: Physicalism and Scientific Realism (2022), Reason and Illusion (2022), The Priority of Faith, Christian Theodicy without Apology, and Virtue and Value, (all 2020) – all available from Amazon KDP. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)