

Introducing the Problem of Evil

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A Classroom Disaster

While the problem of evil engages many introductory philosophy students, it is notoriously difficult to introduce. Initially, I would explain that many students had heard of the *problem*, characterize it briefly, and launch into a version of the *argument* from evil. More often than not, I would be interrupted by a student who was proposing her favorite solution even before I finished the presentation. Then proposals would surface rapidly as I alternately asked to be allowed to finish presenting the argument or criticized a proposed solution. I think that many students were as frustrated as I was. Imagine trying to take notes (for example) about such a class session. Because I believe that others have experienced similar difficulties in introducing the problem of evil, I want to report how I overcame them. In what follows I will often repeat just what I tell my students. I will signal this by the use of italics.

First, I identified the nature of the problems: (1) the case for atheism was not allowed a fair hearing; (2) some proposed solutions were implausible and (3) dismissive of a perennial philosophical problem; (4) theodicies and the criticisms of them were not examined carefully enough; and (5) some students were left with the impression that the professor is the foe of religion, while the students are its friend. (For this reason, I suspect that some students became so defensive that they did not learn.)

Of course some of this reaction could be attributed to religious training: students were parroting what they had heard from their religious teachers. But since the problem is to encourage students to learn something about the problem of evil from a philosophical (rather than religious) perspective, that has to be overcome.

The remedy is to discuss all the interrelated difficulties *before* introducing the argument from evil. That way students are prepared to make an effort to give the argument a fair hearing. This requires that I make some assumptions about the motives and thoughts of some

students, but if the common difficulties encountered in some solutions are explained *before* students propose pat or dismissive ones, it is less likely that anyone will be made to feel uncomfortable when their solutions are examined.

Students propose implausible solutions to the problem of evil primarily because they do not know what makes a proposal implausible or what is required for one to be plausible, and this can be traced to a failure to understand the problem. For example, some students seem to think that anything that might explain evil, regardless of the moral worth of the solution, is a legitimate answer to the problem. For the same reasons they often propose solutions designed merely to dismiss the problem. A dismissive proposal may indicate that the student does not want to think about the problem. And students can rationalize not thinking about the problem by convincing themselves that they are resisting the professor's opposition to religious belief.

My practice is to assume that most students are believers, tell them so, and try to encourage them to work toward a plausible solution to the problem of evil.

Explaining the Problem Initially

The first thing to do is to explain the problem. This is pretty much what I say:

The problem of evil is the problem of showing that it is reasonable to believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God, despite the appearance of gratuitous evil. The problem of evil thus differs from an argument from evil, which is any argument for the non-existence of God that is based on the alleged existence of gratuitous evil. The problem of evil is thus a problem believers face. They need to show that their belief in God is reasonable. Atheists do not face this problem, since they do not believe that God exists. Their problem, if they advocate an argument from evil, is to make a case for the existence of gratuitous evil and thus for the non-existence of God. Gratuitous evil is evil that an all-good God would abolish if God knew of its existence and could abolish it. Gratuitous evil is thus defined in such a way that it is incompatible with the existence of God. It is noteworthy that I have said the appearance of gratuitous evil. Whether or not there is gratuitous evil, there appears to be gratuitous evil. Thus the task of believers is to show that appearances are deceiving, whereas atheists must argue that at least some of those appearances are real.

Evil, Gratuitous Evil, and Morally Sufficient Reasons

The concept of gratuitous evil is unfamiliar to most introductory students, and unless the distinction between evil and gratuitous evil is stressed, many students will identify the two. Thus, they will think that the existence of God is consistent with gratuitous evil or that showing the consistency of God and (any) evil is sufficient to solve the problem. This is how I try to alert them to the meanings:

There is a distinction between evil and gratuitous evil. Evil is what an all-good God would want to abolish unless God had a morally sufficient reason for not doing so. Although gratuitous evil is inconsistent with the existence of God, evil is not, provided that it is not gratuitous. Another way of describing the believer's task is to show that all evil is non-gratuitous—or at least to argue that there are not sufficient reasons to believe that some evils are gratuitous evils.

The concepts of morally sufficient reason and greater good are crucial to an understanding of the problem of evil. A morally sufficient reason is a moral reason that is good enough to justify allowing suffering. Someone has a morally sufficient reason provided that the suffering serves a greater good. A greater good is a good that is good enough to defeat the evil that is necessary for it. Here is an example of a morally sufficient reason or greater good. Parents are not regarded as bad when they have their children inoculated, despite the pain the shots cause. This is because the parents have a morally sufficient reason for having their children immunized, namely, that their children probably will not contract the diseases the shots are designed to prevent. Having the shots serves a greater good, namely, avoiding more pain and suffering in the long run. If you think that the shots are not evil, consider whether you would have your children suffer if there were a painless way to be immunized. An all-good God would only allow evil for which God had a morally sufficient reason. God would only allow evil that serves a greater good.

Theodicies: Avoiding Disasters and Smug Dogmatism

Some introductory students believe that there is an easy answer to the problem of evil, and it may be impossible to persuade them to take it seriously. I try to encourage them to be thoughtful by mentioning motives:

This is not the first time I have taught the problem of evil, and I am aware that some students just want the problem to go away. That is why they treat the problem of evil like an annoying mosquito: they

swat at it with the first thing that occurs to them. But like that mosquito, the problem tends to come back and buzz in your ear. There are some others who are confident that they have the answer. But how can they be so sure, especially when they have not considered objections to their proposals? Maybe if they considered objections, they would not think that the problem of evil is so easy to solve. Whether it is easy or difficult cannot be known without considering opposing sides.

Before students are ready to deal with the problem of evil, they need to know what an answer is called:

Attempts to solve the problem of evil are called theodicies. Theodicies are not arguments for the existence of God, but arguments for the conclusion, "The argument from evil does not prove God does not exist." Just as criticisms of arguments for the existence of God are not arguments for atheism, so theodicies, being criticisms of an argument against the existence of God, are not arguments for God's existence. Theodicies may support religious belief, but that does not make them arguments for the existence of God.

If the students are to avoid advocating implausible or dismissive theodicies, they need to know the ways in which theodicies usually miss their mark:

Two shortcomings can be noted when the problem is treated as one that has an easy answer: (1) a failure to distinguish between theodicies and (2) a failure to draw out the logical consequences of theodicies.

First let us talk about the failure to distinguish between theodicies. Have you ever been in a discussion of the problem of evil that proceeded this way? Someone (call her "Alice") suggests a solution to the problem of evil. Bob criticizes Alice's theodicy for various reasons. Rather than acknowledge the justice of the criticism or attempt to prove that it misses its mark, Alice replies with another theodicy. If Bob criticizes the new theodicy, Alice advocates yet another theodicy. In this way someone may bounce from, say, free will to appreciation of the good and from there to Satan and then original sin. This is the phenomenon of the moving target. Bob is left with the task of chasing after the moving target. This is what can happen in some philosophy classes, but I do not intend to chase a moving target here.

Why not? Because it impedes the goal of seeking a solution to the problem. I assume that most of you are believers and that you would genuinely like to find a solution to the problem. Having someone chase

after a moving target can satisfy only someone who is interested in “looking good” in a debate, someone who does not really care about whether there is a rationally defensible solution to the problem. But for those who do care about rational defensibility, chasing after a moving target is completely unsatisfactory. If a moving target is chased, you do not take the time to pinpoint the virtues and the shortcomings of individual theodicies. It may be that, when all is said and done, you will want to combine two or three theodicies in order try to solve the problem. But you will need to know the merits and shortcomings of the constituent theodicies in order to know whether they will work in combination. It may be that a theodicy you would have advocated is one that you would not use if you knew its shortcomings. Maybe a theodicy you do not currently use is one that merits your belief. You cannot know these things unless you take the time to examine each theodicy individually and determine its merits and faults. That is why we shall distinguish between theodicies and examine them individually.

Perhaps some who suggest one theodicy after another simply do not understand that they are using different theodicies. Perhaps they just repeat what they have learned from religious teachers. They can learn that there are distinctions between theodicies. Students who intentionally try to evade critical examination may be ones who, deep down, fear that their beliefs will not withstand scrutiny. Maybe they will not, but maybe a careful examination will show that belief in God fares better than they feared. They can learn to be more open-minded about this topic.

The second shortcoming of discussions of the problem of evil is a failure to draw out the logical consequences of theodicies. If someone wants the problem of evil just to “go away,” then that person will not give proposed solutions serious thought. These pat answers sometimes have consequences that their advocates would reject—if only they had bothered to deduce the consequences. Some theodicies imply that God is morally grotesque, vicious, or uncaring. That is why we shall take the time to draw out the logical consequences of various theodicies. It is worth noting that this second shortcoming is related to the first. If someone shifts from one theodicy to the next, one might overlook the logical consequences of the proposals, some of which just might be objectionable.

Theodicies: Requirements for Good Ones

The students have been shown in general terms how a theodicy can fail, but they need to be shown what it would take for a theodicy to succeed:

But what is the positive counterpart to these shortcomings? We see how a person can fail to take the problem of evil seriously. We even see to some extent how a theodicy can fail to solve the problem. But what does it take for a theodicy to be a plausible solution to the problem of evil? A plausible solution must (1) cover all evils, (2) take evil seriously, and (3) be free from unwarranted assumptions..

Why must a plausible solution to the problem of evil cover all evils? If a theodicy does not cover all evils, then the question "Why would God allow these other evils?" remains unanswered. In other words, if a theodicy does not cover all evils, it is at best a partial solution.

Why must a plausible solution to the problem of evil take evil seriously? The problem of evil is not the problem of showing why the theodicy would allow the world to be as it is. The problem is to argue that it is reasonable to believe that an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God would allow the world to be as it is. Although a theodicy may not take evil seriously, it is clear that an all-good God would. Thus, if a theodicy is morally grotesque, if a theodicy exhibits callous indifference to evil, then it is simply not addressing the problem.

Why must a plausible solution to the problem of evil be free from unwarranted assumptions? Actually, this is a requirement that is imposed on all arguments. If we ask whether an argument proves its conclusion, we are in part asking whether its premises are known or reasonably believed to be true. If a theodicy had premises that were vulnerable to challenge, then it would be open to the objection that its premises are not all known or reasonably believed.

This is not a requirement that there be no assumptions. After all, it is impossible for there to be an argument with no assumptions at all, and every theodicy is an argument. The requirement is that the theodicy not have unwarranted controversial assumptions.

This is also not a requirement that nothing controversial be said. Of course a theodicy will include at least one controversial claim: the conclusion of the argument, if nothing else. Rather, it is a requirement that a theodicy not begin with undefended controversial claims. If a controversial claim is well-defended, it does not violate this requirement. The idea here is to block explanations of evil that presuppose without argument the existence of Satan or the account of Adam and Eve in "Genesis," for example. A case would have to be made for those claims.

It goes without saying that formal (as opposed to epistemic) standards for good arguments apply to theodicies. That is, deductive arguments need to be valid, and inductive arguments need to be sufficiently strong.

The Argument from Evil

I hesitate to introduce the argument from evil until these requirements for an adequate solution have been discussed because only then are students prepared to assess it carefully and critically. Presenting the argument from evil is now appropriate:

The problem of evil is the problem of showing that it is reasonable to believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God, despite the appearance of gratuitous evil. In other words, the problem of evil is the problem of refuting the argument from evil. Since theodicies are attempts to refute the argument from evil, we need to know what the argument from evil is. Here is the version of the argument from evil we shall consider:

1. *If there were an all-knowing God, then God would know everything.*
2. *If there were an all-powerful God, then God could abolish gratuitous evil.*
3. *If there were an all-good God, then God would want to abolish gratuitous evil.*
4. *So, if there were an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good God, then it would know about evil, and could and would abolish all gratuitous evil.*
5. *So, if there were an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good God, then there would not be any gratuitous evil.*
6. *There are some evils that do not serve any purpose we know of. (In other words, there is inscrutable evil.)*
7. *Although we might be mistaken in our identification of some of the evil as gratuitous, it is unlikely that all inscrutable evil is non-gratuitous.*
8. *Therefore, (probably) there is some gratuitous evil.*
9. *Therefore, (probably) there is no individual that is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good.*
10. *By definition, God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good.*
11. *Therefore, (probably) God does not exist.*

Options for Criticizing the Argument from Evil

Although the students at this point know how and how not to criticize the argument from evil, they have not identified particular

premises or inferences in the argument from evil itself as possibly vulnerable to attack. Thus it is worthwhile to do so:

Rather than attacking the argument from evil now, let us enumerate most of the strategies open to its critics. Most criticisms of the argument from evil are arguments against the premise ‘There (probably) is gratuitous evil.’ Let us call this part of the argument from evil “the gratuitous evil premise.” Ambitious theodicies are attempts to prove that the gratuitous evil premise is false by specifying a greater good or goods that evils serve. Less ambitious criticisms of the argument from evil are attempts to show that there are insufficient reasons to affirm the gratuitous evil premise without further arguing that the gratuitous evil premise is (probably or certainly) false.

Some premises are true by definition and not open to attack. If a student overlooks the distinction between evil and gratuitous evil, he might think that the premise linking being all-good to wanting to abolish gratuitous evil is vulnerable to attack when, in fact, it is true by definition. One way to avoid the problem of evil is to reject the premise that God is, by definition, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Though we will discuss this strategy later, let me just note that it is not an attempt to solve the problem of evil, but to avoid it. This covers most, but not all, lines of attack open to critics of the argument from evil.

An Example of a Failed Theodicy

There have been almost no examples of arguments in my introduction to the problem of evil. But the students need to see how the requirements for an adequate solution apply to a concrete case. Hence I discuss the control-the-population theodicy.

Although I talked in general terms about pitfalls to avoid when offering a theodicy, I did not give any examples except to mention Satan and Adam and Eve in passing. The following is a theodicy I have heard many times. It is apparently popular, but it is a poor response to the problem of evil. I call it the “control-the-population theodicy,” and it runs like this:

- 1. There is evil so that there can be population control.*
- 2. The world would be much worse if there were no population control.*
- 3. Thus, the evil there is serves a greater good, namely, population control. (In other words, there is no gratuitous evil.)*
- 4. Thus, the argument from evil does not prove that God does not exist.*

If someone who missed class today suggests it later, I will not offer a rebuttal. I shall just cast a knowing smile at you. You and I will know that that student missed class.

What is wrong with the control-the-population theodicy? Remember that a plausible solution to the problem of evil must (1) cover all evils, (2) take evil seriously, and (3) be free from unwarranted assumptions. Bear these things in mind as you consider the criticism:

- 1. The control-the-population theodicy explains only those evils that result in population control, primarily death.*
- 2. But there are many evils that do not result in population control.*
- 3. Thus, the control-the-population theodicy does not cover all (even most) evils.*
- 4. There are possible ways of controlling population that involve a lot less pain and suffering than the actual causes of death.*
- 5. If population could be controlled without war, fatal diseases, fatal birth defects, and murder, then that would be much better.*
- 6. An all-good God would take evil seriously.*
- 7. If someone had the option of achieving a goal (population control) by different means, and one route (the world as it is) involved a lot more pain and suffering than another, and yet that individual opted for the more painful alternative, then that individual would not be taking evil seriously.*
- 8. So, if God were to create a world with war, etc., to achieve population control when an alternative that involves less pain and suffering exists, then God would not be taking evil seriously.*
- 9. Thus, the control-the-population theodicy (which states that God takes an option that involves greater pain and suffering) does not take evil seriously.*
- 10. The control-the-population theodicy presupposes that evil is necessary for population control.*
- 11. However, that presupposition can be and has been challenged above. There needs to be a case made for it.*
- 12. An acceptable solution to the problem of evil (a) covers all evils, (b) takes evil seriously, and (c) is free from controversial presuppositions.*
- 13. Therefore, the control-the-population theodicy is not an acceptable solution to the problem of evil.*

Summary and Explanation

This ends my introduction to the problem of evil. It is true that I do not distinguish between the “logical” and “evidential” problems of evil. This is intended for introductory students, and I think that that distinction is best left for a more advanced class. I use an evidential argument from evil because defenders of religious belief are interested in beliefs that are plausible and not merely consistent. I suppose one could substitute a “logical argument from evil” for my evidential one, but then the danger is in attacking a weaker case for atheism than is available. Many introductory students are already inclined to attack an atheistic straw man.

If one points out *what* is required for a plausible theodicy and *why* it is required, students understand what it takes to meet those conditions. If one explains the concepts of “greater good” and “morally sufficient reason” before presenting the argument from evil, students can understand the terms of a plausible answer. They realize that not just anything that explains evil, regardless of moral worth, will do. If one explains the two shortcomings of many discussions of the problem, students learn to avoid them. And by pointing out in general terms the strategies for attacking the argument, students learn to avoid blind alleys and to stay focused on more promising routes. In this way I have tried to encourage my students to be more thoughtful about (rather than dismissive of) the problem of evil.

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