

Assessing a Revised Compensation Theodicy

In a recent article, Seyyed Jaaber Mousavirad constructs a theodicy of compensation. He contends that all evils are justified by conjoining the compensation God provides the sufferer in an afterlife with the good the evils produce here and now, although the good is not necessarily for the one experiencing the evil nor in proportion to the evil experienced (Mousavirad 2022, 185). In what follows I argue that this modified compensatory theodicy is flawed in its premises and ultimately fails to show that an afterlife compensation, conjoined with some good produced here and now by evil, justifies God creating or allowing evil.

Weak and strong versions of the compensatory theodicy

Seyyed Mousavirad distinguishes between what he terms a weak and a strong version of the compensatory theodicy. According to the weak version, natural and moral evils experienced are justified because God compensates for them in an afterlife of bliss. God provides the sufferer such an abundance of “pleasure and bounties in heaven that [the sufferer] feels that these pleasures and bounties are far greater than the pain and suffering he endured in the world” (Mousavirad 2022, 186). Mousavirad rightly rejects this weak version on the grounds that it fails to provide a reason for God creating or allowing evil in the first place.

In its place he constructs what he terms a strong compensatory theodicy, according to which all evils are justified in that God compensates for them in an afterlife and they produce some good here and now. Producing good here and now provides a reason for God creating or allowing evils: they are necessary for there being goods. It is not that the evils necessarily produce good for the individual sufferer or that the good outweighs the evil. It is just that each evil produces some good for someone, and consequently God’s allowance of the evil is thereby shown to be purposeful. This version of his compensation theodicy thus invokes a truncated

version of the greater good defense, truncated because the good produced need not equal or exceed the evil in quantity or quality. In short, he holds that this theodicy preserves both God's justice in that evils are compensated for and the purposefulness of God's creation or allowance of evil in that they produce some good (Mousavirad 2022, 187–88).

Premise 1: All evil produces good.

In defense of his theodicy, Mousavirad invokes three premises. First, he contends that “Evils have some good, and the existence of these evils is necessary to attain these goods; thus, these evils are not futile, even if the good within evils do (sic) not outweigh evils” (Mousavirad 2022, 188). I take this to be a universal claim about evils; otherwise, evils that fail to produce good would be gratuitous and, on his account, there are no gratuitous evils.

He justifies this premise on the grounds that “The existence of evils is required for some goods” (Mousavirad 2022, 189). As evidence, he appeals to soul-making, free will, and divine discipline. With regard to soul-making, he notes that the virtue of mastering temptation and being able to make the right choices in situations requires the presence of the evil of temptation. One can readily think of other examples: cultivating charity requires deprivation, courage requires danger, patience requires difficulty, etc.

Unfortunately, Mousavirad's appeal to soul-building, free will, and spiritual discipline will not support his contention that all evil produces good, for it confuses the contention that all evils produce some good (which is the position of his strong compensation theodicy) with the contention that some goods require evil (Mousavirad 2022, 189). These claims are not equivalent. While it is true that some goods require evil, it does not follow that all goods do. Furthermore, whereas the claim that some evils result in good outcomes is not problematic, the claim that all do is problematic insofar as it presupposes that there are no gratuitous evils.

Whether some evils are gratuitous is a matter of considerable debate, but his premise makes this assumption without providing evidence for it.¹

Appeal to free will to show that evils are necessary to attain good also is problematic, for it too makes a confusion. The free will theodicy does not require that there be evil or that people do evil, only that the doing of evil is *possible*. It is perfectly consistent with a free will theodicy that no one ever commits a moral evil. What the free will theodicy requires is that there be morally significant choice, where a person is free either to perform or to refrain from performing an action that is morally significant for that person, not that the person or any other person actually performs an evil action.

In short, Mousavirad has not established that all evil actions produce some good, and that evil is necessary to produce all good. We will return to gratuitous evil later.

Premise 2: Compensation as justice

For his second premise, Mousavirad contends that “Since the suffering and harms of evils will be compensated in the afterlife, they are just and fair” (Mousavirad 2022, 188).

Compensation, he contends, produces justice, such that God is justified in creating or allowing evils because God compensates sufferers for the evils in the afterlife.

Premise 2 invokes a problematic concept of justice. Suppose that A kidnaps B, subjecting B to painful torture and other forms of degradation. At the same time A promises B that when A releases B, A will compensate B for B’s pain and suffering. One surely cannot contend that A’s

¹ Mousavirad contends that his compensatory theodicy “explains that there are no meaningless evils” (Mousavirad 2022, 191). However, it does not explain gratuitous evil but rather presupposes that there are no meaningless evils.

treatment of B is just and fair because A compensates B for the evil done to B. No matter how A compensates B, the actions of A are morally unjustified. To see this, one might ask how much should A pay B for the maltreatment: one thousand euros; one hundred thousand; one million? The abducted and tortured B might rightly reply that nothing can compensate him for what A did to him.

Mousavirad considers this objection and replies that the above example applies to the weak compensation theodicy but not to his strong compensation theodicy, for, he notes, by adding to compensation in the afterlife production of some good in this life, the evil (and the evildoer) is shown to have purpose and thereby is justified. The good need not exceed the evil. All that is required for the evil (and evildoer) to be fair and just is that there be compensation and some good result from the evil.

Suppose we add this to our above story. Suppose that A says that what A is doing, among other things, in this torture is giving B the opportunity for soul-building. B has the unique opportunity to develop courage and fortitude while A is torturing him, so that not only will B be compensated by A or someone else, but B will experience some good, though not necessarily equivalent to the evil imposed. It seems clear that adding the possibility of soul-building and B being able to make a free choice in responding to the torture does not now make the evil acts of A “just and fair.” In fact, it seems to make A even more sadistic.

Mousavirad says that the good produced by the evil not only need not be equal to or greater than the evil experienced, but it need not be experienced by the person suffering the evil. This, I suggest, is even more pernicious. Suppose in our example, A says to B that A’s actions toward B are justified because when A posts pictures of the torture on the internet, some other persons will be outraged and thus choose to strengthen their moral character. Such a scenario,

combined with compensation, in no way can justify the evil actions of A. In fact, it violates the central Kantian principle that one should never treat people merely as means but also as intrinsically valuable ends in themselves.

The compensation theodicy falters on at least two counts. First, since God provides a life of bliss in Paradise for everyone, no matter what has occurred to them, the blissful events of the paradisaical life are not compensatory, for they do not connect at all with the specific evils suffered by individuals but are a general boon. Second, if Paradise provides great bounty and pleasure for everyone, there is no connection between the *degree* of pain and suffering and the amount of reward. One person would not have more bliss than another because they suffered more; all would be blessed. Lives in the afterlife cannot vary by degrees of pleasure or benefit, for one can imagine the chaos of jealousy in Paradise if God blessed people unequally. If compensation is to have any force, it must be connected to the wrong done to the individual.² Returning to our example, suppose that when A is done torturing B, B returns to society, and it just so happens that in this society everyone is given a substantial monetary reward after age 40, so that B along with everyone else will have a remaining life of bliss. But this blissful life is provided to everyone, not only or specifically to B, and not in any way connected with the evil B suffered. Those who suffered terribly do not experience more or greater bliss. Thus, B is not specifically compensated for A's torture, for a blissful post-torture life provides no compensatory connection

² See Marilyn Adams, who argues that for God to permit horrendous evils, there should be an organic rather than an additive unity between the evils experienced and the goods one receives (Adams 2000, 28–29).

between the life of pleasure and the evils A did to B. The specific evils B experienced are uncompensated and justice is not served. In short, compensation does not establish justice.

Mousavirad considers the objection that there is a difference between compensation and justification. He replies that, considered in itself, compensation is not justificatory, but coupled with the good produced by the evil, it is justificatory. “If God brings about evils for their present good and compensates for the harms of evil, these two components together make evils rationally acceptable and reasonable” (Mousavirad 2022, 198). But if future compensation unconnected with the evil suffered is not justificatory, adding some present good that is neither comparable to nor greater than the evil, or does not affect the sufferer but accrues to someone else, cannot justify the evil. It might provide a purpose for the evil, but without a greater good it is insufficient to afford justification.

In short, neither specific nor general compensation, even connected with some general good, provides grounds for justifying evil. Premise 2 fails to provide an adequate account of justice and fairness and thus does not provide the needed justification for evil required to overcome the weakness of the weak form of a compensatory theodicy.

Premise 3: Evil as good and beneficial

In premise 3, Mousavirad contends that “Since evils are neither futile nor unjust, they are good and beneficial for all humans.... In reality, there is no evil in this world. (Mousavirad 2022, 189, 191). This, however, confuses the quality of the act or experience with its consequences. Evils are not good nor made good by what might result from them, but rather can be the means by which the good is realized. They remain evils that must be justified. The torture and degradation inflicted by A on B remain an evil, regardless of any fortitude or courage B develops or any compensation B receives. An evil may be justified (as when the surgeon inflicts pain to

remove a cancerous tumor), but the evil of the pain and suffering remains evil, to be avoided if possible. What evils may produce or bring about should not be equated with their intrinsic character of being evil.

Animal suffering

In addressing gratuitous evil, Mousavirad refers to William Rowe's widely referenced fawn case, wherein caught in a forest fire, a fawn suffers terribly before it dies. He contends that although this suffering may seem to be pointless, some good comes from it now and that it will be compensated for in the afterlife. It is "inevitable and necessary" (Mousavirad 2022, 193). Indeed, "more evils are necessary to achieve more goods," such that more evils (and corresponding more goods) are better than less evils and less goods. In fact, Mousavirad implies that God ought to bring about more horrendous evils, for "the more horrendous the evil, the more good will be produced (even if this evil does not lead to the greater good as a whole)." (Mousavirad 2022, 194).

The suffering fawn is a case of natural evil and creates some specific problems for a compensatory theodicy. First, will the fawn be compensated in an afterlife? If not, a compensatory theodicy might account for human suffering but would not account for animal suffering and hence all evil, including much natural evil. One could reply that non-humans do not suffer, but this would be a dubious contention that Mousavirad does not propose. If the fawn will be compensated (and later Mousavirad hints that this may be so in a footnote (Mousavirad 2022, 196)), how would a fawn be compensated in an afterlife? Would it be aware that it was being compensated for the suffering it underwent? Isn't awareness of compensation a necessary condition for justice to be served? If the fawn is unaware that it is being compensated for its suffering, in what sense would the fawn suffering terribly be a case of justice and fairness?

Creating more horrendous evils

Even more problematic is the contention that God is not only morally permitted to create horrendous evil, but God ought also to do so since “the more horrendous the evil, the more good will be produced” (Mousavirad 2022, 194). He says that “the theory of compensation works only when severe and horrendous evils are unavoidable, but I believe that there is this inevitability and necessity” (Mousavirad 2022, 193). For one thing, on his theodicy the good need not equal or surpass the evil; all that is necessary is that *some* good result. But then the amount or intensity of the horrendous evil has no connection with the quantity and quality of the good that results. So long as some good results, on his account the evil is justified. And if all that is necessary is that some good result, horrendous evil is likely unjustified: less evil will do just as well. For another, we are again presented with a pernicious account of justice when he says that we should do a greater quantity and quality of horrendous evil so that more good will result. Mousavirad contends that supposing there are two worlds, W1 where 60% evil produces 40% good, and W2 where 30% evil produces 20% good, God should bring about W1 because it results in more good.

However, not only would this view be a miscarriage of justice by justifying the various horrendous genocides of the last centuries on the grounds that they produced some good, but it would imply that there should have been even more of these horrendous evils and their kin, that an increase would be just and fair. Doing more and worse evil so that (some) more good results is morally unacceptable. It would mean, for example, that A would be justified in making things worse for B so that B can develop a bit more patience, fortitude, and courage. Bringing about more nonequivalent good does not justify adding more evil.

Treating people as means only and not as ends

Finally, as we have already noted, Mousavirad's theory is objectionable in that it treats people only as means and not as ends who are intrinsically valuable in themselves. Consider Mousavirad's example where "God creates a disabled infant for a parent to be tested and spiritually perfected through their free will" (Mousavirad 2022, 195). Mousavirad justifies this on the grounds that "it is not cruel to the infant, since God will compensate all of its hardships and sufferings (Mousavirad 2022, 196). But in this instance the infant is treated solely as a means for the good of the parent. Surely, the parents could develop some good without the infant being disabled, for example, by being given the privilege of raising a child with all its concurrent challenges.

Conclusion

Although Mousavirad has made an advance on a weak compensation theodicy, his strong compensation theodicy is fatally flawed. Not only are his premises objectionable, and not only does compensation not justify the evils done, but the additional justification given in terms of lesser goods that may even be produced for others leads to totally unacceptable ways of treating people only as means to produce good.

References

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