THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

A Paper

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Introduction

On May 20, 2013, an EF5 tornado ripped through Moore, Oklahoma, killing twenty-four people, including nine children. The storm destroyed a seventeen-mile path causing an estimated $2 billion in property damage.¹ David Hume, noted agnostic philosopher, classified such events as indicative of the fact that God either does not exist, is not all-powerful, or is evil.² Such a response presents what is known as “the problem of evil.” This problem stems from the tension in the suppositions that if God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnibenevolent (all-good), then evil should not exist.³ Deleting one of the characteristics of God resolves the conflict; however, doing so also renders a being that is no longer God. If God were not pure in His goodness, evil would necessarily exist. If God was not all-powerful, a malevolent force could exist, as God would not necessarily be able to force its inexistence. If God did not possess all insight, evil


might exist without His knowledge as a by-product of the world He created. It is this problem of evil that the completed work of Christ on the cross resolves. For, the inconsistency lies not in the existence of a Supreme Being, but in the self inflicted imperfections of the vessels He created.

**The Problem of Evil**

Until 1996, the consensus in the scholarly world was that the problem of evil, as proffered by John Mackie in 1955, had been summarily answered since the publication of Alvin Plantinga’s *Free Will Defense* in 1974. During that time, William Rowe countered with an alternate version of the problem, which he termed ‘evidential’ in nature. It received intense critical review that forced Rowe to posit a different perspective on the issue in 1996 entitled *The Evidential Problem of Evil*. The issue remains a point of controversy, however, due to its complexity and focus on the greatest entity of all: God.

In its simplest form, the problem of evil is a product of the fact that if God is completely good, knows everything, and supremely powerful, the logical explanation of the existence of evil is enigmatic. When considered, however, the issue contains more depth than the original conundrum would appear to present. In Rowe’s commentary on the problem of evil, he augments the issue to one of personal pain. The challenge is further issued to consider why an all-powerful, omnibenevolent

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4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.
God would allow suffering in a world that He fully controlled and created. The philosopher Collin Howson suggests that this specific issue within the problem of evil is the single greatest weight against God’s existence. He proposes God as the “cause of everything,” thereby implying that He must be the One inflicting pain, and therefore evil. Another trajectory resulting from the suffering aspect of the problem of evil has recently been formalized, though it has been in existence for decades. In his article of 2011, Mark Stephen Scott Murray introduces what he labels as “Theodicy at the Margins,” which views this issue in terms of the oppressed minority. This viewpoint is drawn from the liberation, black and feminist theologies. The newly published perspective views God as always taking the side of the oppressed and avenger of those who cannot defend themselves. This more specific version of the problem of evil is a challenge to the omnibenevolent attribute of God, as an all-good and all-loving Being would seek to extinguish evil at every opportunity. Should He not do so, He is complicit with evil in His permissiveness of it.

A further inconsistency is raised considering this permissiveness and the

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reason a perfect and good God would create a flawed world that permitted evil. A being that did so would necessarily be imperfect, and therefore be disqualified as God under the theistic definition. The imperfections in the world are attributed to its Creator, not His creations, thereby rendering impotent His divinity. Still others raise issues within the problem of evil with the fact that an all powerful, all-knowing, all-good God would create a world where His creations would be allowed to commit evil. John Mackie reasoned that mankind makes both good and evil choices. From his perspective, an omniscient God should be able to foreknow every conceivable choice each person could make, then create a world in which the right choice were made in each instance. God’s failure to do so renders Him less than all-powerful, certainly not omnibenevolent, and challenges the state of His omniscience.

This train of thought leads to one of the most egregious facets within the problem of evil. Occurrences of atrocities and horrendous evil contradict the notion of a God that actively seeks the welfare of His creation. A God that does not intervene to relieve or prevent the suffering resulting from horrendous evil is assumed to have a higher moral reason for refraining doing so. Should He not, the suffering caused by the evil would have no purpose, making God devoid of reason.


14 Stone, 261.
Proponents of this view indicate that mankind has observed countless events of suffering that appeared to have no purpose associated with them. Using Ockham’s Razor in the evaluation of these observations yields the conclusion that thousands of instances of suffering occur needlessly; therefore, there must be no God. Additional debate that surrounds the rationale behind suffering focuses on the point at which evil becomes gratuitous. Non-gratuitous evil, it is reasoned, may be plausible as it is seen to serve a purpose otherwise unachievable. Evil becomes gratuitous when an outweighing good is not achieved through its execution or the good achieved by the enacted evil could have been achieved via a less grievous evil act. The issue of suffering, its permission and prevention has evolved into a more prominent debate. This is the result of the perceived absence, in general, of a God Who is presented as all loving, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent in the face of such suffering. From this observation, the argument of divine hiddenness has emerged from the problem of evil, yet it is outside the scope of this paper for detailed redress.

Response

The simplest response to the definition of the problem is to remove any one of the attributes of God causing the conflict with evil. However, it has already been stated

\[\text{15 Ibid.}\]


that this approach is untenable. Attempts to resolve each one of the tensions manifested in the problem of evil are varied, but all are based on the concept of fairness and morality. The issue results when mankind’s concept of fairness becomes at variance with that which is projected upon its God, Who, because of His god-like attributes, should be held to a higher standard.\textsuperscript{18} Yet this is the point of failure in much of the debate, as the attributes and actions of God, though worthy of study, are infinitely complex. The enigmatic nature of the subject matter, however, does not provide sufficient reason to withdraw from the search for truth. Therefore, in redress of the position that God is the cause of everything and is therefore complicit in evil, the fact that God cannot behave in a manner inconsistent with His Holy nature renders the point illogical. An act is logically impossible for God to do if it counters an attribute of God.\textsuperscript{19} God did, in fact, create an environment wherein His creation could remain free from the problem of evil (Genesis 1:31). It was, however, marred by mankind through rebellion against his Creator (Genesis 3:6). God is all-powerful and the source of life for mankind; therefore, He has the sovereign right to allow or suppress evil as His purview directs. This position is offered as part of Richard Swinburne’s response to the problem of evil.\textsuperscript{20}

A common defense that spans theological contexts is the belief that suffering


serves the purpose of strengthening one’s faith in God as He provides comfort through each ordeal.21 But more than strengthening one’s faith, suffering is a critical part of sanctification, the lifetime process by which believers are transformed into the likeness of Christ.22 The perfecting of one’s faith does not result in a sinless state in this mortal life; rather, it progressively molds man into a more forgiving and understanding individual. This process involves a believer seeing their sin as God sees it, for the ramifications of one’s personal transgressions inflict grief upon even an all-powerful Savior.23 Many arguments posit God as an entity that is disconnected from His creation. This serves as the basis for much of the controversy surrounding the problem of evil. Critics argue that God’s distance from mankind in physical presence and deed is at variance with His supposed omnibenevolent nature. This position is grounded in a misunderstanding of the Sovereignty of God. Because of the actions of man, God made provision for his redemption. In so doing, His Son suffered on behalf of mankind, and continues to do so with each rejection of His offer of eternal life.24 There is no greater deed than that a man lay down his life for another. In accepting God’s redemptive gift, man is allowed to come intimately close to his Creator.

Given the fact that God foreknew the path His creation would take (Revelation 13:8) and continues to suffer for it today (Romans 8:26), many question the reasoning


23 Ibid., 139.

24 Ballard, 73.
behind His provision of free will. However, this too comes from a misunderstanding of the mind of God. He does not delight in forced servitude or worship, as evidenced by the fact that His anger was aroused when Israel served him out of duty, but not out of love (Isaiah 29:13). Further, David would not take land from Araunah the Jebusite in order to offer sacrifices to stop God’s judgment on Israel unless he personally sacrificed to obtain it (2 Samuel 24:24). He knew God would not accept the offerings unless they were made of his own free will. Per Plantiga, a world made up of humans possessing free will – free to choose between right and wrong – does not exist if God forms mankind, and then insures that he always makes the proper choices. Even though humans chose evil, necessitating the advent of a Redeemer and the process of atonement, a world where this state exists is necessarily better than a world in which it does not. Within His sovereignty, God’s ultimate longing is for reconciliation to Himself by the forgiveness of sins through His Son Jesus Christ. That is the reason He extends mercy when humans commit evil acts, so that all may have the opportunity to accept the provision of pardon supplied by Jesus’ death on a cross at Calvary. This is further evidenced in the manner in which the salvation provision was made, as three of the five known women present in the genealogy of Jesus were parties to recorded sin. Tamar pretended to be a prostitute.


26 Ibid.

Bathsheba had adultery forced upon her. Rahab was a prostitute. Even in death He was the object of mankind’s most torturous and evil act of crucifixion. This paradigm was instantiated by design so that God’s creation could not only be reconciled to Him, but to progressively learn to be more like Him through the process of sanctification.\(^\text{28}\)

The position that God does not intervene in the presence of what mankind deems egregious evil is based on a faulty assumption. God is not part of a system of morality, that mankind should seek to justify His actions. He does not fall within the boundaries of mankind’s jurisdiction for moral judgment.\(^\text{29}\) God, simply stated, is truth. Apart from God there is no plumb line by which morality may be measured. He is not “the measured;” rather, His attributes are the standard by which all human actions are evaluated. The demand of mankind to presuppose that God would have moral justification for His allowance of any given instance of evil is misplaced. Humans are predisposed to elevate their importance and project their characteristics onto objects they do not understand.\(^\text{30}\) Job showed tendencies of this during his conversation with God as he endured a textbook representation of gratuitous evil.\(^\text{31}\) God responded, confirming His sovereignty over the state of Job’s life and restating Job’s position within it (Job 38:4).

\(^\text{28}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^\text{29}\) Hasker, 155.

\(^\text{30}\) Teehan, 340.

The prophet Daniel understood this relationship, declaring that no human can compare himself to God, as He does whatever He wants, and no one can stop Him and question His actions (Daniel 4:35).

A primary factor in the gratuity of evil lies in the fact that not only does it appear that there is no moral justification for the amount of evil occurring, but that God does nothing to prevent it, nor does He provide a visible mechanism for people to believe in His existence.\(^{32}\) Since mankind’s salvation depends upon belief in God, the most egregious sin lies with God for not making Himself more apparent for mankind to believe in. Peter van Inwagen offers the defense that in providing mankind with a sustained amount of miracles and signs as proof of His existence, God’s sovereign plan of atonement would not be achieved.\(^{33}\) This position has roots in Scripture, as Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ request for such as sign with a rebuff, indicating that they had already received sufficient proof of His authority and motive in antiquity (Matthew 12:38).

**Summary**

The debate surrounding the problem of evil will continue to evolve, as mankind is born with the propensity to both seek a higher power, yet focus on himself as the fulfills the role. Until humanity gains a proper perspective of itself, the problem of evil will remain an enigma that drives many from establishing a personal relationship with their Creator. The key to understanding the problem of evil lies in grasping God’s

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\(^{32}\) Soerensen, 300.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
desire to reconcile humanity to Him through atonement. He created a world in which mankind was free to choose between right and wrong. Even after man marred His creation, He entered into an imperfect environment via the same weak vessel He came to redeem. In doing so, He endured the very suffering that the problem of evil attributes to His direction. Now, having risen from the dead, He is continually grieved by the repercussion of man’s disobedience following creation. When Jesus came upon the mourners at Lazarus’ funeral, He wept (John 11:35). He felt compassion when He saw the funeral procession for the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13). Even now, when believers experience death, it is a precious event to God (Psalm 116:15). Redemption is Who God is, not what He does. To understand the problem of evil is to know God; and that, from before time began, has been the point.


