

Problem of Evil

Before we get going on the main topic for this evening, there is one further argument for the existence of God that we should address. This is the argument from religious experience.

One problem facing the arguments for the existence of God that we examined last week was that they lacked anything that looked like a substantial spiritual dimension. The argument from design (Teleological Argument), for example, merely made the claim that since we would, quite reasonably, infer the existence of a designer if we found a watch on a heath we can, therefore, say the same about the universe given its similarly mechanical nature. The first cause argument (Cosmological Argument) invokes the causal principle to explain why there is anything at all but, again, does not address the fundamentally spiritual dimensions of religious belief. And, whilst the Ontological Argument centres on the idea of perfection, there is, similarly, nothing in it that specifically addresses the spiritual side to religious belief.

Indeed, it might (arguably) be said that spirituality is the central characteristic of religious belief. With this in mind, I want to turn, briefly, to an argument that focuses more on spirituality than on scientific principles such as design and causation.

The Argument from Religious Experience

This idea is that a religious person sees the world in a way that shows them God's existence. We are not talking about particular mystical experiences within an otherwise normal life. Rather, the idea is that our understanding of the world *is* religious experience. In the same way that a conservationist may see the world differently from someone with no interest in plants and animals whatsoever, so a religious person will see the world through the prism of God. In essence that means that they will see contrasts, similarities and differences in a way that is interdependent with (and expressive of) their religiosity. You may liken this idea to someone who sees the world through the prism of conservation and a love of natural history. This person will constantly have their attention drawn to the natural world (even in the centre of the biggest city). They will make distinctions between different sorts of animal in cases where another person would not. As a person

becomes a better naturalist (or conservationist), they will come to see ever more subtle differences and similarities; one could say that this is indicative of them maturing in their subject. Analogously, the philosopher John Hick (1922-2012) argues coming to know God is a maturing process of a comparable kind.

Even if you do not subscribe to Hick's argument, many religious people have experiences that they count as religious in a special way. Almost always, such experiences are believed to be a sign of direct contact with God. So what kind of experiences are we talking about? – Virtually anything can qualify as a religious experience provided it is set within the right context (context is very important and is something you should think about). The more common kinds of religious experience frequently centre on a feeling of being awestruck in relation to some kind of event or phenomenon. Religious people who visit empty or ruined churches regularly speak of being absorbed in a sense of mystery or of feeling 'in the presence' of something. The 'something' they believe to be God. The question that most obviously arises from this is: why should we attribute such feelings to God, rather than some other – perhaps psychological – explanation?

The famous philosopher of psychology, William James (brother of the author Henry James), argued that whilst religions differed, it was possible to detect a thread common to all genuine religious experience. (An aside: What counts as genuine and why?) He argued that religious experiences are, like perception, experiential. However, such religious perceptions are – for the most part – unlike those associated with light, sound, taste, temperature and so on. Some people 'hear' God speaking to them for example but, usually, the actual words are not fundamental to the content of the experience; they are, according to James, a form of awareness that rises above (transcends) normal perception. This transcendence frequently takes the form of feeling close to God or in his immediate presence. During the religious experience, the 'reality' of the earthly world drops away; we 'tune out' of it, so to speak. I'm sure many of you have had experiences in which you have been so caught up in something that you have stopped noticing what else is going on around you. Ultimately, James suggests that a religious experience gives us a sense of the reality of the unseen. – Given that the unseen is invisible, it makes no sense for us to speak of it if our aim is to get others to see it as we do. He

believes religious experience is based on five basic tenets

1. The visible world is part of a spiritual world that gives it meaning.
2. A harmonious relationship with the spiritual universe is our true purpose in life.
3. This 'harmony' allows spiritual energy to flow into (and affect) our everyday existence.
4. Religious experiences produce a new passion for life and its meaning; this adds itself to how we understand our lives already.
5. Religious experiences tend to promote feelings of safety and security with regard to ourselves and our place in the world. They make the sense of our vulnerability to misfortune less acute because they put us in relation to the feeling that we are loved by God.

Objections

The problem, of course, is that these moments could be put down as instances of temporary insanity. Perhaps, more realistically, they could be understood as times in which the brain becomes less aware of its surroundings or functions differently. Or, as Freud suggests, they might be forms of hallucination related to deep-seated insecurities about the fragility of our existence. Freud also asks is this: isn't it remarkable that religion describes the universe "exactly as we are bound to wish it to be"? – Perhaps you do not agree with the implication of this question? Does religion always describe the universe as we would wish it to be?

The philosopher Bertrand Russell made a much more general objection: he argued that there is nothing in the content of religious experiences that implies the existence of God. They are just experiences that we, as individuals, have; they may be important to us and our personal beliefs but that is not enough to make a reasonable case for the existence of God.

Let us now turn to the main topic of this class – namely, arguments against the existence of God.

Arguments Against The Existence of God

Of arguments against the existence of God, there is one that stands out. It is an argument based on what is known as ***The Problem of Evil***. The reason this argument is powerful is because it trades on a logical contradiction as opposed to analogy or experience. So how does it work?

The Problem of Evil

First suggested by Epicurus and formulated by Augustine in his Confessions, the problem of evil runs as follows: "Either God cannot abolish evil, or he will not; if he cannot then he is not all-powerful; if he will not then he is not all good." Its power derives from the fact that it claims that the presence of evil in the world logically contradicts the possibility of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God (this is the standard conception of the Christian God).

There is, I think we will all agree, evil in the world. Look no further than the Holocaust or, more recently, the beheadings carried out by terrorists in the Middle East. Then, of course, there are natural disasters such as the Japanese Tsunami of 2006 which killed over 15,000 people. Although many would not consider natural disasters to be evil, they are often thought of as forms of natural evil which can be contrasted with moral evil. Moral evil is that which is carried out by human beings. Evil of both the natural and moral kind can generally said to be a great cause of suffering and unhappiness in the world.

Here are a number of questions this raises:

1. How can an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God allow moral or natural evil to happen?
2. If God is all-knowing He would know that by creating the earth and human beings with free will, he would be causing (creating) acts of evil.
3. How can Adam and Eve be held accountable for what they did if God created them knowing that they would eat of the tree of knowledge?
4. If God was all powerful and all-knowing, he would know about future natural disasters and be able to stop them. If he is all good why does he not do so?

In trying to answer these questions we seem logically compelled to undermine the possibility of the Christian God as traditionally conceived. Any combination of two out of His three attributes is possible but not all three. God can be all-powerful and all-knowing but not all good: he may know about the evil we carry out on one another and the natural disasters that kill thousands of innocent people but does not intervene because he is not all-good. He could be all-powerful and all-good but not all-knowing: perhaps he does not know about our acts of

evil or the natural disasters that occur. He could be all-knowing and all-good but not all-powerful and, as such, be unable to help. Thus, it seems that the tripartite, traditional conception of the Christian God cannot be reconciled with the presence of evil in the world.

The Free Will Defence

Many theologians answer the problem of evil (and arguments based on it) by making the 'free will defence'. In essence, this defence states that in order for human beings to properly understand good and evil they need to encounter genuine forms of each. One cannot appreciate a sunny day without experiencing a rainy one after all. God, therefore, had to give us free will in order for us to learn and understand the meanings of our actions more fully. Indeed, one could push this defence further and say that such evil is necessary in order to allow for certain acts of profound goodness.

Consider, for instance, the following passage from Primo Levi's account of his time in Auschwitz. Levi was deported there in 1943 and, just before the end of the war, was moved to the camp sanatorium because he had contracted scarlet fever. A 17 year-old Dutch Jew by the name of Ladmaker was also in the sanatorium. He had typhus, scarlet fever and a severe cardiac condition, and could only lie on his front, as he was covered in bedsores. One night, shortly before liberation, Ladmaker's condition deteriorated further. Another prisoner *"...climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Ladmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tinfoil, diluted a little chloramines and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself...I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done.* (Levi.P. *If This is Man*. p.173)

The contemporary moral philosopher Raimond Gaita remarks that, 'this is goodness to wonder at' meaning, not only that it exists way beyond what we would normally think of as morally good behaviour (such as giving to charity, for example), but that it is, in a

sense, beyond our ability to rationalize. The point being (in terms of the free will defence) that without such evil as was perpetrated under the Nazi regime, the possibility for such remarkable acts of goodness would not exist.

But what about natural disasters that cause suffering (natural evil)? Broadly speaking, the same argument can be made. As human beings with free will, we are at liberty to choose to live wherever we like. Theologians suggest that it is our choices that bring us suffering, not God. So, for example, we might choose to live in an earthquake zone or in the shadow of a volcano – it's up to us! Indeed, that we do choose such locations then allows for extraordinary acts of goodness in the forms of heroic rescues and such like.

Does the Free Will Defence Work?

One thing to notice immediately is that there seems to be an awful lot of evil in the world. Is it really necessary for our deepened understanding of right and wrong that God allows for so much of it to continually occur?

A further objection is: why did God create something (when there was nothing before) that He knew would allow for tremendous suffering? Surely, this shows that, indirectly, he has committed an immoral act and, as such, is not all good (let alone worthy of worship)?

The Evil God Challenge

A further rejection of the free will defence – and one that is much more difficult to answer – has recently been developed by the contemporary philosopher Stephen Law.

Law argues as follows. If an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God needs to allow for the existence of evil for humankind to properly appreciate goodness (by giving us free will), so an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god would have to allow for goodness in order for us to properly appreciate suffering. In other words, just as we have the problem of evil in relation to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good god, we have the problem of good in relation to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god. Both gods have to provide free will in order for there to be full understanding of good and evil. So both gods have to allow for free will and both gods have to allow for the moral opposite of their own character.

Law thinks that most people would find the evil god hypothesis absurd but he wonders whether they should. After all, what makes it more reasonable to believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good god as opposed to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god? Law suggests that Christian responses of the free will kind highlighted above could just as easily apply to an all-evil god as they could an all-good god. An all-evil god would have to allow for some good to occur, for some people to want for nothing in order for the majority of us to realise just how miserable our lives actually are. The only reason we are disposed towards believing in an all-good god as opposed to an all-evil one is a phenomenon of our psychology. There is nothing that makes belief in an all-good god any more *reasonable* than belief in an all evil god.

As a theist, one might be tempted to appeal to the passage from Primo Levi I quoted above. Perhaps there is a need for acts of evil of the kind Levi experienced in order for 'goodness to wonder at' to emerge. However, there are also examples of evil to wonder at – acts which are so appalling that it is beyond our ability to comprehend them. Consider some of the most appalling atrocities of the Holocaust. In addition to the gas chambers and appalling acts of torture, there were cases in which the skins of Polish-Jewish women were used to make lampshades. Moreover, although not done on a mass scale as previously claimed, it has been confirmed that that the Nazi regime experimented with making soap from human corpses. Surely this is evil to wonder at?

Law is not saying that an evil-god is any more or less likely to exist than an all-good god; his argument is that, in terms of the free will defence, one could make it just as reasonably in relation to an all-evil god as one could an all-good god. Thus, in terms of defending the existence of the Christian God as traditionally conceived, the free will defence fails.