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Can God Take Responsibility for Evil and Still be Good

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Theodicy, the study of God and evil, is a vast landscape of ideas that calls for careful analysis. Issues related to God and evil are multitudinous and complex. They range from questions about the nature of evil to questions about the nature of God and they cover just about everything in between.

In the following essay I have what I take to be a small contribution to make to just one aspect of this rather large and complex field of inquiry.

Roughly speaking, there are two kinds of arguments against the existence of God, deductive and inductive. The deductive arguments (there is some variety of these) try to show that the existence of a particular kind of God is incompatible with the existence of evil in the world. Given that evil exists in the world, then God cannot exist. The inductive arguments (there is also some variety of these) try to show that the existence of God is not probable or likely. The inductive

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arguments cannot prove that God does not exist, but they can demonstrate that God's existence is not likely.³

For many years I found some version of the deductive argument against the existence of God to be persuasive. Over the past several years, however, I have come to see a problem with the argument, a problem that now makes it unpersuasive. In the following I would like to share with the reader the problem that has changed my mind about the persuasiveness of the argument against the existence of God based on the existence of evil in the world.

The version of the deductive argument that I used to find persuasive is the following. If God is all powerful and all good, then God would not permit the existence of evil in the world. There is evil in the world. Therefore, a God that is all powerful and all good cannot exist. The argument is sometimes put in terms of "all good, all powerful, and all knowing," but for the sake of simplicity I will focus upon omnipotence and perfect goodness. The point that I want to make follows from this discussion and does not require me to say something about all three characteristics.

It is important to keep in mind that the argument from evil does not conclude that "God does not exist," but only that if we describe God in a particular way (all good and all powerful) the God so described does not exist. There are many descriptions of God that make the existence of God compatible with the existence of evil. Any God that is not all powerful, for example, can exist along side evil without being blamed for that evil. Or, any God that is not all good can exist along side evil, although in this case such a God can be blamed for the evil. Since the idea of God that most people find acceptable, however, is a God that is both all powerful and all good, I will consider the argument from evil as pertaining to such a God. If I can show that an all powerful, all good God can take responsibility for evil and still be good, then I will have shown something much more significant than merely showing that the existence of some Gods is compatible with the existence of evil.

Let me begin by briefly explaining the argument. The argument seems to say that if God is all powerful, then God has the capacity to

³ For a thorough account of the problem of evil, see Michael Tooley's contribution to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The Problem of Evil." You can find this encyclopedia on line.

eliminate evil from the universe. If God cannot eliminate evil from the world—does not have the power to eliminate evil—then God is not all powerful. And if God is all good, then God would eliminate evil from the universe if God could do so. A God that can eliminate evil, but does not do so, is seen as a God that is not all good. Since God can eliminate evil in virtue of his or her being all powerful, a God that is also all good will eliminate evil from the universe.

While there are many things to be considered in an examination of the argument, I would like to focus upon one specific element. Some people argue that evil is a necessary part of the universe. It provides an opportunity for “soul building” or it is a necessary correlate of “free will,” and so on. Those who argue in this fashion (whatever the explanation) are giving reasons why the world as we know it must include evil, even if God is all good and all powerful. The claim here, in opposition to the argument from evil, is that the world is a better place when it has some goods that outweigh the evils that must accompany them. To put this another way, there will be more overall good in the world—the world will be a better place overall—if the world includes some goods that are accompanied by evils, than if the world included only goods without any evils. For example, one might claim that the world in which there exists free will (but also the evil that comes with free will) is a better world than a world that has no free will, but also no evil.

Since this is a bit tricky, let me give an analogy. If we want the most money we can have to spend on the things that we would like to purchase, then the world in which we have one million dollars to spend, but also have one hundred thousand dollars of debt, is a better world than one in which we have only one hundred thousand dollars, but also have no debt. I am not sure I agree, but it is not difficult to see why someone would make such a claim. Similarly, if the world affords us more good, even though it includes evil, we can see why someone would think this a better world than one in which there is less good, but no evil at all. The world in which we live, then, even with its attendant evils, is a better world than one that has no evil, even though it has less good. If this is true, then it seems to follow that God can take responsibility for evil and still be good because God is producing more good than would otherwise be the case.

Now, in defense of the argument from evil, we might claim that since God is all powerful he could have created a different world from the one that he did in fact create. This other world could include lots of good without any evil at all. For example, God could have created a world in which only God and the angels exist. Such a world could be filled with a great deal of good and it would be free of evil. Wouldn't such a world be a better world than the one in which we live?

On the face of it, it seems to me that this defense of the argument works. World number one includes much goodness and no evil, while world number two includes the same amount of goodness as world number one, but it includes some evil. Since God is both all powerful—God can create either world number one or world number two—and God is all good—God will create the better world, world number one—God cannot exist if world number two exists.

But, does this defense work? Is it true that the world without evil is better than the world with more good, but also some evil? These are the questions that bring me to consider what it means for us to say, as human beings, that the world without any evil is better than a world with some evil but also with much good.

Here it seems to me that the better worlds that God could have created are worlds that would not include human beings with their attendant free will and suffering.⁴ There is here a contrast between worlds in which there is evil (but also human beings) and those worlds in which there is no evil, but also no human beings. If we return to the question of overall good, the second kind of world seems to be superior to the first kind of world. And this supports the argument against the existence of God based on the existence of evil in the world. That is, God could have created a world without evil (but also without human beings), but God did not do this. God created a world with both evil and human beings in it. This makes God responsible for the evil in the world. Since God is responsible for the evil in the world and could have created a world without evil, God cannot be considered all good.

⁴ It could be that such worlds could not include animals as well as human beings, but this is another issue to be considered later.

The assumption here is that a world without evil is a better world than a world that includes evil. A world in which just God and the angels exist (but no evil) is a better world than one in which human beings exist, but also evil. Therefore, in creating the best of all possible worlds, God would create a world without evil but also a world without human beings. Again, this supports the argument against the existence of God. God has created a world with evil when God could have created a world without evil. The power of God is not in question here, but God's goodness is clearly called into question. God cannot create a world with evil in it and still be considered all good. Or can he/she?

This is where things get interesting. There seems something odd about my claiming, as a human being, that "the world would be a better place without human beings in it." This phrase is not illogical or meaningless, but it nevertheless seems odd to me and I will try to say something about that oddness. The importance of this phrase follows from the fact that if the world would not be better without human beings, then we will have removed one feature of the argument from evil, namely that God could have created a better world but did not do so.⁵

There is something odd about my saying that the world would be a better place if it contained no human beings because in a world where there are no human beings, human beings have no interests at all, and especially none regarding what counts as a good or better world. In a world without human beings there is no issue of what is a better or worse world, since better and worse require human beings for whom things are better or worse. Since there are no human beings in a world inhabited by only God and angels, it is not possible for us to say that such a world is better or worse. In a world without human beings there is no human better or worse.

We can talk, of course, about worlds in which there are no human beings, and we can say that such a world is better or worse, but the better or worse in this case is not our own better or worse. It is not the better or worse of human beings. We can say that a world without suffering is better than a world with suffering in it, just as we could

⁵ Other versions of the argument may still be acceptable. This discussion takes up only one or two versions of the deductive form of the argument against the existence of God based on the existence of evil.

say that a world with more trees is a better world than a world with fewer trees. But if there are no human beings in this world who cares? What difference does it make to human beings if one world is better than another but there are no human beings in that better world? There seems to me to be something wrong with talking about better worlds when the goodness of those worlds would not in any way affect human beings (because there are no human beings in those worlds).

As you can see, the oddness of making claims about the goodness of worlds without human beings in them is a puzzle. In one sense we understand the claims, but in another sense the claims seem inappropriate. Let me try an analogy here to see if I can make this oddity easier to understand. Suppose that we (human beings) are talking about an alien planet. We say that the alien planet would be a better place for the aliens to live if it includes less suffering. We understand what this means because we human beings already have the idea that more or less suffering on the part of inhabitants of a planet means that life on that planet is better or worse. But using suffering as the standard of life that is better or worse is only available to us because we as human beings already use that standard. If there are no human beings, however, then it is not clear that the human standard of better or worse makes the same kind of sense it does when human beings are involved.

If we talk about worlds that are better or worse, but we are not able to use human standards of better or worse, what can we say? In a world without human beings in it, where we cannot introduce human standards of better or worse (such as suffering) what would we say makes such a world better or worse? And the answer is, I think, that we would not know what to say about what makes such a world better or worse. Since we are not able to impose human values on a world without human beings in it, we really do not know what to say about such a world. And yet, we do say things about such worlds and those things make some kind of sense. That we both make sense and have no idea what to say about what makes a world without human beings in it better or worse seems to me to expose the oddity of our saying that a world with only God and angels is a better world than a world with human beings in it, but also the evil that comes with human existence.

What can we conclude from this discussion of “the human perspective” and better worlds? First, I think that this discussion calls into question the premise that “If God is all powerful and all good, then God would not permit the existence of evil in the world.” The reason we question this premise is that it looks as though a world without human beings and no evil may not be a better world than a world in which there are human beings and the evils that accompany such creatures. The reason the first world may not be better is that it may not be better from the human perspective and this is the only perspective we have. We can understand better worlds only in terms of what human beings consider better or worse and a world without human beings in it does not include the human perspective. What human beings think is irrelevant in a world without human beings in it.

Calling the premise into question means that there can be evil in the world and God can still be good because the goods that make this a better world are accompanied by some evils. The goods and evils go together. To have the one is to have the other. We may want to say that God, given that God is all powerful, should be able to separate the goods and evils. But, in this case that separation takes us as human beings out of equation and once we are out of the picture it becomes odd for us to apply our own perspective to a world without human beings in it.

I want to be clear, however, about this conclusion. It does not refute that version of the argument against the existence of God based on evil that considers the amount of evil in the world. That is, we might argue that even though God can create a world with evil in it and still be good, God could have created a world with less evil in it than the present one and since God did not do that God’s existence is incompatible with the amount of evil in the present world. Also, calling the premise of the deductive argument into question tells us nothing about the inductive arguments designed to show that God’s existence is not likely. These issues remain to be considered. The discussion above shows only that God can take responsibility for evil and still be good and it shows this by asking what sense it makes for us to apply our human perspective to a world without human beings in it.



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