

1 God, Evil, and Justification

It is not pleasant to turn one's gaze toward the suffering experienced in life, but it is inescapable. Inevitably we endure heartbreak and physical pain in our personal lives, and we confront our own vulnerability to injury and disease, as well to disrespect and mistreatment, to betrayal, to loss, and to premature death. Beyond our individual minds and bodies, the losses and pains that come to those we love – our sons and daughters, our partners, our brothers and sisters, our closest friends – may cut even more deeply. We hurt when they hurt, and it is deeply vexing to attempt to understand why they could possibly be made to endure the setbacks, the injuries, the diseases, and the injustices they do. To widen our view to the suffering of our fellow human inhabitants of the globe at the current moment, we need only – and we should – read and listen to documentary filmmakers and journalists' reports: a pregnant woman whose pelvis is shattered in a bombing in Ukraine and the millions of Ukrainian mothers, fathers, and children who have lost everything in a senseless invasion; an Indian heat wave causing deaths from dehydration among people living in poverty in homes lacking insulation and cooling systems; innocent people going about their shopping in the United States, shot to death in a rampage by a racist gunman in the grip of a white nationalist “replacement” conspiracy theory; the ungraspable numbers in the millions of those who have died – and those who remain alive, in deep grief over losing those who have died – in an ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.

We look backward to history and see scenes of grotesque violence and cruelty. Use of terms such as the transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide can seem wrong in virtue of their generalness. Labels can obscure – and keep us feeling psychologically safe, in a way that should be challenged – the individual realities of what was experienced and endured in historical atrocities: female enslaved persons forced to bear the children of slave owners only to have their infants stolen from them at birth to be sold and used, never seen again by their mothers; the slow, wasting, painful death of starvation through forced hard labor in prison camps; the brutality inflicted in beheadings by machetes in front of family members; Native American children forced into assimilation “schools,” subjected to cultural erasure as well as emotional and physical abuse; malicious murders motivated by hatred for people because of their sexual orientation; countless maternal deaths in the natural process of childbirth, every one of them tragic.¹ We have not yet mentioned the nonhuman animal suffering that

¹ As reported in Kristoff and WuDunn (2009, pp. 98–99), the highest lifetime risk of dying in the process of childbirth is in Niger, where a woman or girl has a 1 in 7 chance of dying. Overall, in sub-Saharan Africa, the lifetime risk of dying in childbirth is 1 in 22. A woman in India has a 1 in 70 chance of dying in childbirth at some time in her life, compared to the United States, where the lifetime risk is 1 in 4,800, Italy, where it is 1 in 26,000, and Ireland, where it is (only) 1 in 47,600.

has occurred, and continues to occur, in the natural world, in the abuse of pets and in animal fights, and in heartless practices in factory farming.

Fixing our attention on the evils in our world can be so disheartening that it is not only diversions such as watching a comedy series or gardening that tempt us away, but anything at all distracting, even attending to bills, scrubbing messes, or doing the laundry. It takes courage to face the saddest and most devastating facts about the experience of life, for human beings and other sentient creatures. We need even more courage to sustain reflection on these facts with respect to their theological and metaphysical implications. These are not easy topics to work out, either emotionally or rationally.

Still, none of us can escape the painful and brutal aspects of human life. And billions of us do currently, or have in the past, believed in the existence of God. By ‘God’ we mean in this Element an absolutely perfect divine being, one who essentially is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good and who is (if existent) Creator of the universe. Most of us at one point or another have wondered about how the world could contain the suffering it does if there were a God. How should one think about the question of the theoretical fit between a metaphysical picture of the world as created and overseen by God, on the one hand, and the realities of the atrocities and suffering we observe?

1.1 Defining Evil

Sometimes the word ‘evil’ is construed in such a way that it suggests malicious intent. On this understanding of the term, the suffering and devastation experienced during natural disasters, such as the destruction of possessions and lives in tsunamis, tornadoes, and pandemics, would not ordinarily be thought of as evils. They would not be construed as evils, that is, unless one were to think of such suffering and loss as sent to victims by some kind of supernatural agent out of maliciousness, so that the victims were *made victims on purpose*. Some philosophical treatments of theoretical problems concerning God and evil do suggest the possibility that all instances of suffering on Earth are brought about intentionally by agents. For instance, in Alvin Plantinga’s (1974) highly influential theistic defense against an atheist’s charge that theists have logically contradictory beliefs in believing, at the same time, that God exists and that the evils in our world exist, we find the suggestion that perhaps human and animal suffering at the hands of natural forces, such as hurricanes, lightning strikes, and viral scourges, is ultimately the result of

In more recent statistics provided by the World Health Organization, a woman’s lifetime risk of maternal death, defined as the probability that a fifteen-year-old woman will eventually die of a maternal cause, including severe bleeding (mostly bleeding after childbirth), infection (usually after childbirth), and complications from delivery, is 1 in 5,400 in high-income countries and 1 in 45 in low-income countries (World Health Organization, 2019).

the bad free choices of beings we can't directly see. The suggestion is not that perhaps these instances of suffering are caused directly by the absolutely perfect being, God, but rather that, possibly, they are caused by created nonhuman beings who misuse their God-given power of free will to wreak havoc on Earth, beings such as spirits or demons. On this construal, "moral evils" are brought about intentionally by human agents, such as robbery at gunpoint, and "broadly moral evils" (what are more typically called "natural evils"), such as the destruction of homes and lives in floods, are (possibly) intentionally brought about by nonhuman (supernatural) agents.

Not all theists make appeal to such a possibility in their thinking about suffering in relation to God, and not all philosophers and theologians who address the "problem of evil" – or, rather, the cluster or family of perplexities and arguments pertaining to God's existence in light of the suffering we observe and experience – use the term 'evil' in the narrow sense that requires agency or malicious intent. In the philosophy of religion, the term 'evil' typically is used more broadly, to refer to any painful, rotten, wrong, distressing, or horrid aspect of life in our world, including our human vulnerability to emotional suffering, physical pain, injustice, torment, betrayal, loss, cruelty, injury, ruination, disease, and premature death. On this broader construal, the various forms of cancer count as evils, including childhood leukemia and osteosarcoma, as do inherited genetic diseases that result in disabilities and premature death, along with smallpox outbreaks, the 1918 flu pandemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic, even if we think of these (as most of us do) as unintended and the fault of no created agent at all.

1.2 An Argument from Pointless Evil

With this broad understanding of evil in place, we can begin to examine carefully the matter of why the reality of evil may be thought to pose a challenge to the rationality of belief in God. Our concern may focus on the bare existence of any evil at all, or it might focus on various facts about the evils we experience and observe in our world, such as how extremely intense they can be – painful to the limits of human endurance, and even exceeding those limits, causing death – and how widespread they are – afflicting sentient creatures across the globe and throughout history – and how they seem to be distributed in ways that appear unfair and inexplicable. Some people who are kind, good, and loving suffer from debilitating injuries, upon which are piled injustices, loneliness, and further afflictions, and then even more emotional, professional, physical, and social losses. Others who are self-centered, cruel or destructive live rather charmed lives with respect to material wealth and physical well-being. Certain cases of evil might strike us as so horrific that we cannot see any

way it could make sense rationally to believe that God is really there, as Creator and sustainer of the universe, in light of them.

God – described by St. Anselm as *the being than which none greater can be conceived* – has as essential attributes every great-making quality, including omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness. To have knowledge of some truths is a positively valuable trait, one that is limited in comparison to having knowledge of all truths and having no beliefs that are mistaken. God, as an essentially omniscient being, knows all the truths there are to be known and believes no falsehoods. This means that there is no pain or hardship that “escapes God’s notice” or is outside God’s realm of perception, unlike much of the suffering of others with respect to us, which happens without our awareness: in private, unshared with us, or across the world in some place we have never been or even heard of. Unlike us, God would not be ignorant about anyone’s suffering – God would see and know of it all. Further, if God is perfectly good, then God would not want us to suffer. Insofar as we are good people, we do not want those we love and care about to suffer, and God, as our perfectly good Creator, would not be indifferent to our well-being, but would care about us. In addition, to have the power to do things is a positively valuable quality. God, as an essentially omnipotent being, has the power to do everything that can be done. If God is perfectly powerful, then God can eliminate any suffering he knows about and wants to eliminate. Here we have the basic line of reasoning in favor of the conclusion that, if God were to exist, then there would be no evil in the world. The argument is that God, as perfectly good, would not want us to suffer; and as perfectly knowing, God knows about all suffering; and as perfectly powerful, God can prevent all suffering. But there is suffering in the world. Thus, there is no God.

Here is a line of response to the argument in the previous paragraph. Sometimes, even if we are good people, we allow, or even cause, someone we care about to suffer, even though we could have prevented it, because we have their greater good in mind. A simple example is a good parent who takes her child to the physician’s office to receive the vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella. The child is distressed; the situation produces anxiety; and the injection hurts. Although the parent knows about the distress and pain, in taking the child to the physician and allowing the vaccination to be administered, she is not thereby a morally bad person. Why? Because the vaccination is known to help prevent the child from contracting a contagious disease. This observation suggests that it is perhaps mistaken to think that God would want us never to suffer at all. God might want us to suffer for some good reason known to God, making God’s allowance, or even causation, of our suffering justifiable. This suggests that the perfect goodness of God implies that God would not want us to

suffer when that suffering was *not needed* to bring about a greater good, which could include preventing an evil as bad or worse.

The question arises, of course, of why any suffering would be needed by God in order for God to bring about a greater good. How could it be that an omnipotent being would *need* anything at all in order to produce a desired outcome? God would not be constrained by what is physically necessary for bringing about some end, since God, if existent, is the Creator of the physical world and the laws of nature that govern its operation. Taking our children to be vaccinated against polio, measles, mumps, rubella, tuberculosis, tetanus, and other infectious diseases is not strictly causally necessary for preventing their acquiring one of these diseases – our children might very luckily avoid getting the disease, even though unvaccinated – and it is not causally sufficient for their not getting one of these diseases – they might get vaccinated, but then very unluckily get the disease anyway. But still, we are aware, based on ample evidence, that taking our children for these vaccinations and allowing them to endure the temporary distress and pain they bring is causally necessary for greatly lowering the odds that they will acquire one of these diseases, given that they exist in our world and given the ways they spread among people and the regularity of the laws of nature. We are not in charge of what infectious microorganisms there are in our world or in charge of how the natural world works. So we have to make compromises, so to speak, with respect to causing and allowing pain, given the realities in which we find ourselves, in order to do our best to promote the full well-being and flourishing of those we love. But God, as Creator and sustainer of the universe, is in charge of what exists – including which diseases exist – and how our world works – including the law of gravity, for instance, and how viruses and bacteria are transmitted, and how infectious microorganisms affect sentient creatures, and how our immune systems and our nervous systems work.

So God would not be bound by the natural laws that govern our world. God might, for instance, part the Red Sea or turn water to wine if so desired, and God could create worlds different from ours in which things work very differently from the ways they work in our world. Nonetheless, a theist may suggest, there might be logical necessities that govern the acquisition or realization of some goods that are of sufficiently high value and are such that not even God could realize those goods without causing or allowing some suffering to befall created beings. And if this were so, then God's perfect goodness could be upheld even in light of there being suffering on the part of created beings in our world. The logical impossibility of God's realizing the goods without the suffering would be akin to the logical impossibility of God's making a circular square: since there's no such thing to be done, it is no knock against God's omnipotence that God cannot do this nothing. And perhaps God's perfect goodness could be

upheld even in light of there being the horrifically intense instances of suffering there are, and the vast amount of suffering there is, and the distribution of suffering among different persons and sentient creatures that there is, if such facts (or facts equivalent to them in negative value) are logically necessary for the realization of the sufficiently greater goods.

It stands to reason, thus, that if God exists, then God has *justifying reasons* for causing or permitting the instances of suffering that occur in our world in that they are logically necessary for the realization of greater goods, where the greater good could itself be a vastly increased chance of the realization of certain goods. God would not cause or allow suffering *pointlessly*. A pointless evil is one for which there is no God-justifying reason for causing or allowing it to occur.

Over the course of more than three decades, William Rowe advanced arguments for the nonexistence of God rooted in instances of horrible evil regarding which there appear to be no reasons that could justify God in remaining inert while they occur. The argument from pointless evil, which derives from the work of Rowe (1979, 1988, 1996), especially his 1979 work, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” and is insightfully probed by Graham Oppy (2013) and Daniel Speak (2015), among others, is as follows.

Argument from Pointless Evil:

- (1) If God exists, then our world does not contain any instances of pointless evil.
- (2) Our world contains an instance (or instances) of pointless evil.
- (3) Therefore, God does not exist.

In the subsequent sections, I will take up, in turn, each of the two premises of this argument, offering support for the first and second premises and critically examining some replies.

1.3 Support for Premise 1 of the Argument from Pointless Evil

I have roughly indicated in Section 1.2 the line of reasoning that leads up to the first premise of the argument from pointless evil. Here is further support. When we nondivine human agents intentionally cause or allow harm to others, we sometimes do so out of maliciousness, and we sometimes do so not maliciously but because we think there is no other or better way of bringing about a greater good for the one we hurt. In addition to arranging for vaccinations, we also, for instance, enforce consequences for bad behavior that temporarily grieve our children. When we fail to act to prevent the suffering of others, this is sometimes from a lack of knowledge – we were unaware of the abuse being suffered by the child in our neighborhood – and it is sometimes due to a lack of power – we cannot feed all those who are starving to death, and we may find that we cannot

intervene in a crime without harming ourselves. But none of the excuses for failing to help that apply to us, as beings who are limited in knowledge and power, would apply to an absolutely perfect being who has all knowledge and power: God cannot be harmed and can do everything there is to be done, and no instance of suffering would escape God's notice. Further, as an essentially good being, God would not act maliciously. Hence there is good reason for thinking that, if God exists – since God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good – everything that happens in the world involving suffering must be something that God causes or allows for some justifying reason. If God were to exist, then there would have to be some justifying reasons for which God causes or allows each instance of suffering in our world to occur, or else that suffering would be something God did not know about or failed to notice – which is impossible, given that God is all-knowing – or that suffering was something God did not care about or which God knew to be unnecessary for bringing about a greater good – which is impossible, given that God is perfectly good – or that suffering was something God had no power over whatsoever – which is impossible, given that God is omnipotent. Therefore, if God exists, then our world does not contain any instances of pointless evil.

Let me put the case for the truth of Premise 1 even more carefully, in a way that might head off some potential misunderstandings and objections. (This is how I express the supporting argument in Ekstrom [2021, p. 16].) Since God is essentially omniscient, God knows all truths there are to be known, including all truths about the instances of evil that occur in our world. If God is said not to know *ahead of time* that certain evils occur – owing to, for instance, God's atemporal existence, or owing to the fact that the occurrences of the evils in question have some indeterminacy in their causal history, such that there are no truths about these evils until they occur – still God either atemporally knows that these evils occur or God knows that these evils occur as they occur and knows ahead of time of the risk of their occurrence, given God's knowledge of the content of God's initial creative decree and God's knowledge of all the features of our world, including its natural laws, its past states, and the powers granted to created beings. Hence there are no truths about actual instances of evil and no truths about risks of evil that are unknown to God or about which God is ignorant. Since God is essentially omnipotent, God is able to do everything there is to be done, so God is able to prevent every preventable evil and, with respect to any evil there may be that is unpreventable *prior to* its occurrence owing to, for example, lack of infallible divine foreknowledge and indeterminacy in the causal history of the evil, God is able to prevent the risk of every such evil – by, for instance, not creating anything at all, or by issuing a fully determinate creative decree or by declining to give any created beings