

Introduction

CHAD MEISTER AND PAUL K. MOSER

EVIL AND GOD

“The problem of evil” arises from an apparent conflict between two claims: the claim that God exists and the claim that the evil in the world is real. Calling it “the problem of evil,” however, can be misleading, because various problems for theism arise from the reality of evil. One problem occurs among theists who seek to answer a question about God’s purposes. In ancient and medieval times, for example, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologians generally assumed that God exists and is fully good, merciful, and all-powerful. A central question they sought to answer about God was: Why has God permitted evil in a world that God created? More recently, a different but related question has arisen: Is it reasonable to believe that God exists when there is so much evil in the world and, if it is reasonable, on what ground?

The general concept of evil covers a wide domain and can include everything that is harmful and destructive in the world. It thus connotes all bad or nefarious actions, states of affairs, and character traits. For instance, a theft, a drought, or an individual who routinely lies can be evil. Even so, the concept of evil has a deeper dimension. The moral deficiency of such actions as the beheadings of innocent civilians by ISIS, the serial killings of John Wayne Gacy, or the murders of the Holocaust does not qualify as simply wrong or immoral. Similarly, the harm of such events as the Bangladesh cyclone in 1991 (when more than 140,000 people lost their lives), the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004 (more than 250,000 victims), or the Tangshan China earthquake in 1976 (more than 700,000 people killed) is not simply bad or even dreadful. Such events encompass a deeper dimension of evil – one that generates a philosophical problem for theists.

The evil challenging theism does not reduce to human suffering. It can include what we may call “the fragility of human life,” that is, its vulnerability to its destruction or demise. Even if human life includes a test of human character, some humans are not given the opportunity to

2 *Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser*

undergo the test. For instance, some humans die in infancy, in advance of any test of their character. This seems to be a missed opportunity for them, and it is arguably not good, even if they die without suffering. Human fragility, with or without suffering, seems to be part of the world's evil, and it prompts the question of why a morally perfect God would allow it. Credible answers do not come easily here.

In philosophical discussions, a common classification divides evil into two broad categories: *moral* evil and *natural* evil. Moral evils are brought about by the intentions or negligence of moral agents. Some moral evils are horrible, such as the previous examples from ISIS, Gacy, and the Holocaust. The evils of human trafficking, economic exploitation, and animal and human torture are further examples of horrible moral evils. Other cases of moral evil are less severe, such as speaking ill of another person or neglecting to recycle one's plastic garbage. In addition, certain character defects also can be moral evils, such as selfishness, excess vanity, and dishonesty.

Natural evils are not brought about by moral agents but result from such naturally occurring events as the devastating cyclone, tsunami, and earthquake mentioned earlier. Similarly, other natural events that cause harm to human beings and other living creatures would be cases of natural evils. Disabilities and diseases that have deleterious effects on humans and other animals, such as AIDS, Zika, deafness, and blindness, are also natural evils.

Attention to evil extends beyond the Abrahamic theistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It occurs in the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas – the sacred scriptures and central religious texts of Hinduism. In traditional Buddhism, evil is the perpetuation of illusion by factors that foster constant becoming – a becoming that leads to suffering. This suffering, or *dukkha*, is the focus of the Four Noble Truths. In Daoism, evil is the result of a lack of balance between the two opposing and fundamental principles of Yin and Yang.

All of the major world religions attempt to address problems raised by evil, but evil is not problematic only for the religions of the world: it raises difficulties for atheism too. For a typical theist, evil is an aberration, something repugnant about the world. It is unwanted, unwilling by God, and contrary to the purpose of creation and the way things ought to be. On a typical atheistic account, in contrast, evil is a natural part of the world, simply part of the way the world is. Typical atheists thus make a philosophical concession to the reality of evil that does not occur within various religious traditions, including the Abrahamic faiths that view evil as contrary to the way the world was meant to be.

Traditional theism faces profound problems raised by evil. It portrays God as the ultimate locus of being, meaning, and value; as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent; as a person or at least not less than a person (possessing consciousness, will, and intentions); and as worthy of human worship and hence morally perfect. The problem of evil demands some accounting for the evil in a world allegedly created by this maximally exalted God.

Typical discussions of the problem of evil bear directly on divine omnipotence and omnibenevolence (and sometimes omniscience). It seems, at least at first glance, that if a God with such attributes exists, then a world created by God would not include evil. As omnibenevolent, God would not want evil to exist. As omnipotent, God would have the power to make the world exist without evil. As omniscient, God would have the knowledge to accomplish the task. Since there is evil – widespread, horrific evil – there is some reason to believe that such a God does not exist. While there are theoretical problems for the non-Abrahamic faiths and nontheists raised by the reality of evil, they pale in comparison to the problem of evil for traditional theism. This book focuses on the problem of evil for theism.

The problem of evil has two major theoretical versions: the logical problem and the evidential problem. The logical problem concerns whether the basic claims of theism about God are inconsistent with the reality of evil. In the latter half of the twentieth century, some significant philosophers argued for an inconsistency here. A prominent atheist, J. L. Mackie, stated the following in an influential article: “Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another” (“Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955), 200). Mackie holds that evil is a problem for theists in that there is a contradiction between the fact that evil exists and the claim that the God of traditional theism exists. In particular, he alleges an inconsistency in affirming the following propositions:

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) God is omnibenevolent.
- (3) Evil exists.

While one or two of these propositions may be true, Mackie argued, taken as a group, the three form a logically inconsistent set. Almost everyone agrees that (3) is true; Mackie thus inferred that an omnipotent or omnibenevolent God does not exist. Various theists have argued that if God (possibly) has a morally acceptable reason for allowing evil

4 *Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser*

to occur, the logical problem of evil fails to show the nonexistence of God. In any case, whether the nonexistence of God can be demonstrated remains a matter of philosophical debate.

The evidential problem of evil suggests that, given the reality of evil, theism is probably not true, even if it is logically consistent. While there are various types of evidential arguments, the kind of reasoning employed is usually inductive. Such arguments also generally rely on actual cases of evil and suffering, sometimes described in graphic detail. A typical claim is that the existence of evil in its vast amounts and horrible forms provides reasonable evidence that the God of traditional theism (probably) does not exist.

A philosophical response to the problem of evil may attempt to show that arguments from evil against theism are unsuccessful. Such a response is often called a “defense” against evil, the most common being a “free will defense” that assigns responsibility for (some) evil to human freedom. A defense aims to support the view that God could have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils in question. Another approach aims to vindicate God by offering a plausible *explanation* for evil. An attempt to identify God’s morally sufficient reasons or purposes for allowing evil is sometimes called a “theodicy.” No single theodicy has convinced all inquirers about the problem of evil, and the book of Job suggests that humans, given their cognitive limitations relative to God’s purposes, are not in a good position to have a theodicy, at least so long as God does not supply one. Many inquirers, including many theists, doubt that God has supplied a theodicy. Even so, it is an open question whether one could have evidence of God’s reality even in the absence of a theodicy.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This book is divided into two parts. Part I, including Chapters 1 through 7, takes up some prominent conceptual issues and controversies regarding the problem of evil. Part II, including Chapters 8 through 13, examines some significant interdisciplinary issues related to the problem of evil, including those from Near Eastern religious studies, philosophy, science, and the history of science and religion.

In Chapter 1, “Evil and the Meaning of Life,” John Cottingham notes that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, suffering is redemptive and that this redemptive component is understood in a unique way. This tradition differs from a secularist approach to evil that either simply accepts that the world has evil or attempts to find temporary meaning in the midst

of the contingencies of life. The redemptive component in question does not entail that the purpose for evil emerges solely from something achieved in an afterlife. Scriptural and religious teachings promote the idea that the moral quality of human life and experience is central to the meaning and value of that life and that redemption aims to enhance that moral quality. According to Cottingham, the Judeo-Christian view that meaning is to be found within a moral framework – which includes such fundamental values as love, justice, and compassion – fits with common human intuitions.

In Chapter 2, “Beauty and the Problem of Evil,” Charles Taliaferro presents an approach to the problem of evil within a version of Anselmian theism – the view that God is that than which none greater can be conceived. The essay is structured as a reply to those (such as Galen Strawson) who maintain that to suppose that the Christian God exists is morally repugnant and ugly. Taliaferro advances four reasons why responses to the problem of evil are incomplete if they do not include the aesthetics of beauty and ugliness. He also argues that the ugliness and beauty of the cosmos are compatible with a beautiful God, and he emphasizes that this God can be experienced, as represented in the works of Julian of Norwich and W. H. Auden. In confronting evil, according to Taliaferro, our sense of ugliness and beauty needs to be underscored.

Various philosophers have claimed that logical arguments from evil have been rebutted by one or more versions of the free will defense. In Chapter 3, “Logical Arguments from Evil and Free Will Defences,” Graham Oppy argues that this is not the case. He grants that there is currently no successful logical argument from evil against God’s existence, but he argues that the logical arguments from evil are no worse off than any other logical arguments for or against the existence of God. It may well be, according to Oppy, that there are yet-to-be-discovered versions of the logical argument from evil that are successful. He finds no reason to rule out such a claim.

In Chapter 4, “God, Evil, and the Nature of Light,” Paul Draper discusses scientific debates about the nature of light as he evaluates the evidential problem of evil. By focusing on the structure of the reasoning in those debates, he notes a similarity in the debates between theism and what he calls “source physicalism.” Comparison of certain theories of light with other incompatible ones, he argues, has shown some of them to be improbable – at least with other evidence held equal. Similarly, in his story, a popular version of theism can be shown to be improbable in comparison with an incompatible theory of physicalism entailing that physical reality is the source of the mental. Given various data about

6 *Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser*

good and evil, Draper argues that this version of physicalism is much more probable than theism and that, with other evidence held equal, theism is likely false.

We do well to recognize the cognitive limitations of human beings when thinking about the problem of evil. A position called “skeptical theism” takes this consideration seriously. Skeptical theists are typically skeptical about whether evil can disconfirm theism and not about whether God exists. They are skeptical of our ability to have adequate knowledge of the moral matters crucial to the success of the evidential argument from evil. In Chapter 5, “Skeptical Theism,” Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra point out that skeptical theistic responses to evidential arguments from evil are typically grounded on two claims. The first is that if the God of theism exists, we should not be surprised that we are not privy to God’s reasons for permitting evil. The second is that many of the evidential arguments for atheism are weaker than one might think. They examine the approaches of various leading skeptical theists and evaluate some of the central issues raised by critics of skeptical theism. They conclude the essay by sketching a next step for skeptical theism given emerging versions of evidential arguments.

The problem of evil suggests reasons for the claim that God does not exist. A related problem, “the problem of divine hiddenness,” does the same. Some inquirers have asked whether the latter problem is a version of the problem of evil. In Chapter 6, “Evil, Hiddenness, and Atheism,” J. L. Schellenberg argues that it is not. He contends that there are different motives that might be attributed to God (anti-bad, pro-good, and pro-relationship) and that the divine hiddenness argument is more fundamental than the argument from evil. He proposes, however, that it may be beneficial for the two types of arguments to work together.

In Chapter 7, “Anti-Theodicy,” Nick Trakakis describes how anti-theodicy presents an oppositional stance toward the project of theodicy. He discusses some of the morally objectionable and historically conditioned aspects of theodicy. He also engages with some recent criticisms of anti-theodicy, in particular one arguing that various approaches to anti-theodicy are committed to Schopenhauerian pessimism, the view that it would have been better if the world had never come into being. In addition, using the pastoral response to the problem of evil developed by John Swinton, Trakakis responds to another criticism of anti-theodicy. He argues that anti-theodicy can avoid the dangers of both Schopenhauerian pessimism and Leibnizian optimism while also providing the means to resist the destruction of faith, meaning, and hope in the face of the world’s evil.

Part II of the book addresses interdisciplinary issues related to the problem of evil. The systematic study of the natural world and the scientific knowledge thereby obtained have been remarkably informative for our species. In Chapter 8, “Cosmic Evolution and Evil,” Christopher Southgate examines some implications of the sciences for the problem of evil. He focuses on cosmic theodicy, understood as the theological problem of suffering caused by the natural processes of the cosmos, including natural disasters, disease, and evolutionary development. This focus includes consideration of various theodicies and what may be needed for an account that preserves the loving character of God given the pain and suffering found in the natural world. Southgate argues that such an account may include claims about eschatological redemption and the cosuffering of God with God’s creatures.

In Chapter 9, “Ancient Near Eastern Perspectives on Evil and Terror,” Margo Kitts examines the use of literary and artistic illustrations and religious idioms in the Ancient Near East to justify killings and mass-casualty violence. She notes that many idioms unearthed since cuneiform and hieroglyphic writings were deciphered reflect both an understanding of evil as cognate with death and terror and a captivation with displays of might and the terror of its victims. Using hermeneutics, Kitts aims to show that reading certain ancient texts may allow us to peer into our own intuitions about evil.

The last four chapters of the book are written from the perspective of either a particular religious tradition or, in the case of the final chapter, atheism. In Chapter 10, “Judaism and the Problem of Evil,” Lenn Goodman approaches evil from a Jewish perspective focusing on “the suffering of innocents.” Drawing from Maimonides, Goodman notes that unlike what is presented in some rabbinical teachings, the Torah’s affirmations of the justice of God disallow the tormenting of the innocent for the purpose of enhancing eternal reward. Death and suffering, in this account, are consequences of human finitude and the cycles of the natural world, but life remains meaningful nonetheless. Finite embodiment, in this perspective, also underlies the individuality that allows us to imitate the divine perfection through getting to know God’s wisdom, grace, and compassion and to conform to them in our own lives.

In Chapter 11, “Christianity, Atonement and Evil,” Paul Fiddes considers the problem of evil from a Christian viewpoint implying that God overcomes evil and sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. He focuses on the interconnection between atonement and theodicy, arguing that a free will theodicy requires the suffering of God, while the *Christus Victor* view of atonement, which affirms an objective conquering of evil,

8 *Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser*

requires a subjective shift in the ability of humans to deal with pain and suffering. These two theodicies need to intersect, according to Fiddes, in order to yield a satisfactory account of the reality of evil. The result will expand the concept of atonement to include the enablement of response to God by all of creation.

In Chapter 12, “Islam and the Problem of Evil,” Timothy Winter notes that while the various traditions within Islam include a range of approaches to the problem of evil, they share an adherence to the Qur’an. Using this sacred text, Islamic thinkers conclude that the suffering of the guilty was just punishment for their sin, but the suffering of the nonguilty can be directed toward the purification of the soul. In addition, many Islamic thinkers hold that the guiltless, including animals and infants, will receive compensation in the afterlife for the sufferings experienced in this life. Going further, a perspective common among Sunni thinkers includes the doctrine of “theistic subjectivism” entailing that the “evil” experienced by guiltless humans is not intrinsically evil, because God’s ways are always wise even though human minds may be unable to grasp them as such.

In Chapter 13, “Naturalism, Evil, and God,” Michael Ruse takes it as a given that the problem of evil is a challenge to belief that an all-powerful and all-loving God exists. He considers whether methodological naturalism, entailing that scientific explanations must not include divine interventions, exacerbates the problem of evil. He denies that it does so while acknowledging that to affirm methodological naturalism now is to affirm a Darwinian theory of evolution through natural selection. Ruse argues that a Darwinian understanding of humans (a) suggests that they are a combination of selfishness and altruism, (b) supports that humans can choose between right and wrong, and (c) acknowledges the existence of much pain and suffering in the world.

CONCLUSION

The intellectual challenges raised by the reality of evil, suffering, and terror continue to be vexing for theists of all stripes. Although scholarly research has advanced in the areas of philosophy, theology, history, religious studies, and science, final solutions to the problem of evil remain elusive. Even so, many insights have arisen from various areas in relation to inquiry about the problem of evil. Some of these insights emerge in this book’s chapters.