

SYNTHETIC THEODICY

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In this article, I raise the possibility that a particular species of solution to the problem of evil may be impossible for humans to give in practice, even if such a solution should exist. After surveying the problem in its various forms and the proposed solutions to it, I identify a shared assumption of many or all of these proposed solutions. I then argue that this assumption has not been adequately defended and is possibly false, and consider what implications its falsehood would have for debates about the problem of evil.

Then Job answered the Lord and said: "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

Job 42:1–3

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THEODICY: A SURVEY

The problem of evil is, roughly, the question of whether the existence of evil and suffering in the world is compatible with the existence of an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator God.¹ Intuitively, there is an inconsistency here, based on the following premises:

An all-powerful being could create a world without evil.

An all-good being has an overriding reason² not to create a world with evil in it.

An all-knowing being, if it can perform a certain action and has an overriding reason to perform that action, knows that it can perform and has an overriding reason to perform that action.

Any being, if it can perform an action, has an overriding reason to perform that action, and knows that it can perform and has an overriding reason to perform that action, will perform that action.

A creator God, if such there be, did create the world.

From these premises, it follows that

an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator God, if such there be, did create the world without evil in it.

But clearly

there *is* evil in the world,

so, by (5) and (7),

a creator God, if such there be, created the world with evil in it.

Therefore, by (8) and (6),

a creator God, if such there be, both did and did not create the world with evil in it.

Contradiction!

The problem of evil comes in two varieties. The *logical* problem is the question of whether the existence of evil is *logically* compatible with the existence of God. The *probabilistic* problem is the question of whether the existence of evil makes the non-existence of God more likely than not, even if there should be no logical inconsistency between the two. While the above exposition is slanted towards the logical problem, it can also be adapted to the probabilistic version. A probabilistic inconsistency may for present purposes be defined as something whose negation is provable in the probability calculus, given all the actual probabilities that obtain. (Thus, e.g., given the fact that the probability of throwing any particular side of a particular fair die is 1/6, it is a probabilistic inconsistency that the probability of throwing the same side two times in a row is lower than the probability of consecutively throwing two different sides.) We can now redefine the probabilistic problem as the question of whether the co-existence of God and of evil

constitutes a probabilistic inconsistency.

Many strategies have been pursued in arguing that the problem of evil is not a problem for theism. One strategy is to flat-out deny the existence of evil – that is, to deny (7) – thus blocking the contradiction we just derived. (This may seem a hopeless tack, yet Augustine is arguably one author who has pursued it. In *The City of God*, he argues, roughly, that evil is merely the absence of good, and therefore does not *exist* in the relevant sense (Augustine 426). I mention this strategy only to set it aside; it will not be relevant to the rest of this article, and I will henceforth assume that evil *does* exist in the relevant sense.)

Another strategy is what I will call *theodicy*.³ Theodicies do not deny the existence of evil, but instead try to show that its existence is not incompatible with the existence of God. They must therefore deny one of the first five premises. Theodicies typically take aim at premise (2) of the argument. While they do not usually deny that God has a *reason* for not allowing the existence of evil – that, after all, would seem to follow from His all-goodness – they tend to deny that this reason is *overriding*. The thought is that God allows evil to exist because its existence is required by the existence of a greater good that outweighs it. Thus, for example, Thomas Aquinas famously writes that, “[It] is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good” (*Summa Theologica*, Question 2, Article 3; Blackfriars translation). In other words, God’s reason for not allowing evil is outweighed by a stronger reason for allowing it, and theodicies typically try to describe this reason.

Positive theodicies, which arguably include the theodicies offered by Leibniz in the *Théodicée* and by Thomas Aquinas in Question 2, Article 3 of the *Summa Theologica*, try to give God’s *actual* reason for allowing the existence of evil. *Negative theodicies*, like that offered by Alvin Plantinga (1977), aim merely to give a counterexample to the alleged inconsistency, describing a scenario in which evil coexists with God, without claiming that the scenario corresponds to the actual world.

SYNTHETIC THEODICY

Traditional theodicies are what I call *analytic* theodicies, for reasons that will become clear shortly. In the stories this type of theodicy tell about why God allows evil to exist – whether these stories are meant as mere counterexamples or as theories about how it actually is with the world – God has some reason to permit evil in general, from which his various reasons for permitting particular evils follow, and to which it is prior. To put it another way,

they assume that God’s reason for allowing evil at all is, *mutatis mutandis*, also his reason for allowing this or that particular evil.

But another approach is possible. Rather than assuming that God’s reason for permitting evil in general is prior to his reasons for permitting particular evils, we could suppose that the priority goes the other way. Some examples might illustrate what I mean.

Suppose someone inquired about my reason for raising my left hand – not just on this or that occasion, but at all, or in general. If I were in an unpedantic and unphilosophical mood, I might reply that I have no single reason for sometimes raising my left hand: just a variety of particular reasons at particular times – to get something off a high shelf, to wave at a friend, and so on. In a different mood, I might answer instead that, although I *do* strictly have a reason for sometimes raising my left hand, that reason *just is* the disjunction of all the reasons I have had (and possibly all the reasons I will or could have) for raising my left hand on particular occasions. In any case, though, the takeaway is that my particular reasons for raising my left hand are prior to my reason for raising my left hand in general. It is these particular reasons that assure that I also have what I will call an *overarching* reason for

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Illustrasjon: Torstein Theodor Tollefsen



raising my left hand at all – the reason my imagined inquirer asked for. The overarching reason for raising my left arm in general is the disjunction of the particular reasons for raising my left arm in particular cases. Put more formally, my overarching reason for X-ing is the reason I have for X-ing at all, while my particular reasons for X-ing are my reasons for X-ing on this or that occasion.

Compare this to my reason for looking both ways before I cross the road. In this case, I do have a pretty clear reason for performing this action at all – namely, that I would like to avoid getting run over – which is also, we may fairly suppose, my reason for looking both ways before I cross the road on any particular occasion. Thus, in this case, it might plausibly be said that the priority goes from the top to the bottom: that my overarching reason for looking both ways before I cross a road assures that I have particular reasons on this or that occasion, rather than as in the previous example, the other way around.

Analogously, this distinction could apply to God's reasons as well as to mine: Even if God might always have an overriding reason for permitting this or that particular evil, his *overarching* reason for permitting evil at all may be like my overarching reason for sometimes raising my left hand, rather than my overarching reason for looking both ways before I cross the road. The thesis that God's overarching reason is like my overarching reason for sometimes raising my left arm will be called *Synthetic* Theodicy.⁴ The thesis that the priority goes the other way – that God allows evil for a general reason in the way I look both ways before I cross the street – is thus duly labeled *Analytic* Theodicy. Note the capital letters: these theses distinguish among theodicies, and thus are in a sense *metatheodicies*. First order (lower case) analytic theodicies are theses about God's reason for allowing evil, thus (if true) providing a solution to the problem of evil. Second order (upper case) Analytic Theology is a thesis about the structure of God's reasons for allowing evil. As such, it doesn't aim to provide a solution to the problem of evil, but accepting it will constrain one's basic methodology in doing so – i.e. ensure that one's (first order, lower case) theodicy will be of the analytic variety.

So it seems Synthetic Theodicy *might* be true. But do we have any evidence to recommend it over Analytic Theodicy? Possibly.

Consider that theodicies tend to be good at explain-

ing some instances of evil, but bad at explaining others. Free will theodicies explain moral evil, but not natural evil; theodicies based on Divine punishment explain the death of a rapist who contracted AIDS from one of his victims, but not Sudden Infant Death Syndrome; soulmaking theodicies explain the suffering of the cancer patient who survives his ordeal and comes out stronger, but not the suffering of the cancer patient who eventually dies in agony; and so on.⁵

Now, this is no blot on negative theodicies aimed exclusively at the logical problem, whose explanations of evil need not be plausible, but only logically possible. But it *is* a blot on positive theodicies and on negative theodicies aimed at the probabilistic problem, and the probabilistic version of the problem of evil is now considered far tougher than its logical counterpart. In fact, many or most philosophers now agree that logical negative theodicies like Plantinga's (1977) have buried the logical problem.⁶

Of course, proponents of all of these theodicies can and do try to make room for aberrant cases like the ones discussed two paragraphs ago. They may speculate that natural evil is due to demonic agency, which can in turn be explained in free-will terms; that original sin means

that even infants deserve whatever's coming to them; or that the doomed cancer patient may through his suffering earn a shorter stay in Purgatory. But these saves are as a rule unconvincing, as well as making auxiliary posits (demons, original sin, Purgatory) that are inessential to theism writ large. This, again, is no blot on negative logical theodicies, as long as the posits are

not logically incoherent, either in and of themselves or in conjunction with the other posits of the theodicy. But they may be problematic for positive theodicies, and are certainly problematic for negative probabilistic theodicies, at least when they are aimed at non-theists who presumably think that such posits lower the probabilities of the hypotheses that contain them.

IMPLICATIONS OF SYNTHETIC THEODICY

If Synthetic Theodicy is true, it is clearly impossible in practice for short-lived and cognitively limited beings like us to give the right positive theodicy, even if there is such a thing. After all, and as already noted, the most natural and historically most common way of giving a positive theodicy just is to state God's reason for allowing evil (either as

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a theory of what the reason actually is, or as a mere counterexample). From God's omnipotence and omniscience, it follows that every particular evil that exists is an evil that God has permitted to exist. And since there are innumerable evils, God's actual reason for permitting evil – if there is no shorter statement of it than the disjunction of all of God's reasons for allowing particular evils – is far too long and complex for anyone to find or state.

Does Synthetic Theodicy also have implications for negative theodicy? Possibly. For it could be that there is no possible world in which God's reason for permitting evil is significantly less complex than His actual reason for permitting evil (assuming there is one). If so – and if Synthetic Theodicy holds – it would be as infeasible for us to give a true counterexample to the alleged inconsistency between God and evil as it would be for us to give the actual explanation for why He allows evil (assuming there is one).

In turn, the possible infeasibility even of negative theodicy is both bad news and good news for the theistic apologist. To state the obvious, it *is* bad, if only because it is troubling. However, it is also quite consistent with the teachings of the Abrahamic faiths, which have never claimed that we can understand everything about God's ways and nature without the supernatural gift of faith. I also note that it seems to echo nicely the moral of the Book of

Job, arguably the Biblical text that deals most directly with the problem of evil.

It is good news, however, because it means that a failure to convincingly solve the problem of evil by way of an analytical theodicy will not necessarily count against theism. After all and as already mentioned, the lack of such a solution is, if Synthetic Theodicy is indeed true, quite consistent with there being a solution to the problem of evil.

CONCLUSION

I have not here argued in any serious way for Synthetic Theodicy, but simply raised the possibility that it *could* be true. Merely doing this, however, is still worthwhile, for the following reasons. Firstly, even if Synthetic Theodicy is not true, the possibility that it might be has not so far been adequately explored. The arguments that could be offered against it might bring new insights to philosophical theology. Secondly, and as already noted, its mere possible truth – perhaps in the alethic, but at any rate in the epistemic sense of “possible” – has implications for theistic apologetics and natural theology. And while one might even question its mere possibility, the arguments that might be offered for or against that possibility might themselves help shed new light on old questions. In conclusion, then, Synthetic Theodicy is, if nothing else, an intriguing claim that should be explored further.

NOTES

¹ From now on, I will take it as read that the God of monotheism has these attributes, and that there is at most one all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator God, so that references to God should be taken as interchangeable with references to an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful creator God.

² An overriding reason I conceive of roughly as a state of affairs which rationally obligates an agent to perform an action, all things considered. Note, therefore, that the conception of a reason I adopt for the purposes of this article is not mentalistic; on this conception, a reason has very little to do with such things as intentions, but should rather be thought of a state of affairs – mental or non-mental – that makes it rational for a certain agent to behave in a certain way at a certain time.

³ The term “theodicy” is often defined so as to include all theistic solutions to the problem of evil, including the evil-denying varieties just discussed. I use the word in a more restricted and unusual sense only because it's a short and handy term for what I will spend the rest of this article talking about.

⁴ These labels are inspired by (and analogous to) Kant's distinction between a synthetic and an analytic manifold. For Kant, a synthetic manifold is roughly an object with proper parts whose proper parts are prior to the object as a whole, while an analytic manifold is an object with proper parts where the object as a whole is prior to the parts. Incidentally – and as already noted – Synthetic Theodicy is to be distinguished from synthetic theodicies. Synthetic Theodicy, as we have seen, is a statement about the structure of God's reasons that implies certain meta-statements *about* theodicies, while a synthetic theodicy is a theodicy that conforms to this view of God's reasons.

⁵ Free will theodicies claim, roughly, that the existence of evil follows from the existence of creatures with free will, which is such a great good that it outweighs the existence of the evil it produces. Divine punishment theodicies claim, roughly, that the evils we endure are God's way of punishing us for the evils we have committed. Soulmaking theodicies claim, roughly, that the evils we endure are necessary to make us virtuous and holy.

⁶ See e.g. Craig (2007).

LITERATURE

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