

Augustine and the Problem of Evil

(Please note that these are rough notes for a lecture given in December 2003, based on the relevant portions of the text of *Philosophy and Ethics*, and should not be quoted or otherwise used verbatim)

Imagine that you are taken prisoner – you are totally at the mercy of the person who has captured you, you see all around you other prisoners being tortured and killed. Some behave badly and obviously deserve punishment. Others appear to be kind and honest – and yet they too end up suffering in various ways. You realise that everyone ends up dead. You also know that there is no means of escape – no way of organising your life in a way that is free from the person who has put you in this prison.

This view is likely to make you cynical about any claim that the person who has put you here is loving and personally concerned for your welfare. It may also make you cynical about the value of the life you lead – you may see kind and loving things happening around you; you may have temporary pleasure; but in the end you sense that it is all mockery – for you are never going to be able to escape.

This feeling of being in a closed world, where everything is controlled, and where you know your future is limited and controlled by a force outside yourself – whatever happens you are helpless to influence it – is a nightmare.

But is that nightmare also true of the world in general. Is our personal happiness or unhappiness, our suffering and our death, controlled by a universal force called 'God'?

The philosopher David Hume can generally be relied upon to state a problem directly. Here is what he says in Book XI of his *Dialogues*... It is the point at which he turns the argument from design on its head, and presents a world that is far from a comfortable, reassuringly designed machine:

Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children!

Human beings are fragile and short-lived. They are liable to accidents and diseases, and those who escape these still have to face the inevitable prospect of old age and death. The world is not a safe place in which to live, but it is the only place in which to live.

If you claim that God is the creator and designer of the universe, you need to square that with an account of what the universe is actually like.

Bertrand Russell, in examining the claim that 'the universe has been shaped and is governed by an intelligent purpose', turns a sharp eye over the iniquities of humankind and comments:

'The world in which we live can be understood as a result of muddle and accident; but if it is the outcome of deliberate purpose, the purpose must have been that of a fiend. For my part, I find accident a less painful and more plausible hypothesis.'

[from *Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, Allen & Unwin, 1957]

The main point to consider here is whether such an evolving God is true to the Western theistic tradition, where God is seen as the omnipotent creator.

The more literal and definite your idea of God; the more difficult become the problem posed by the fact of evil and suffering.

THEREFORE, the fact of evil and suffering in the world creates a problem for those who believe in God. In its simplest form, it may be set out like this:

- God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving and the creator of everything
- Suffering exists in the world

Therefore

- God knows that there is evil (if he is all-knowing)
- God could prevent evil (if he is all-loving and all-powerful)

But

- He allows it to continue

Therefore

- Either he wishes evil to continue (in which case he cannot be all-loving)
- Or he cannot eliminate evil (in which case he is not all-powerful)

This argument is a strong one both from a logical and a psychological point of view. Logically, it seems impossible to reconcile a literal understanding of an all-loving and all-powerful God with the continuing existence of evil.

Psychologically, it is natural to ask for God's help in time of trouble, and his failure to intervene to overcome suffering and evil may therefore be a disincentive to continue to believe in him.

There are two particularly well-known approaches to this problem, the Irenaean and the Augustinian. These were outlined by John Hick in his book *Evil and the God of Love*. The first, from Irenaeus, argues that God permits evil for a good purpose. The second, from Augustine, claims that evil and suffering are not God's responsibility, and that he is therefore perfectly justified in allowing them to continue. Neither argument attempts to take the other two ways out of the problem – namely that either suffering is not real, or that God does not exist.

If we stay with the idea of a loving, omnipotent God, then suffering and evil need to be explained as part of his intention for the world. **In other words, suffering and evil have to find a place within in an overall scheme which can still be seen as the intention of an all-powerful and loving God.**

The attempt to find this is called a *theodicy* - an attempt to show that God is right and just.

Today we are examining just one such theodicy – that of St Augustine, Augustine 354 - 430

Augustine came to the problem from two different perspectives, one philosophical, the other based on the Bible.

And this is important for answering essay questions – include both approaches, not just one.

1. Based on the ideas of Plato.

[Reminder of Plato and the forms... that there is a level of reality higher than that which we experience in our everyday life. We now see only passing shadows.

Now it is possible to argue that we see shadows because life is limited, and therefore fragile, and therefore incapable of completely satisfying someone who has had a taste for something higher. Things in this world always fall short of perfection – that's Plato, and it's taken up by Augustine.]

He argued that evil was not a separate force over and above goodness. Rather, to call something evil was simply a way of saying that it lacked goodness (evil as a 'privation of good' is the usual way of expressing this). The world was full of finite, limited things. Their limitations prevented them from the perfect expression of their own natures. Therefore they 'fall short' of what they were designed to be, and hence participate in evil.

The fourth of Aquinas' Five Ways, concerns the way in which we understand goodness and perfection - and moves from them to the idea of a source of goodness. In *Summa Theologiae* (Bk 1 Ch 1, 5:1) describes goodness as **achieved actuality**. In other words, to be good is to express your own nature. This is seen most clearly in the idea of tools used by humans: a good knife is one that cuts well – it completes its nature by cutting well. (This idea was first put forward by Aristotle.)

A version of this argument had also been presented by Anselm in his *Monologion*

Making connections:

This argument about falling short of perfection, and of being judged according to one's potential, can be related to the 'Natural Law' approach to ethics, where – essentially – moral choices are judged according to the degree to which the action being considered does or does not confirm to something's 'essence' or 'real self.'

But this part of Augustine's argument does not let God off the hook. A central question to ask of the Augustinian approach is this:

*** Evil may be a lack of goodness, but why is there a lack of goodness? If God were all-powerful, could he not have organised the world such that there were no fall from perfection?**

2. Based on the Bible (Augustine's explanation for why the world is the way it is)

His second approach was to put the blame for evil on humankind, rather than on God. Augustine pointed to the 'fall' of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Evil, and to the idea that all subsequent humanity are descended from them and therefore share in their sin and fall (through what is termed 'original sin').

Thus, moral evil (evil done through human choice) could be blamed on humankind, rather than God.

[reminder that there are two kinds of evil – moral and natural...]

we need to distinguish between two things:

1. Suffering that results from the nature of the universe in which we live and the effect this has upon fragile human life. This would include diseases, earthquakes and all other forms of 'natural evil'. This is sometimes called 'metaphysical evil', since it is a form of evil that is built into our whole understanding of the world.

2. Moral evil, which results from the free choice of individuals to inflict suffering. Warfare, torture, inequalities that lead to suffering, emotional pain - all these can come under the general heading of moral evil, since, if people were all perfect, they would not come about.

But we need to keep in mind that these two forms of evil and not equally balanced, for the following reasons:

IF everyone behaved perfectly, there would still be natural evil. Disease and death do not depend upon moral wickedness, but are the result of the way the world is made. (It has been argued that it was as a result of the sin of Adam, the first man, that suffering and death came into the world, but this is not presented as a logical argument and is not widely taken into account in the consideration of the problem of evil.)

BUT IF there were no natural evil - that is, if everything were created perfect - then it could be argued that there would be no moral evil either, since moral evil results from an inadequate or defective understanding of self and world. The murderer is not a perfect being who just happens to choose to kill an innocent person, but a human being who, because of his or her imperfections and/or the imperfections of at least one other person, chooses to kill.

Therefore 'natural' or 'metaphysical' evil is the greater problem for theism. If suffering results from an act of deliberate wickedness by a human individual, it is logical to blame that individual for

the suffering, but there is a more fundamental question to be asked: **Why is the world such that people can choose to perform deliberate acts of wickedness?**

But what of natural suffering, unrelated to moral evil?

Augustine followed the traditional story that some of the angels, led by Satan, rebelled against God. They too 'fell' and took all the created order with them. Therefore creation itself became a place of suffering.

For Augustine, evil first came into the world through the 'fall' of the angels. In books XI and XII of his *City of God*, he argues that all angels were created perfect, but that some received less grace than others, and were able to 'fall'. This fall is then repeated in human terms in the Garden of Eden, following the temptations of Satan (himself the chief of the fallen angels) which meant that humankind would, from that point on, be imperfect.

According to Augustine, God will finally come to judge people, and will administer justice in accordance with how they have behaved, sending some to hell and others to heaven. Meanwhile, natural suffering is either sin or a punishment for sin (in the sense that it comes about in a world that is fallen, and therefore full of suffering).

Debate:

Be ready to argue whether or not you think that Augustine's view of natural evil as a punishment for sin is compatible with belief in a loving God.

Of course, there were other ways of describing the dilemma:

The best known, and earliest is that of Irenaeus:

That the world is an environment in which we are presented with challenges, it is a place where we may grow – and in the end we will all reach heaven (a bit of a caricature of Irenaeus, but you get the point). In other words, suffering is God's responsibility, but it is retained in the world for a good purpose.

A greater good? (generally known as the 'free will defence')

The implication of the 'free will defence' (and, indeed, the Irenaean approach that lies behind it) is that it is better to have a world in which people are free to choose evil, rather than a world in which they are not free at all. Human freedom is the greater good, for the sake of which we have to cope with mass murder, abuse of children, torture and the like.

Aquinas (in *Summa Theologiae*) presents the issue in another rather stark way. His argument starts with the fact that God and evil are incompatible:

- God is believed to be both good and without limit, so there is nowhere that God is not present.
- In that case, evil cannot exist; there is no room for it, since it cannot arise where God is present, if God is good.
- But we know that evil exists.
- Therefore there cannot be an infinite and good God.

Of you can try to make the God you believe in less of a universal feature, and more of a personal or limited thing. Hence he may be seen within the changing and suffering of the world (a God who evolves), or he may be identified with the suffering of humanity (identified, for example, with Jesus on the cross) – but neither of those approaches, although they may satisfy some aspects of the religious response to suffering and evil, actually gets round the fundamental problem.

Revealing the nature of God or good?

Notice that the problem of evil, as it has been explored so far, assumes that we have a knowledge of good and evil that is independent of any knowledge of God. If that were not the case, then we would have no reason to challenge the goodness of God.

Let us put this in philosophical terms. As we saw earlier (see p00) an analytic statement is one in which its truth can be known simply by defining the terms. 'A triangle has three sides.' is analytic; you don't have to examine triangles to show that it is true. A synthetic statement is one that can be shown to be true or false on the basis of evidence. 'The cat is sitting on the mat,' can be affirmed or denied only by looking.

Now the question to be considered is this: is the statement 'God is good' analytic or synthetic? If it is analytic, anything God does is good by definition (that is what 'good' means). If he allows the torture of children, then - within the whole scheme of things - that must be good.

In other words: What would it take to make you stop believing in the existence of God? What amount of suffering and evil is compatible with a loving God? If the answer is that no amount of suffering will shake your faith, then the idea of saying that God is loving, in any literal sense of the word, is nonsense. Because, unless you can specify what would prove your statement wrong, then it is meaningless. (that was the implication of the world of the Logical Positivists and others – but it is clearly linked here to the problem of suffering and evil. The contention of that approach is that suffering and evil makes a loving God meaningless.

In the end, if you take Augustine's position you have to accept that:

This world is a limited and finite place – what we call suffering and evil is simply the natural result of that limited nature. In other words, to expect that a limited, finite creature can live for ever and never suffer is simply to misunderstand what it is to be a limited creature. The world does not belong to us, we cannot determine what shall happen, but are always limited by factors outside ourselves over which we have no control.

That is the import of Augustine's argument that evil is only a limitation of good, rather than a force in itself. And there is backing for that position from unexpected quarters – for it is in like with the teaching of the Buddha – that unsatisfactoriness is not something imposed on us for punishment, or somehow unfair, it is just the way the world is.

But Augustine has a very different conclusion, because – alongside that 'privatio boni' argument is the other one about punishment. Evil and suffering are either sin (if they are moral) or the punishment for sin (the world is the way it is because of our fall from grace, and that of the angels).

In other words, Augustine is saying, in effect, that suffering and evil are a punishment from God, in that they are the result of human and non-human disobedience. Only God will judge how we have responded to that suffering, and will reward or punish us after this life on the basis of how we respond to it.

In other words, there is no escape from the control of God – for he is not only justified in allowing present suffering, but will also choose to punish some people in an afterlife for the way in which they have responded to this limited life.

And that is the heart of the Problem of Evil, and it is why many thinkers have come to the conclusion that such a god, if he were to exist, would be unworthy of worship – exactly the sort of view taken by Russell. Those who continue to believe in the existence of God in the face of evil, do so in spite of Augustine's argument.