

GOD, EVIL, AND PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENTS

by Paul Pardi

How can a good, all-powerful God permit bad things to happen? Philosophers and theologians have discussed this simple question for centuries. The question comes to the forefront particularly in the midst of devastating circumstances or extreme and seemingly needless suffering. In recent days, every part of the world seems to be touched by evil and suffering. Kosovo has been dismantled by war, Turkey and Taiwan have been devastated by earthquakes, and in the United States, incidences of school shootings and hurricane disasters fill the headlines. But is evil analyzable? Simone Weil once observed, "Evil being the root of mystery, pain is the root of knowledge." Caught between this tension of mystery and knowledge stands the human wonderer.

Philosophers who set out to address such questions generally face two broad issues: the problem of God's hiddenness and the problem of evil. The general problem of hiddenness is epistemological in nature and is concerned with God's apparent failure to reveal Himself in such a way that more people would believe in Him. Some philosophers of religion see this problem as a not so distant cousin of the problem of evil. The problem of hiddenness asks questions related to God's lack of involvement by, for example, providing comfort or assurance in the face of evil. Others notice God's absence in His apparent unwillingness or inability to prevent, or at least lessen the severity of evil and suffering.

The second, and by far the more prominent issue (call this the general problem of evil) addresses questions about the compatibility of certain conceptions of God with the existence of evil. More specifically, philosophers have been faced with the question of whether the existence of a God that has all the properties of the Judeo-Christian conception would permit all the evil the world has known and will know? The question really strikes at the core of our being: is this really the best a good God can do? Theists and non-theists alike have felt the burden of this question and have been in constant dialog over the proposed answers. In the near future, Calvin College will be hosting a conference entitled "God and Evil" in order to continue this very dialog. The conference will feature prominent theists such as Peter Van Inwagen and Alvin Plantinga who have written extensively on the problem of evil.

At the end of the day, are there solutions to these intricate and hard-hitting questions? Typically, the theist addresses the problem of evil not as a problem with theism but a problem *within* theism. She is attempting to explain how, not if, the existence of God is compatible with evil and why God is silent. In this context, the philosopher of religion is concerned with gaining a greater understanding of God and His relationship to the created world since both the existence of God and the existence of evil are considered real. The non-theist generally sees these two problems as defeaters for theism. If evil exists (and we all know it does) then certain, traditional conceptions of God can't possibly be true. The existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of such a God. It is worth noting that many non-theists see the problem of evil as such a severe problem that, alone, serves as a sufficient defeater for belief in God.

In modern philosophy, the problem of hiddenness has not been as prominent as the more general problem of evil. That trend, however, appears to be changing. One of the themes of the recent Pacific meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers was on divine hiddenness and featured papers on both sides of the question. Some of the essays read at the conference will be a part of a new collection on hiddenness by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser entitled *The Hiddenness of God: New Essays* (forthcoming from Cambridge). On the other side of the question, philosophers such as John Schellenberg and Theodore Drange (University of West Virginia) have developed arguments from divine silence that seek to show how the presence of non-belief in the world is evidence against the existence of God. In his recent book, *Non-belief and Evil*, Drange attempts to argue that the presences of such widespread non-belief in God is good grounds for believing that God does not exist. If God does exist, Drange argues, He would cause more people to believe in Him. Drange sees this as a type of evil over which God should have direct control if He exists.

Whereas the problem of divine hiddenness asks questions about why God doesn't do more to prevent evil, the more general problem of evil presents questions about why God allows it in the first place. Some non-theists do allow for the compatibility of the existence of evil and *the belief* in God (though not the existence of God). They view the existence of evil itself as an explanation for the existence of the belief in God. For example Freud's now famous argument was that it is precisely due to our inability to live in this cold, hard world that the belief in God is formed. Thus belief in God becomes a "useful fiction," a survival skill that helps humanity get along in the world in the face of unbearable evils. Survival skills, the argument continues, are not a product of dysfunction so belief in God should not be abandoned (in some cases). Still, the belief in God, though helpful, is entirely false. Alvin Plantinga deals with Freud's position in his *Warrant and Christian Belief* due this January from OUP.

Non-theistic philosophers of religion typically have seen the problem of evil as a problem that counts against the existence of God. Historically, non-theists tried to develop deductive arguments designed to show the incompatibility of the existence of God (as conceived in the Judeo-Christian tradition) and the existence of evil and suffering in the world. In the same way, theists historically have approached the problem by developing deductive arguments (called theodicies) designed to demonstrate that existence of both God and evil are compatible. But in more recent exchanges, arguments on both sides have moved away from this deductive approach to more of an inductive one. Arguments from non-theists for example, have attempted either to show the incompatibility of theism as a worldview given evil or to show that other approaches to the world such as naturalism explain evil better than theism. This has come to be known as the evidential problem of evil (for the best collection of essays on this topic, see *The Evidential Argument from Evil* edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder of Seattle Pacific University).

William Rowe (Purdue University) was the first modern philosopher to state the evidential problem clearly. His 1979 paper, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" set the ball rolling and has been anthologized in numerous volumes. Since 1979, Rowe has reworked and strengthened this argument. Michael Bergmann (Purdue) will be looking at Rowe's new argument at the forthcoming Eastern Division annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

Paul Draper (Florida International University) has developed a probabilistic argument from evil along evidential lines and currently is working on a similar argument based on Darwinian evolution and naturalism. I asked Dr. Draper about this trend towards more probabilistic arguments as opposed to deductive arguments. "The most important shift in the contemporary discussion of the problem of evil occurred in the 70s and 80s. It was then that the focus shifted away from the issue of whether or not various known facts about suffering are logically incompatible with (and so disprove) theism to the issue of whether or not various known facts about suffering are strong evidence against theism."

The move, he explains, shifted from attempting to show how belief in God's existence is *irrational* given evil to the idea that belief in God's existence is less probable given evil in the world. "Concerning the first issue, it is now widely accepted that some facts about suffering are compatible with theism and that none can be proven to be incompatible. But even facts that are compatible with a theory can be strong evidence against it. (For example, one's fingerprints on the safe can be strong evidence that you stole the money even though they are clearly compatible with your innocence.) So the second issue is independent of the first." He went on to describe how contemporary efforts are more interested in looking at the relative explanatory strength of theism as opposed to naturalism or some other explanation in accounting for the existence of evil in the world. "Before this trend began," Draper noted, "much time was wasted debating how many facts about suffering theism 'needed' to explain to avoid disconfirmation."

Clearly, the problem of evil continues to be a "live" issue for philosophy of religion and appears to be growing in prominence as an area of study. At the end of the day however, the problem of evil may not be so much philosophical as emotional. We may come to the point where we understand why and how God does what He does but, even if we do, pain and suffering will continue to cut as deeply as it ever has. As Saul Bellow's once said, "There are evils ... that have the ability to survive identification and go on for ever." Perhaps having a greater understanding will serve to remove a bit of the sting.