The Argument From Evil

So far we have discussed two important arguments for belief in God. But there is also a classic argument *against* theism, and that is the argument from evil. There are various ways of stating it, but the idea is clear enough. God, if there is one, is powerful enough to prevent evil and good enough to *want* to prevent evil. So there should be no evil in the world if there is a God. But there is evil. Therefore, there is no God. This formal way of putting it is sterile; the argument moves people because the world so clearly has such a large measure of suffering that it is hard to imagine why a good and omnipotent God would permit it. Put another way, a world like this one just doesn't *seem* to be in the care of a benevolent and powerful God, at least as some people see it.

The problem, then, is to find a way of reconciling the existence of evil with the existence of God. The problem has two rather different components, in fact. One is intellectual: attempting to find a way of blocking the argument for atheism. The other, however, is existential. Even if we show that the argument from evil is not probative on strictly logical grounds, the question will be: what way of looking at the world sits best with our sense of things?

Various solutions have been offered to the intellectual problem of evil. One is due to St. Iranaeus. The earth is a place for the perfection of souls before their entry into blessedness. The trials of this world are like a refiner's fire; they temper, strengthen and purify our natures to fit us to dwell with God.

What should we make of this? It isn't just a silly idea. We think that there is value and nobility in triumphing over adversity. We think that there is typically something deeper about people who have experienced life. And many people who have been through difficult and painful experiences don't really wish that things had been otherwise. But as an intellectual response, it may seem lacking. What of people who die very young? It *might* be argued that they were refined early. But what of those who die a quick and painless death at a young age -- say, an infant who dies in her sleep. Is it really plausible to say that the point of this death was to perfect the infant's soul? One loses one's sense that one even knows what this might mean.

It is also clear that trials and tribulations are not distributed in any way that seems to suit the demands of soul-making. Some reprobates never suffer; some people whose character already seems plenty strong enough continue to have to endure. The evil of the world seems too random for the "vale of soul-making" notion to seem plausible for very long.

And there is another point. Much of the suffering in the world is among animals. But even if we think our suffering is of more consequence, the suffering of animals *is* an evil. And the soul-making argument seems to get no grip on this part of the problem.

The most common response to the argument from evil is the free will defense. Go gave us free will; to meddle in our affairs and protect us from all evil would be to make a mockery of our supposed free will.

I think we should grant two things: first, on the whole, it is better that we have free will -- whatever exactly that amounts to -- than that we don't. It is what makes it possible for us to be responsible, and, indeed, to have a role in shaping our own lives. And I think we should also grant: in a world in which we actually exercise our free will, some suffering is virtually inevitable.

Does this solve the intellectual problem? Not by itself. Several reasons. First, some would argue that the *amount* of suffering in the world is far greater than the value of never interfering with out freedom could justify. Was it *really* necessary to let the Holocaust play itself out?

An analogy: I want my children to develop strength and independence. for that reason, I don't just protect them from all the things life can dish out. Some of their learning will be - and must be - through painful experience, and within limits I don't even wish it weren't so. But there *are* limits. I might (or might not) let me son deal with the neighborhood bully by himself. But if my son were being tortured and I could do anything to stop it, I would. In fact, it would be bizarre to accuse me of somehow not letting him develop independently if I protected him from *outrageous* evils when I could. Now the torture that Palinor, the protagonist of our novel, experienced was outrageous -- as is the torture of many people in the real world. Is it really plausible to say that leaving the torturer free to do such hideous evil is worth the cost?

Here a certain response might seem natural: compared to the infinite and eternal bliss of Heaven, even the most fiendish

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torture pales into nothingness. It's like a needle-stab suffered by a diabetic. Unpleasant, perhaps, but trivial when compared with the benefits.

This response has a certain logical cohesiveness. *Any* finite evil would seem to whither to nothing in the face of an infinite reward. But there is a bad air about this answer. It seems to sanction the claim that the holocaust was actually a trivial thing. And that could be said only by someone in the grip of a theory. It also doesn't cohere altogether well with the larger traditions of which the response is a part. In the Biblical tradition, at least, we are given the impression that human suffering matters to God -- that it is not a trivial thing.

Perhaps all this could be worked out. You may have your own views. As Marilyn McCord Adams has pointed out, Christianity has a particular approach to this problem that is perhaps distinctive. It doesn't amount to a solution in the intellectual sense at all. Instead it is something that might be seen to make the need to solve the problem less urgent. According to Christianity, God understands suffering in the deepest possible way. This is so because God has suffered and, in fact, God has suffered death itself, in human flesh. According to Christian Doctrine, Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God incarnate -- the second person of the trinity become fully human. It is a heresy within orthodox Christianity to claim that Jesus somehow was spared a very real and painful death -- that, for example, Jesus was "really" a spirit, and his physical body was a mere appearance, or that he was somehow assumed into heaven before the crucifixion, and what the witnesses saw was illusion. (This latter view, by the way, can be found in the Holy Koran, and so on this crucial point about Jesus, Islam and Christianity are in sharp disagreement.) Although not an intellectual solution to the problem of evil, the point is that on this view, God is not asking us to tolerate anything that God was unwilling to tolerate in fully human form.

Of course, this particular solution is not available within traditions that deny the doctrine of the Incarnation. Other traditions have other approaches. In mystical Judaism, God needs humanity as much as humanity needs God, and humanity and God must work together in the process of *Tikkun* -- the reintegration of the world and, in a sense of God Himself. This myth (in the literary sense of the word) is not a provable truth about the world, but it was a source of sustenance for Jews in the face of a reality that must sometimes have seemed almost unbearably hostile.

So we need to be careful not to confuse intellectual and existential solutions to the problem of evil. Each does a job that the other may be incapable of doing. And with this background in mind, we will go on to discuss the particular remarks that C.S. Lewis and David Hume have to offer on this problem.

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