

## C. S. Lewis and David Hume on the Problem of Evil

Lewis begins with a terse statement of the problem of evil:

If God were good, He would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.

While some might complain that this soft-pedals the problem -- it isn't just the lack of happiness but the abundance of misery that creates the conundrum -- it will do. Lewis's approach to the problem is to question a basic metaphysical assumption of the argument -- that an omnipotent being really could wipe away our tears and heal our direst ills. To cast doubt on this assumption, he needs to start by asking just what omnipotence really amounts to and to do that, he needs to investigate the concept of impossibility.

Most so-called impossible things are impossible *unless* some impediment is removed. For example, Lewis tells us, if I break my leg, then it is impossible for me to get to the top floor of the building *unless* someone helps me. Sometimes we can see clearly what sort of "unless" clause is called for. Other times, it isn't clear whether any exceptions are possible. Human vision and the nature of light being what they are, we can't see around corners. Could it have been otherwise? Lewis says -- reasonably enough -- that he doesn't know.

This last example points to a distinction: the distinction between relative impossibility and absolute impossibility. Things being what they are, I can't lift a cow. But there is nothing *deeply* impossible about this. Other things are impossible, *period*. It is impossible, *period* to make a round square.

I've noticed that a lot of people scoff at this idea. They say "Oh! Maybe God could just do something we can't understand or imagine, but if only we could understand it, we would see that he had made a round square.

Nonsense.

Literally.

A square has straight sides. That's part of what it *is* to be a square. Round things aren't straight. If they were, they wouldn't be round. There is nothing deep here. To say that something is a round square is to talk nonsense. It means only marginally more than to say that something is a furpled burgledurff. God can't make a furpled burgledurff because it doesn't mean anything. God can't make a round square because what it means is incoherent. Nothing God might do would *count* as making a round square. And to say that all this is beyond our comprehension is simply wrong. It isn't beyond our comprehension at all that straight things aren't round. It is as obvious as things get.

Lewis's point is that it is no limitation on God's power that God can't do contradictory things. The reason God can't is that there is nothing that would count as doing them, so there is nothing here for God to do. (The original "There's no *there* there"...)

It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternative; not because His power meets with an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.

Perhaps Lewis is wrong about this. But if you can mount a convincing argument to show that he is, you have a promising career ahead of you as a professional philosopher. Still, what can he *do* with this observation? After all, it isn't absolutely or intrinsically impossible for God to make a world in which there is no suffering or pain.

Lewis, of course realizes this as well as the next person. His point is not that it is absolutely impossible for God to make a pain-free universe. His point is that it is absolutely impossible for God to make a world like that *and* to put free, independent creatures in it. His claim is this:

...not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively

independent and "inexorable" nature.

Lewis takes it for granted that a world with a society of free beings is better than a world with no such things. He doesn't argue for this, though there is a hint of an argument when he points out that if something in the world is convenient for me, it is probably not convenient for someone else. This is not a bad thing, Lewis writes:

It furnishes occasions for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humor and modesty express themselves.

To which Lewis might have added more glamorous virtues such as courage and heroism.

Although it isn't a primary part of Lewis's argument, this idea is worth lingering over: a world with no pain nor any possibility of pain is a lesser world than one in which we can suffer. The reason is that a world without pain is a world without the deepest sort of good: moral good. Behind this is the point that a world with choices is better than one without. And for choices to mean anything deep, some of the alternatives will have to be bad.

There is an air of paradox about this claim, but it seems hard to deny. The fact that things can be bad makes them better. And there also seems to be no doubt that this can carry us at least some distance towards a solution to the intellectual problem of evil. In one sense, Lewis's essay amounts to bringing some of the details into focus.

Begin with what it is to be a *self* at all. A self has to have self-consciousness. But Lewis argues that we could only have a sense of self if there was something apart from the self -- an "other" -- to offer a contrast. This raises a question about God: how could *God* have a sense of self? Lewis appeals to the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity -- the claim that God is three Persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in one Being: there is "society" within God's inner nature. Whether or not this is the only solution to the problem, I note in passing that Plotinus, the third-century neoplatonic philosopher, held that the ultimate being, the "One," in his philosophy, is not capable of knowledge precise because it involves no differentiation whatsoever.

Of course, we could imagine a world with creatures whose only relationship was with God, and whose only real choice was to love God more than self or vice-versa. But Lewis takes it for granted that a world with a *society* of creatures is better yet. And while I have no particular argument in favor of this claim, I have no inclination to doubt it.

If I knew other creatures "directly" by some sort of immediate acquaintance with their thoughts, I would find it difficult, if not impossible to tell "them" from "me." Is that odd thought I just had a burp from my own unconscious? Or is it a transmission from another being? Lewis thinks it would be hard to tell unless there was an external, material medium -- air, light, paper, whatever -- through which we communicated. Lewis puts it neatly:

Matter, which keeps souls apart, also brings them together. It enables each of us to have an "outside" as well as an "inside", so that what are acts of will and thought for you are noises and glances for me; you are enabled not only to *be*, but to *appear*, and hence I have the pleasure of making your acquaintance.

This is an argument for the necessity of matter -- of an external (and externalizing) medium in any world that has a society of distinct, free beings who can keep themselves straight from one another. But Lewis continues: this matter will have to have a fixed nature that isn't fixed by our wills. The problem is this: there are many of us. If the world is made to fit *my* will, it can at least potentially differ from yours. But in that case, *my* "will" will not be able to bring anything about; *you* will determine everything. So matter provides a neutral arena for the exercise of the will.

For choices to be significant, furthermore, some of them will have to be more agreeable than others. If no matter what we choose is pleasant, choices are morally trivial. There has to be a possibility of pain. Furthermore, this is not simply evil. Our pain receptors warn us of danger, and the warnings, while technically painful are not things that we necessarily mind. (As long as I don't get *too* near the fire, the process of finding out by a little sting of heat that I'm too close doesn't really bother me, Lewis points out.)

But now we return to a point we noted earlier. There is no way that this fixed, neutral external medium in which our choices are played out can make things agreeable to everyone at once. This makes the moral virtues possible, but it makes moral evil possible as well.

Now God does sometimes intervene, according to Lewis. God does sometimes perform miracles that disrupt the course of nature and save us from suffering. But if this were routine, our choices would be too few to add up to anything.

Lewis doesn't claim to have deep insight into just which features of the world are necessary for meaningful moral life; he takes himself to be making plausible speculations. But he does believe that whatever the details may be, they are of the general sort and level of complexity that he indicates. And the upshot is that a world is better for containing the real possibility of evil, because without it there can't be meaningful action. The question is: does this really eliminate the problem? If God can actually perform miracles, then haven't there been more than enough situations in history that called for just that sort of intervention? Presumably God could have stopped the holocaust. A weakened blood vessel inside Hitler's skull at a crucial stage in the process might have been enough. Is our freedom worth the amount of evil that Hitler brought about? We could ask the same of the Inquisition or the Killing Fields of Cambodia. And we could ask the same of disasters that are not the result of anyone's bad moral choices at all. Most of the starving people in the world have no real choice in the matter at all. Perhaps the right balance has been struck. But some people find this hard to believe. To some people, the world simply doesn't seem to be the sort of place that a good God would create. It seems to be a mere moral chaos.

This theme is in the background of the selection from Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that deal with the problem of evil. As you will recall, the dialogues have three characters. One is Cleanthes, the defender of the argument from design and opponent of the cosmological argument. Another is Demea, who accepts the cosmological argument but rejects Cleanthes' anthropomorphic conception of God. The central figure -- the one who seems most closely to represent Hume -- is Philo, the seemingly-mystical, more plausibly skeptical opponent of all anthropomorphism and of all *proofs* for the existence of God. At the beginning of our selection, Philo and Demea review the evils of the world as a way of making out the claim that God can't be like us, and in particular that to talk of God's "goodness" in the terms that we understand is ludicrous. Philo puts it this way:

His wisdom is infinite; He is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore, it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?

Cleanthes offers two sorts of responses. At first he protests the pessimism of Philo and Demea, claiming that pleasure and happiness are more common than misery and pain. But Philo protests: pleasure fades. States of happiness are transient. What he means, I take it, is that any pleasure you can think of -- food, sex, music -- fades and becomes disagreeable if we have too much of it. We become satiated. But whereas pleasure tends to degenerate into unpleasantness, pain becomes all the more painful the longer it lasts.

Cleanthes' second defense is to object to the idea that God's virtues must be *infinite*. We have no need for such claims:

The terms "admirable," "excellent," "superlatively great," "wise," "holy"; these sufficiently fill the imaginations of men, and anything beyond, besides it leads to absurdities, has no influence on the affections or sentiments.

If we give up any analogies between God and humanity, Cleanthes insists, we give up religion itself, because we no longer know what we are talking about. If we insist on the infinite perfection of God, we can't solve the problem of evil. The solution is to believe in a *finite* God. That is all the religious imagination needs or even can deal with. And it avoids the problem of evil.

Philo doesn't deny that what we see in the world is *consistent* with the existence of a very good and powerful finite God. But he insists that the world we see isn't the sort we would imagine if we, so to speak, came to the universe anew with only the knowledge that such a God created it. That means that we could never *infer* the existence of such a God from what we see in the world. In fact, Philo says, there are four hypotheses about the causes of the universe:

*that* they are endowed with perfect goodness; *that* they have perfect malice; *that* they are opposite and have both goodness and malice; *that* they have neither goodness nor malice.

Which is most likely? Since we see both good and evil, we can't reason to either of the first two. Hume adds that the uniformity and steadiness of general laws of nature seems to rule out the third. So we are left with the fourth: the sources of the universe are neither good nor bad by our lights.

Is this the reasonable conclusion? The bit in the argument about the steadiness of the laws of nature is not very convincing. The only way of interpreting it that seems to make it even remotely plausible is to say that the laws of nature are neither moral nor immoral, and the world seems to operate by laws. But this is unconvincing because the total design including the circumstances on which the laws operate, is what is at issue. Mixed causes could produce mixed results partly by way of laws that are themselves neutral. The world contains goodness and beauty and it contains horror and pain. It is at least consistent to claim that both are there deliberately. But it isn't clear how much damage this does to Philo's point, it is also perfectly consistent with the facts to say that the world is the result of blind causes that have no moral interest in us or anything else. If we have to *infer* which story is right, we have no clear reason for ruling this possibility out.

Now Philo's claim -- at least the one that Hume puts in his mouth -- is that we can't *infer* the existence of God at all. Belief in God is a matter of faith. Hume himself says this in his own words in his essay "On Miracles" in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. However, one suspects that Hume himself saw such faith as anything but a virtue, as the end of his essay on miracles more than hints:

...upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

Whatever you make of that, it is not unlikely that no solution to the intellectual problem of evil will ever be entirely satisfactory. But there are less cynical evaluations of faith than Hume's, and when we look at the debate among Antony Flew, R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell, we will see some other ways of looking at this whole matter.

© Copyright Allen Stairs, 1998. All Rights Reserved  
[stairs@glue.umd.edu](mailto:stairs@glue.umd.edu)

[Back to the Main Page](#)