

2. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The God at issue today need not be perfect in all respects; she must, however, be an omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good being (an OOG).

1) If God existed, she'd be an OOG. [Assumption]

An OOG being knows everything; so she knows when a city is going to be flooded, or the crops aren't growing, or a baby is threatened by fire. Since she is all-powerful, she could prevent it if she tried. Since she is wholly good, she does try. Thus the flood, famine, fire, etc. is prevented. So:

2) If an OOG existed, there would be no evil. [A]

3) If God existed, there would be no evil. [1,2]

But the truth is that (as the Dostoevsky reading makes vividly clear):

4) There is evil. [A]

5) God does not exist. [3,4]

Is this a valid argument? Is it sound, that is, are the assumptions true? 2) has been questioned.

GOOD RESULTS FROM EVIL

An OOG being would allow some evils, those that have good enough results in the long run.

The baby will go to heaven. Its parents will develop sympathy and strength of character. Officials will be motivated to "make things right" by tightening fire codes.

This assumes (a) the resulting goods will occur, (b) they will outweigh the earlier evil, (c) the evil cause is truly necessary for the good effect. True?

GOOD PRESUPPOSES EVIL

An OOG would allow some evils, those that are preconditions of higher goods.

Sympathy, charity, heroism, kindness, depend for their possibility on the existence of evil.

2nd order: kindness, heroism

1st order: deprivation, danger

This assumes (a) the second-order goods really will occur, (b) they will outweigh the first-order evil, (c) the higher good really presupposes the lower evil. Is this plausible?

GOOD CAUSES EVIL: FREE WILL

An OOG being would allow some evils, namely those due to human free will. Free will is so important that an OOG tolerates its misuse rather than take it away. (Worries about God's omniscience.)

Does free will have to be misused? Gandhi was hardly a robot! Why not block the horrific consequences? Natural disasters are nothing to do with free will.

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

The OOG being's ways are mysterious; s/he works according to a higher morality.

The things we're calling 'evil' may not look that way from a higher perspective:

Then what does it mean to say that God is wholly good? Don't we mean good in ways that make sense to us? If not, then we're just playing with words.

It seems premise 2) above is, at the very least, controversial. Can we fix it?

2*) If an OOG existed, the only evil would serve some sufficiently good point.

4*) There is unredeemed evil—evil that serves no sufficiently good point. Is the new argument valid? Are the assumptions plausible?

2*) says roughly that if an OOG existed, this would be the best of all possible worlds. Maybe that's too much to ask. Maybe it's even impossible—any world can be improved, by adding a rainbow or foot massage. Does that give the theist a way out?

Do we have grounds for thinking that 4*) holds?

Atheist: According to accepted principles of evidence, it is reasonable to conclude from the fact that our search for an X fails, that there is no X.

Theist: Is that right? Let's consider the pattern of inference more carefully.

(a) There are no observed elephants in this room.

(b) There are no elephants in this room.

(c) There are no observed bacteria on the floor (I've looked carefully!).

(d) There are no bacteria on the floor.

Detectability Condition "Failure to see something (an elephant, a person, a reason) gives us reason to believe it is not there only if we are justified in believing that if it were there, we would see it." (Russell, section 2, para. 8)

Atheist: But this doesn't fit the theist's own practice. If there were invisible elephants here, she wouldn't see them; still she feels justified in believing none are present.

Simplicity Condition One should believe the simplest explanation of one's data.

5-minute world example. I certainly seem to remember having breakfast this morning. What to believe? I had breakfast offers a simpler explanation than the world came into being 5 minutes ago complete with memory-traces as of breakfast.

Likewise (?) the suffering is pointless offers a simpler explanation of why we can't find a point to it than there is an OOG being with a great plan that we don't understand.

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