

Does God Believe In Me?

Back at University (many years ago) I had a good friend called Bruno. Bruno was a very intelligent, well educated German Jew, a large, portly man with a little goatee beard. I believe he subsequently became a barrister. If anyone said to him 'Bruno, do you believe in God?' he would smile, shrug and say, in a perfect Oxford accent, 'Oh, I don't know. Does God believe in *me*? That's the question, isn't it?'

And I would agree. This was a perfectly fair question to ask. It is true, of course, that many of the evils in the world are the direct result of deliberate actions perpetrated by human beings, or the result of culpable negligence on the part of human beings. These considerations are very cogent, but they overlook one critically important detail: who (or what) created human beings – and the way they are – in the first place? If the answer is God, then it is God, ultimately, who must bear at least some of the responsibility for what human beings do (or fail to do). Omar Khayyam is reputed to have said to God, 'You made me as I am, so what about it?'¹

The problem of evil has been of major concern to theologians for centuries and it has also, obviously, attracted the attention of philosophers, to say nothing of journalists, current affairs commentators and many others.. But the philosophical difficulty is this: God is said to be all-good. God does not do evil. God is also said to be the Creator of the entire universe and of everything within it. God is also said to be all-powerful, but here we have a problem. Evil exists. If God is all-good then He, She or It would never have created anything evil. If God is all-powerful, then He, She or It would have the power to eliminate evil or to prevent it from even occurring in the first place. So, in the light of these considerations, how or why does evil exist?

The theologian must face two equally worrying possibilities: *either* God is not all-good *or* He, She or It is not all-powerful. God cannot be both. God cannot be all-good *and* all-powerful otherwise evil would not exist or should not exist. But evil *does* exist, although some theologians have tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid this problem.

This is a major theological puzzle. It does not arise, however, if there is no such thing as 'God'. Nor does it arise if there is no such thing as 'evil'. I could be wrong, but I think it would be a very bold theologian who would attempt to argue there is no such thing as evil – not if he wanted to be taken seriously, at any rate.

It is patently obvious that evil exists and indeed flourishes. There are *moral evils* such as war, crime, gratuitous cruelty etc.; there are *natural evils* such as floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters, as well as disease with all the pain and suffering which it entails. The problem is that if God is the creator of literally

¹ Omar Khayyam – 11th century Persian mathematician, astronomer and poet.

everything, everything includes evil so it would follow that God is the creator of evil as well as good. But this contradicts the other assertion that God is all-good. It cannot be the case that God is all-good *and* the creator of evil, but this contradictory conclusion seems to follow by a process of watertight reasoning.

All sorts of questions arise out of this particular puzzle. If God is all-good, how or why does evil exist in the world which he, she, or it created? Secondly, if God is all-powerful as well as all good, then he, she or it presumably has the ability to *eliminate* evil, completely (including getting rid of the Devil, who is sometimes blamed for evil). But the continuing reality of evil is very apparent. Further, if God is all-good then he, she or it would *want* to prevent evil. But evil exists – therefore God either *wants* to prevent evil but cannot, or *can* prevent evil but refrains from doing so (for whatever reason). It looks as if God is either benevolent or omnipotent, but not both, otherwise evil should not exist.

It could be argued that some supposedly ‘natural’ evils such as global warming are caused not by God but by human beings who pollute the environment. Superficially plausible, it needs to be remembered that it was God who created the irresponsible human beings in the first place. Without digressing into the pros and cons of who or what caused global warming, if God knowingly created irresponsible human beings but holds them accountable when things go wrong, then we seem to have a ‘cosmic buck-pass’ by the deity.

By parity of reasoning the same applies to moral evils such as greed, cruelty, selfishness, dishonesty etc. on the part of human beings. It is all very well to blame people, not God, for their various shortcomings, but why did God create them that way in the first place? As Omar Khayyam said to God, ‘you made me as I am, so what about it?’ Possibly God did not *deliberately* create people selfish, cruel, negligent etc. but simply left it to chance how individuals would grow up and develop in life. But here again, there seems to be an abrogation of divine responsibility.

It is conventional nowadays to explain an individual’s shortcomings in terms of problems in their upbringing. Often we hear people blaming a person’s shortcomings on their parents who did not bring them up properly, but on that basis we should blame the parents’ shortcomings on *their* parents, and so on back into time until in the end we cannot rationally blame anyone at all – except, perhaps, for the deity who started it all, if indeed there is one. Likewise a delinquent individual’s shortcomings are often ascribed to poverty, inequality, social injustice etc., but here again we end up in a never-ending regress of who caused what or what caused what. As before, this only leads back to the deity, if indeed there is one.

On the other hand it could be argued that evil is created not by God but by human beings who have *free will* and *responsibility* which God gave them. It is argued that free will is of such importance in itself that this must override its possible undesirable consequences. But this too can be queried. God, knowing everything, must have

been perfectly well aware of the consequences of giving human beings free will, so God has some collateral responsibility for human wickedness. It is also important to remember that 'natural' evils such as disease, famines, floods, earthquakes etc. are nothing to do with human activity or free will (they existed long before the days of pollution or global warming).

At this point I think it is important to clarify what sort of a problem we are dealing with. We are not dealing with a scientific problem or a factual enquiry that can be settled by research, tests or observations. We have plenty of facts already. We are dealing with a *logical* problem, a question of clarifying and reconciling a set of statements and definitions which appear to lead to contradictions. Specifically, 'God only does good; God created everything; 'everything' includes evil; therefore God created evil; therefore God does not always do good'. This conclusion contradicts the first premise so that it or one of the other premises must be false. Which one?

A theologian might respond by saying that logic does not answer these issues. They are beyond human understanding. What is needed is *faith*. Regrettably, however, such a response does not address the questions we have raised. If anything it only raises other questions which are just as awkward, such as how, precisely, can faith resolve logical contradictions? Critics could argue that faith does not provide an answer, it merely looks the other way. Another response to the problem is to say that evil is God's challenge to humanity to become better through opposing and overcoming evil through good actions. For example it is only because of pain and suffering that charity and other good works take place. Maybe so, but this does seem rather a roundabout way of doing things. An *omnipotent* God could have created a world without pain and suffering in the first place, quite apart from the point that if pain and suffering exist so as to make us better people, a lot of innocent and harmless people and other creatures seem to get hurt along the way.

Of course, it should in fairness be recognized that physical pain is the body's 'warning signal' to you that you have had an injury or a body malfunction which requires attention. If we did not or could not experience pain we could end up in a very bad way! Arguably, God has given us the ability to experience pain for a very good reason. It is therefore wrong to regard pain *as such* as an evil; it is more appropriate to regard its *cause* as the 'evil'. Of course, we would be better off if we never had the injuries or body malfunctions in the first place, or God could have made us stronger, more pain-resistant.

It is sometimes argued by theists that 'good cannot exist without evil'. This is true perhaps in a manner of speaking. Living creatures, such as ourselves, can only survive by killing and feeding off other living creatures. Without digressing into a long discussion on the pros and cons of vegetarianism, it is stretching the point to breaking point to turn this into an argument that good cannot exist without evil. Many would argue that feeding off other creatures is not an evil at all; it is natural, the way we evolved. And if this was the only way we could have evolved, this

suggests that God had to operate within certain practical constraints. But if so, where does that leave 'omnipotence'?

Another argument is to say that evil is necessary as a counterpart or contrast to good. Here we can simply ask 'why?', and we can also note that if good cannot exist without evil for whatever reason, then this amounts to a limit upon what God can do. And if that is so, God cannot be omnipotent. More fundamentally, in saying that evil is necessary as a counterpart or even an opposite to good, by what principle should we accept that everything that exists must have a counterpart or an opposite of some sort? Such a notion is only to be found within the writings of metaphysical philosophers such as Hegel. It is true that within Newtonian mechanics every instance of a force produces an equal and opposite reaction, but it sounds bizarre to suggest that every instance of badness produces an equivalent instance of goodness. Does every instance of goodness produce an equivalent instance of badness?

More commonly it is said that good cannot exist without bad just as white cannot exist without black. This is clearly false; if everything were white, this would simply mean that we would have no concept of colour. Or again, if blackness did not exist it would not follow that white would not exist either. To put it plainly, those who use the 'contrast' argument to explain the existence of evil are using a very weak, tenuous argument.

But let us not digress from the main issue. The basic problem is that evil exists (for whatever reason) therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and benevolent, otherwise he, she or it would have eliminated evil long ago. Arguably the deity would not even have let it into existence in the first place. Having looked at this puzzle from various different angles, we are no further forward. But I should like to propose two possible solutions which may, or may not, be acceptable to theologians:-

- (1) God is all-good but not all-powerful, which is why evil exists;
- (2) God is all-powerful but, whilst not doing wrong, sometimes fails to do good, which is why evil exists.

I think this second alternative is the more problematic. It contradicts the core of Christian teaching which is that God is wholly good. If God is all-powerful but sometimes fails to do good, this is negligence, a shortcoming which is ordinarily considered reprehensible.

The first alternative I suggest is more feasible: God is all-good but not all-powerful. Even if God created the entire universe, it is difficult to believe that the deity could suspend the laws of gravity, exceed the speed of light or prevent living creatures from being injured, falling ill, dying – or, perhaps, deciding to do something morally wrong. There cannot be unconditional, unconstrained divine omnipotence except in

our imagination. There is no evidence for it, except perhaps for allegations of miracles and the like, largely based on optical illusions, conjuring tricks, auto-suggestion, rumour, hearsay etcetera.

It might seem too radical, to many theologians, to accept that God could be all-good but not all-powerful, but I suggest that this is more feasible than the alternative scenario that God is all-powerful but not always all-good.

Of course, the most fundamental question is whether there is a deity at all. There are people who reject the idea of god because of the very problem we have been looking at, the existence of evil. However there are philosophers who do not give much attention to the problem of evil for they have other reasons for rejecting the idea of a deity. These revolve mainly around questions concerning test and verification of the deity's existence in the first place. The Logical Positivists argued that the existence of an invisible, intangible deity is not amenable to any sort of observation or test, so that it cannot even in principle be either verified or falsified. So they maintained that the sentence 'there is a god' is neither true nor false, but literally meaningless.²

This amounts to what we could call 'strong agnosticism', ordinary agnosticism being the simple 'don't know' position. It would seem, therefore, that the only thing left is faith, a position which many theologians would concur with. Another possibility I suppose is 'conjecture', although I do not think theologians would be happy with the sometimes negative connotations of that particular word.

But on the question of evil, if God exists and is all-good but not necessarily all-powerful, the only answer I can suggest is not a theoretical one but a practical one. That is to assist God by going around doing good things, which would be appropriate if God is benevolent but *not* omnipotent. On the other hand, maybe God is morally neutral. How can we tell?

And speaking purely as an individual I can still reasonably ask, does God believe in *me*?

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² See *Language, Truth and Logic*, A.J. Ayer, 1936.