

The Probabilistic Version of the Problem of Evil

We've been talking about the logical version of the problem of evil. I explained last time that the burden of proof that it lays upon the atheist's shoulders is simply too heavy to be sustained, and that this fact is now widely recognized by both atheist and theist philosophers alike. Therefore, this is not really an issue of hot debate anymore. For hundreds of years – from the time of Epicurus, hundreds of years before Christ, until the 1970s – the logical version of the problem of evil was the standard statement of this problem. Now it is widely recognized that this problem, in fact, is bankrupt. No one is able to show that the co-existence of God and the suffering and evil in the world are logically incompatible with each other.

But that then throws us onto the probabilistic, or the evidential, problem of evil, which does remain very much a matter of debate among philosophers today. This is a much more powerful version of the problem. Since its conclusion is more modest – namely, it is improbable that God exists – the burden of proof that it lays on the atheist is much lighter, and therefore can be said to be an easier objection to sustain. How might we respond to the atheist's claim that the evil and the suffering in the world make it improbable that God exists? I want to make three points by way of response to this argument.

1. *We are not in a good position to say that it is improbable that God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.*

The key to the evidential problem is the atheist's claim that God probably doesn't have good reasons for permitting the evil and suffering in the world.

We all recognize that we see neither the point nor the necessity of much of the suffering in the world. So the success of the atheist's argument is going to depend on whether or not we are warranted in inferring that because the suffering looks unjustified, it really is unjustified. The atheist's argument depends upon that critical inference from appearance to reality. Because the suffering appears to be unjustified or pointless, it really is. The first point that I want to make in response is that we are just not in a good position to make that kind of a judgment with any sort of confidence.

As finite persons, we are limited in time and space, as well as intelligence and insight. But the sovereign God sees the end of history from its beginning and providentially orders history so that his ends are achieved through people's free decisions and actions. And in order to achieve his ultimate ends, God may well have to allow a good deal of suffering along the way. Suffering which appears to be pointless to us within our limited frame of reference may be seen to be justly permitted within God's wider frame of reference.

Let me give two illustrations of this point. One from contemporary science and one from popular culture.

The first illustration: in so-called chaos theory (a field of modern science), it has been shown that certain large-scale systems like the weather or insect populations are extraordinarily sensitive to the smallest disturbances. A butterfly fluttering its wings on a twig in the jungles of West Africa can set in motion forces that will eventually cause a hurricane over the Atlantic Ocean. Yet no one watching that little butterfly fluttering on that branch could possibly – even in principle – predict such an outcome. We have

no way of knowing how seemingly insignificant and trivial alterations can radically affect the course of world history.

The second illustration from popular culture: in the movie *Sliding Doors* (starring Gwyneth Paltrow), the movie tells the story of a young woman who is rushing down the stairs of a train station to catch a subway. As she nears the train, the movie splits into two paths that her life might take. In the one life, the doors to the train slide shut just before she can board, so she is prevented from catching her train. In the other pathway, she makes it through the sliding doors just before they close. Based upon this seemingly trivial event, the two paths of her life increasingly diverge as time goes on. In the one pathway of life, she is enormously successful, prosperous, and happy. In the other life, she encounters failure, misery, and unhappiness. It is all because of that split-second difference in getting through those sliding subway doors.

Moreover, that difference is due to whether or not a little girl playing with her dolly on the stair railing is snatched away by her father or momentarily blocks the young woman's path as she is rushing down the stairs to catch the train. When you see this, you can't help but wonder about what other seemingly innumerable trivialities led up to that event. For example, whether the father and the daughter were delayed in leaving the house that morning because the little girl didn't like the cereal that her mother gave her for breakfast. Or whether the father was inattentive to his daughter because of something that he had read in that day's newspaper that disturbed him, and so his thoughts were not on his daughter. And so on and so forth.

The most interesting part of this film, however, is the ending. In the happy, successful life, the young woman is suddenly killed in an accident, while in the other miserable life, her life turns around and the life of hardship and suffering turns out in the end to be the truly good life after all. My point is obviously not that everything will turn out for the best in this life! No, I am making a much more modest point: simply that given the dizzying complexity of life, we are simply in no position to judge with any sort of confidence that God has no good reason for permitting some instance of suffering to afflict our lives. Every event that occurs sends a ripple effect through history such that God's reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries from now, maybe in another country. Only an all-knowing God could grasp the complexities of directing a world of free people toward his previsioned ends. Just think of the innumerable, incalculable events that would be involved in arriving at a single historical event, for example, the Allied victory on D-Day. Think of the infinite complexity that would lie behind arriving at that single event! We have no idea of what suffering might be involved in order for God to achieve some intended purpose through the freely chosen actions of human persons, nor should we expect to discern God's reasons for permitting suffering. It is hardly surprising that much of the suffering and evil in the world should appear pointless and unnecessary to us because we are simply overwhelmed by this kind of complexity.

I want to emphasize that this is not to appeal to mystery or to divine psychology, but rather it is to point to our inherent limitations which make it impossible for us to say when confronted with some incident of suffering that God probably doesn't have a good reason for permitting that event to occur. Unbelievers

themselves recognize these kinds of limitations in other contexts. For example, one of the decisive objections to utilitarianism (which is the ethical theory that says that we should do that action which will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people) is that we have no idea of the ultimate outcome of our actions. Some short-term good might lead in the long run to untold misery, while some action that looks disastrous in the short-term may turn out to bring about the greatest good for humanity. We don't have a clue given our cognitive limitations. This defect in utilitarianism has absolutely nothing to do with divine mystery or divine psychology or something of that sort. It has to do with the inherent cognitive limitations under which we as finite observers operate.

Once we contemplate God's providence over the whole of human history, I hope you can see how hopeless it is for finite limited observers to speculate about the probability of whether God has a good reason for the suffering that we observe. We are simply not in a position to assess those kind of probabilities with any sort of confidence.

That is the first response to the probabilistic version of the problem of evil. Let's go on to point 2.

2. Relative to the full scope of the evidence, God's existence is probable.

The key to understanding this second point is that probabilities are always relative to some background information. Probabilities are not absolute. It is always probable with respect to some background information. So, for example, suppose we are given the information that Joe is a college student and that 90% of

college students drink beer. Relative to that information, it makes it highly probable that Joe is a beer drinker. But suppose now we are given the additional information that Joe is a Wheaton College student and that 90% of Wheaton College students do not drink beer. Relative to this new set of information, it now becomes highly improbable that Joe is a beer drinker. So probabilities – to repeat – are relative to background information.

So when the atheist says God's existence is improbable, your antennae should immediately go up, and you should ask, “Improbable relative to what?” What is the background information? Is it the suffering in the world? Well, if that is all you take as your background information, it is no wonder that God's existence would look improbable relative to that alone (though as I've argued in point 1 appearances can be deceiving). But the probability of God's existence relative to the suffering in the world alone isn't really an interesting question, is it? The really interesting question is: how probable is God's existence relative to the full scope of the evidence? I'm persuaded that when you consider the full scope of the evidence then God's existence is quite probable, even given any improbability that evil might be thought to throw upon God's existence. That is to say, any improbability of God's existence relative to evil alone is simply outbalanced by the evidence for the existence of God – evidence that we've discussed in this class.

Consider, in particular, the moral argument for God's existence. A lot of the suffering in the world is the result of human choices – moral choices. Much of the evil in the world is moral evil. But then you can present a moral argument that goes like this:

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
2. Evil exists.
3. Therefore, objective moral values exist (namely, some things are evil!).
4. Therefore, God exists.

Paradoxically, at a superficial level, although evil would seem to call into question God's existence, at a deeper, more fundamental, level evil actually proves God's existence because apart from God the suffering in the world isn't really evil. So if the atheist thinks that there is moral evil or that suffering ought not to exist, then he is making moral judgments that are possible only if God exists.

What you need to understand with respect to the evidential version of the problem of evil is that most of the people who write on the evidential version of the problem of evil are simply assuming tacitly that there is no evidence on the other side of the scale. For them, the only question is whether or not God's existence is improbable relative to the evil and suffering in the world, because they just assume there is nothing on the other side of the scale to outbalance it. But I think that there are very weighty arguments on the other side of the scale for God's existence, including the argument from evil itself. We could actually concede that God's existence is improbable relative to the evil in the world taken in isolation but maintain that this is just outweighed by the arguments for God's existence.

Those two points alone, I think, are sufficient to turn back the force of the atheist's evidential argument from evil. But I now want to make a third point:

3. Christianity entails doctrines that increase the probability of the co-existence of God and the suffering in the world. That is to say, if the Christian God exists, then it is not really so improbable that evil and suffering should also exist. It actually turns out that the problem of evil is much more difficult for a sort of bare-boned theism – a mere monotheism – than it is for Christianity. For Christianity entails certain doctrines that increase the probability that suffering and evil should exist.

What are these doctrines? Let me mention four of them this morning.

1. The chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God. This is absolutely fundamental. The reason that the problem of suffering seems so difficult, I think, to most people is because they just naturally assume that if God exists, then his goal for human life is happiness in this life. God's role is to make a comfortable environment for his human pets. But on the Christian view this is false. We are not God's pets. The goal of human life is not happiness as such, but rather the knowledge of God which in the end will produce true and everlasting human fulfillment. Much of the suffering in life may be utterly pointless with respect to the goal of producing human happiness. But it may not be pointless with respect to the goal of producing a deeper knowledge of God. Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer himself or on the part of those around him.

Of course, whether or not God's purpose is actually achieved through our suffering is going to depend on our response to it. Do we respond with anger and bitterness towards God? Or do we respond with deeper faith and trust and dependency in God? Whether or not God's purposes are achieved through our suffering all depends upon how we respond to it.

Because God's ultimate goal for human history is the knowledge of himself (which will, in the end, bring eternal happiness to people), history cannot be seen in the proper perspective apart from considerations of the kingdom of God. The purpose of human history is establishing the kingdom of God. God's desire is to draw as many people freely into his kingdom. It may well be the case, I think, that suffering is part of the means that God uses to draw people freely into his kingdom.

Is this some sort of airy-fairy speculation on my part? Not at all! A reading of a missions handbook like *Operation World* by Patrick Johnston reveals that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe suffering, both moral and natural evil, that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates, while the growth curves in the indulgent West are basically flat. Consider for example the following reports from *Operation World*.¹

China: It is estimated that 20 million Chinese lost their lives in Mao's Cultural Revolution. Christians stood firm in what was probably the most widespread and harsh persecution the Church has ever experienced. The persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since 1977, the growth of the

¹ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 164, 207-8, 214.

Church in China has no parallels in history. Researchers estimate that there were 30 to 75 million Christians by 1990. Today, it is estimated to be somewhere between 90 million and 100 million. Mao Zedong unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history.

El Salvador: The 12-year civil war, earthquakes, and the collapse of the price of coffee, the nation's main export, impoverished the nation. Over 80% live in dire poverty. An astonishing spiritual harvest has been gathered from all strata of society in the midst of the hate and bitterness of war. In 1960 evangelicals were 2.3% of the population, but today, they are around 20%.

Ethiopia: Ethiopia is in a state of shock. Her population struggles with the trauma of millions of deaths through repression, famine and war. Two great waves of violent persecution refined and purified the Church, but there were many martyrs. There have been millions coming to Christ. Protestants were fewer than 0.8% of the population in 1960, but by 1990 this may have become 13% of the population.

Examples like this could be multiplied. For example, since the earthquake in Haiti a few years ago there has been tremendous revival and throughout Haiti people coming to faith in Christ, such as never before.

The history of mankind has been a history of suffering and war; and yet it has also been a history of the advance of the Kingdom of God. In 1990, the U. S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena released information charting the ratio over time between Bible-believing Christians in the world and non-Christians in the world.

Neither category includes merely nominal Christians. The information concerned Bible-believing or evangelical Christians in the world compared to non-Christians in the world. In the first century, when Christianity began, for every Bible-believing Christian in the world there were thousands of non-believers. By the time of the Middle Ages, that figure had shrunk to about 1,000 non-believers for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. By the year 1900, that ratio had shrunk to 27 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. And by 1990, that figure had shrunk to 7 non-Christians for every Bible-believing Christian in the world. The trend continues. According to Patrick Johnstone, “We are living in the time of the largest in-gathering of people into the Kingdom of God that the world has ever seen.” I think that it is not at all improbable that this astonishing growth in the Kingdom of God is due in part at least to the presence of terrible suffering in the world.

2. Mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and his purpose. Rather than submit to and worship God, people rebel against God and go their own way and so find themselves alienated from God, groping in spiritual darkness, morally guilty before God, and pursuing false gods of their own imagination. The terrible human evils in the world are simply testimony to the state of man’s depravity in this condition of spiritual alienation from God. So the Christian isn’t really surprised at the terrible moral evils in the world. On the contrary, he expects them. The Scriptures say that God has given mankind up to the evil that it has freely chosen. He doesn’t intervene to stop it. He lets human depravity run its course. In Romans 1, three times (in verses 24, 26, and 28) Paul says, “God gave them up” to the evil and depravity that they had chosen.

He lets human evil run its course. This only serves to heighten mankind's moral responsibility before God as well as our wickedness and our need of his forgiveness and moral cleansing.

3. God's purpose is not restricted to this life, but it spills over beyond the grave to eternal life. According to the Christian faith, this life is but the cramped and narrow foyer that leads into the Great Hall of God's eternity. God promises eternal life to all who place their trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. So when God asks his children to endure terrible suffering in this life, it is only with the prospect of a heavenly joy and recompense that is beyond comprehension.

When you think about it, the apostle Paul lived a life of incredible suffering. He suffered from both some sort of debilitating physical infirmity (natural evil) as well as from moral evil perpetrated upon him by his persecutors. His life as an apostle was punctuated by "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger" (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). And yet he wrote, "We do not lose heart. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Paul lived this life in the perspective of eternity. He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life that we shall enjoy with God. Think about it. The longer we spend in eternity, the more the sufferings of this life shrink by comparison to literally an infinitesimal moment. That is why Paul could call the suffering in

this life a “slight momentary affliction.” He wasn't being insensitive to people who suffer terribly. On the contrary, he was one of them! But he understood that these sufferings are simply overwhelmed by the ocean of everlasting joy and glory which God will give to those who trust him.

It could well be the case that there is suffering in the world which serves no earthly good whatsoever. It is pointless from a human point of view, but God permits it simply that he might overwhelmingly reward in the afterlife those who have borne such suffering in faith and confidence in God.

4. The knowledge of God is an incommensurable good. The passage that I cited from 2 Corinthians also makes this point. Paul imagines, as it were, a scale on which the sufferings and the miseries of this life are placed on one side, and on the other side is placed the glory which God will bestow upon his children in heaven. And Paul says, “the weight of glory” is so great that it is “beyond comparison” with the suffering. Think about it. To know God, the locus of infinite goodness and love, is an incomparable good. It is the fulfillment of human existence. It is what we were made for. Thus the sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. So the person who truly knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, “God is good to me,” simply in virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.

These four Christian doctrines greatly increase the probability of the co-existence of God and the suffering and evil in the world. Thus they in turn decrease any improbability that the evil and

suffering in the world would seem to cast upon the existence of God.

The atheist might respond at this point that we have no reason to think that these four doctrines are true. Whoa! Wait a minute! He is trying to shift the burden of proof again! Remember, it is the atheist who says that the suffering in the world makes God's existence improbable. So it is entirely legitimate for you to respond, "Not the Christian God!" The atheist needs to show that the Christian God is improbable relative to the suffering in the world. In order to do that he either needs to show that these four doctrines are probably false or else show that God's existence is still improbable given the truth of these four doctrines. But in either case he has the burden of proof here. It is not up to you to prove that these doctrines are true. It is up to the atheist to show that they are either probably false or that evil and suffering is still highly improbable given the truth of these doctrines. The atheist is the one who has the burden of proof here. Don't let him foist it upon you.

Let's wrap up this discussion. In summary, the evidential version of the problem of suffering just can't be put through successfully. It requires probability judgments which are beyond our ability. It fails to take into account the full scope of the evidence. And it is diminished in force when it comes to the Christian God.

Since neither the logical nor the evidential version of the problem of evil goes through, I think that the intellectual problem of suffering and evil fails as a disproof of the existence of God.

But when I say "fails" I mean "fails intellectually." The anguish of the suffering and the gnawing doubt may still remain. That brings

us back to the emotional problem of evil. I've already said that I think for most people the problem posed by suffering is really an emotional problem. That will be the question we will want to turn to next week.