Suffer the Little Children to... Suffer

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Abstract

The present essay is a discussion of what I take to be the hardest version of the argument against the existence of an"omni-god" based on the existence of gratuitous suffering. An appndix discusses whether the possibility of dialetheism has any effect on the conclusion.

1 The Problem[1]

The greatest problem for Christian theology, and the theologies of other religions which endorse the existence of a god of a similar kind, is the existence of apparent evil in the world. The problem was put by Hume with characteristic succinctness thus:[2]

> Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. ls he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

[1] What follows is an (undergraduate) lecture I have given a number of times, for example at the University of Queensland in 1996 and the University of St Andrews in 2008. Of course, the literature on the topic it deals with is enormous, and there is much more to be said about all the issues raised.—For an entry into the matter, see Pike (1964), Rowe and Wainwright (1989), §3 (pp. 192–259), Adams and Adams (1990), and Tooley (2015).—However, it has always seemed to me that what I say here cuts to the heart of the matter. The appendix on paraconsistency has been added at the request of the editors.

[2] *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X (Coleman (2007), p. 74).

The problem is an ancient one, discussed by Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz, Hume and many other philosophers and theologians. And it is not difficult to turn the problem into an argument against the existence of any god who is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect. (There are niceties about how one may understand each of these notions, but none that bears significantly on what follows.)

The argument can be put in many different forms. Perhaps the most acute versions concern the amount of apparently gratuitous suffering in the world. One such version, due Michael Scriven, goes as follows:[3]

> [W]e can often be certain that something which is ... evil has happened, such as the sadistic murder of a child, and it is equally obvious that we can often be certain that it could have been prevented if there had been someone there who had some modest physical power, an understanding of the situation, and some interest in preventing evil or pain. God, by his nature, must know about and is capable of an interest in preventing the occurrence of a great deal of such evil and pain to those who do not deserve it. It follows that He would if He existed, prevent such things from occurring, and since they do occur, He does not exist.

2 The Argument Spelt Out

We can spell out the argument as follows. Let e be some event which occurred and which caused gratuitous suffering. Any choice will do here. Scriven's example is that of the sadistic murder of a child; but you might choose instead Nazi extermination camps, childhood polio outbreaks, or famines. The only premise of the argument is as follows:

1. If someone knows that e is happening (or will happen if nothing is done to prevent it), has the ability to stop it (without any harm to themself), but fails to do so, then their action is morally defective.

The argument now proceeds as follows:

2. Suppose God exists.

3. Then God knew that e was happening (or was about to happen).

[3]Scriven (1966), p. 160.

4. God had the ability to stop e (without any harm to God).

5. God did not stop e.

6. Hence God did something morally defective.

7. But God does nothing morally defective.

8. Hence, 2 is false. That is, God does not exist.

The argument is by *reductio ad absurdum*. 2 is the supposition made for *reductio*; and it is easy to see that 3-8 follow. 3 follows from 2 by God's omniscience. 4 follows from 2 by God's omnipotence. 5 is true merely because e does, in fact, occur. 6 follows from 3-5 and premise 1. 7 holds in virtue of God's moral perfection. 6 and 7 contradict each other. So 8 follows by *reductio*.

What, then, of the premise, 1? It certainly appears very plausible. Suppose that e is the sadistic murder of a child, for example. A particularly harrowing example concerns the 1963–1965 "Moors Murders", when a British couple, Brady and Hindley, tortured and murdered a number of children.[4] Let us suppose that you know that this will happen unless someone steps in to stop it, and that you can stop it, but that you allow it to happen. At best your action is callous. At worst, you are an accessory before the fact—both moral defects. Possibly, one might argue that what you did was not wrong if there was a serious chance that you would get hurt in stopping the incident, though arguably, this would show another moral defect: cowardice. However, this is irrelevant in the present case, since it follows from God's omnipotence that God would not be hurt.

One sometimes hears it said that God's moral perfection is of a kind different from human moral perfection. This does not avoid the argument: it just concedes it. God is morally defective in the sense that the Moors Murderers, and the Nazi guards at extermination camps were.[5]

The argument, then, is an extremely strong one.

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moors_murders.

[5] See Mill on this matter in Pike (1964), pp. 37–45.

3 Punishment and Desert

Of course, many people have suggested reasons as to why the premise is false. Let us turn to consider these. Note, however, that to break the argument, it must be shown that it is reasonable to reject 1 for *every* e, however nasty or gratuitous the suffering was: just one e for which 1 is true is sufficient for the argument. This is obviously a tall order.

One suggestion as to why it may not be wrong not to stop the suffering caused by e is that the sufferer may deserve it as a punishment for something they have done. Thus, it may be suggested, it is morally permissible to allow a convicted criminal to suffer in retribution for their act. One might wonder about the morality of pure retribution, especially its compatibility with the moral virtue of mercy.

However, we can avoid this issue by simply noting that there are many es for which this could not possibly provide a rationale for rejecting 1. Take, for example, some horrible suffering inflicted on a young child. The child obviously cannot deserve this. Not only has it not been alive long enough to do something bad enough to deserve the agony, but children are not even morally responsible agents, and so cannot deserve anything. We do not hold young children morally responsibility for what they do, since moral responsibility requires an appropriate understanding, which young children do not have.

There is a somewhat curious Christian dogma of "original sin", which implies that it is permissible to punish children for the failings of their parents (and, ultimately, Adam and Eve). This violates every principle of natural justice. To punish *you* for no reason other than your mother murdered someone, before you were even born, would be morally egregious.

4 Free Will

A second suggestion that is frequently made as to why it may be right not to stop the suffering caused by e is that this can be done only by interfering with the liberty of another. This is sometimes expressed by saying that God could not prevent people making others suffer without interfering with their free will, and hence called the 'free will defense of suffering'.

It is clear that non-interference can *sometimes* be justified on these grounds. You may punish your child for some misdemeanor in a way that is, though not

severe, tougher than is really justified. Yet it would be wrong of me to step in to stop the punishment, since it would interfere with your right as a parent to bring up your child as you think correct. However, it is equally clear that many cases of non-intervention cannot be justified on these grounds. Consider a person who refused to prevent someone torturing their baby on the ground this would interfere with the parent's rights. Such a "justification" would receive a sharp dismissal, and quite rightly. If we could not justifiably curtail people's liberties sometimes, then we could not restrain homicidal maniacs. It should be remembered also that the person who is suffering is liable to be having their liberty curtailed. In such cases, intervention would therefore be a way of defending free will.

Moreover, the free will defense is defective for another reason. Much suffering is caused but by natural phenomena such as earthquakes, tsunami, crop failure, diseases, and so on; and at least many of these have nothing to do with human agency. Clearly, preventing such things would not tamper with anyone's liberty or free will.

Finally, note that there are many cases of suffering that can be justified on neither of the grounds we have so far considered: the torture of a young child, the suffering of a whole population (good and bad alike) because of some disease, or oppression such as concentration camps, and so on.

5 The Good that Suffering Does

Another reason that is frequently given as to why it may be wrong to interfere to prevent suffering is that allowing the suffering will permit enough good to make the suffering worthwhile. Again, it is clear that the permission of some suffering may be justified on these grounds. For example, we may justify administering a painful treatment to someone on the ground that it is the only way to cure a fatal illness.

But notice that it is not enough that *some* good should come out of the suffering; it must be enough to counter-weigh the suffering. Does suffering always, or even usually, produce more good? A brief glance at some particular cases, such as the Nazi extermination camps, makes this very implausible. Indeed, there would seem to be cases where no good can possibly arise—for example, when someone dies a slow and agonising death and no one ever finds out about it. As Mill forcefully pointed out, the natural outcome of

evil and suffering is more evil and suffering:[6]

> [B]oth good and evil naturally tend to fructify, each in its own kind, good producing good, and evil, evil... The ordinary and predominant tendency of good is towards more good. Health, strength, knowledge, virtue are not only good in themselves, but promote the acquisition of good, both of the same and other kinds. The person who can learn easily is he who already knows much; it is the strong and not the sickly person who who can do everything which conduces to health; those who find it easy to gain money are not the poor but the rich... And again, *e converso*, whatever may be said about evil turning into good, the general tendency of evil is to further evil. Bodily illness renders the body more susceptible of disease; it produces incapacity of exertion, sometimes debility of mind, and often the loss of means of subsistence... Poverty is the parent of a thousand mental and moral ills... One bad action leads to others, both in the agent himself, in the bystanders, and in the sufferers. All bad qualities are strengthened by habit, and all vices and follies tend to spread...

However, there are even more cogent arguments against this attempted justification of suffering. To see what they are, it is necessary to distinguish between good which logically *presupposes* suffering and good which is merely *caused* by suffering. An example of the latter is my driving more carefully as the (caused) result of my seeing a gruesome traffic accident. Examples of the former are cases of compassion and fortitude, which would not be (logically) possible without someone suffering.

Now, that certain suffering causes good may justify humans allowing it to continue. But it cannot justify an omnipotent being to allow it. For an omnipotent being has control over causal laws, and can therefore bring about the desirable end without the painful means. Hence, for this justification to work, it must be the case that all undeserved suffering gives rise to acts which display compassion, fortitude and other morally desirable qualities which presuppose suffering.

This seems most implausible. But even if it were true, it would hardly suffice. For to justify the suffering, the good must outweigh it. Now consider,

[6]Hick (1970), p. 118.

for example, a child suffering from a long and painful terminal illness which gives rise to the parents' compassion, fortitude—and distress. It would be inhuman to say that the situation with the suffering and the compassion is better than the situation without suffering and compassion. Indeed, it would seem that things like compassion are good just because they mitigate suffering. Thus, this justification for suffering comes close to the following argument: hospitals are good because they help people who are ill. Hence illness is good because it makes hospitals possible.

It is therefore clear that none of the things considered in this section provide an omnipotent being with reasons for allowing innocent suffering.

6 Conclusion

We have now discussed all the main reasons for supposing that premise 1 is false, and seen that none of them works. The argument is therefore sound: God does not exist. Actually, a somewhat stronger conclusion can be drawn from the argument. For some of the more appalling suffering in the world could and would be stopped by a person of fairly limited physical power who cared, provided only that they knew about it. (The British Moors Murders, for example could have been stopped by a person simply picking up the phone and calling the police.) The argument therefore rules out the existence of a being with even these more modest properties.

7 Appendix: A Paraconsistent Solution?

The argument of Section 2 is perfectly valid in "classical logic". However, it uses *reductio*, which fails in some logics. And it might be wondered whether another possible reply to the argument is simply to reject *reductio*. In particular, suppose that one is a dialetheist, and accepts that some contradictions are true. Could one simply accept the contradiction at lines 6 and 7, and not move to 8? In one sense, the answer is that, yes, this is a logical possibility. However, that in itself means little.[7]

For a start, the fact that accepting a contradiction is a logical possibility does not make it a rational possibility. Even assuming classical logic, it is logically possible that I could jump off the top of the Empire State Building

[7] As noted by Weber (2019).

(without a parachute) and live. To believe that I could do so would be a mark of insanity, however. To accept this statement, simply to protect a cherished view of some kind, when there is no evidence for it, would be entirely *ad hoc* and rationally vicious.[8]

To address the specific case at hand further, let us start by considering argument by *reductio ad absurdum* in more detail. As a piece of formal reasoning, a *reductio* argument starts by assuming some A, from which one deduces something of the form $B \wedge \neg B$. (Call this the *body* of the *reductio*.) One then infers $\neg A$, discharging the assumption. As a piece of dialectical engagement, matters are somewhat different, however. Given A, one shows that this entails something that is unacceptable—maybe, if the argument is *ad hominem*, to a person who accepts A—and so which should be rejected. In virtue of this, A is also rejected.

Of course, a standard view is that to reject A is exactly to accept $\neg A$. So these two ways of looking at a *reductio* argument amount to much the same thing. However, the standard view is moot, even from a classical perspective. And once one is moving in a terrain with the possibility of logical gaps and gluts, as we are now, it is completely untenable. If there are logical gaps, rejecting A does not mean accepting $\neg A$; and if there are logical gluts, accepting $\neg A$ does not mean rejecting A.[9]

Now, the context we are presently in is a dialectical one: a live dispute about the existence of a Christian God. The issue, then is whether the body of the *reductio* argument establishes something that is rationally unacceptable—at least to a Christian. So the question that needs to be faced here is whether, in the argument of Section 2, the contradiction established for *reductio* is such a thing. And the first thing that needs to be noted is that this form of argument is not *reductio ad contradictionem*, but *reductio ad absurdum*. Moreover, some non-contradictions are more absurd than some contradictions. Thus, the claim that God is a frog is more absurd than that the Liar sentence is both true and false.

So the question is whether the contradiction that God is and is not morally defective is absurd—at least for a Christian. Actually, it is not the contradiction that is at issue. A contradiction entails each of its conjuncts; and it is one of these that is highly problematic: that God is morally defective. (In fact, this is what is established at line 6.) For a Christian, this

[8]See, further, Priest (1998), §4.

[9]For further discussion, see Priest (1987), ch. 7, and Priest (2006), ch. 6.

will seem as absurd as the claim that God is a frog.

Let me make the point in a different way. The contradiction that a *reductio* argument delivers can be moved around by a little massaging. Suppose we run the argument of Section 2 as follows.[10] Let e be a (not necessarily actual) event that causes (or would cause) gratuitous suffering. Premise 1 now becomes:

1′ Any being who knows that e will occur unless something is done to stop it, who is able to do so, and is not morally defective, will prevent e from happening.

We then run the argument as before, and infer that God prevents e from happening. So it does not happen. But take some such e that, sadly, does happen. The contradiction, then, is that e both does and does not occur. The problematic conjunct in this case is that e does not happen. The empirical evidence shows that it did. Jews were put in gas ovens; the Moors Murders did occur. There is no evidence that these things did not happen. To accept that they did not do so is patently irrational. And this is not just to accept some heterodox theological view, but to put oneself in the same category as holocaust-deniers.

To add insult to injury, we can tweak the argument again. Assuming that the conditional implicit in 1′ is contraposible, we can use the fact that e does occur to infer that no being of the kind in question—in particular, God—exists. Of course, given the body of the argument, the theist *still* has to accept that e did not occur. But they now also have to accept that God both exists and does not exist as well. I leave it to theologians to figure out what kind of heresy that would be.

In sum: dialetheism does present possibilities for addressing the argument not otherwise available. However, on examination, these appear even more implausible than more orthodox suggestions.

References

[1] Adams, M., and Adams, R. (eds.) (1990), *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[10] See, further, Priest (2006), esp. 7.4.

[2] Coleman, D. (ed.) (2007), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[3] Hick, J. (ed.) (1970), *The Existence of God*, London: Macmillan.

[4] Pike, N. (ed.), *God and Evil*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[5] Priest, G. (1998), 'What's so Bad about Contradictions?', *Journal of Philosophy* 95: 410–26; reprinted as ch. 1 of G. Priest, J. Beall, and B. Armour-Garb (eds.), *New Essays on the Law of Non-Contradiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[6] Priest, G. (1987), *In Contradiction*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff; 2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[7] Priest, G. (2006), *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[8] Rowe, W., and Wainwright, W. (1989), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 2nd edn, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

[9] Scriven, M. (1966), *Primary Philosophy*, New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

[10] Tooley, M. (2015), 'The Problem of Evil', in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/.

[11] Weber, Z. (2019), 'Atheism and Dialetheism; or "Why I Am Not a (Paraconsistent) Christian" ', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97: 401–407.