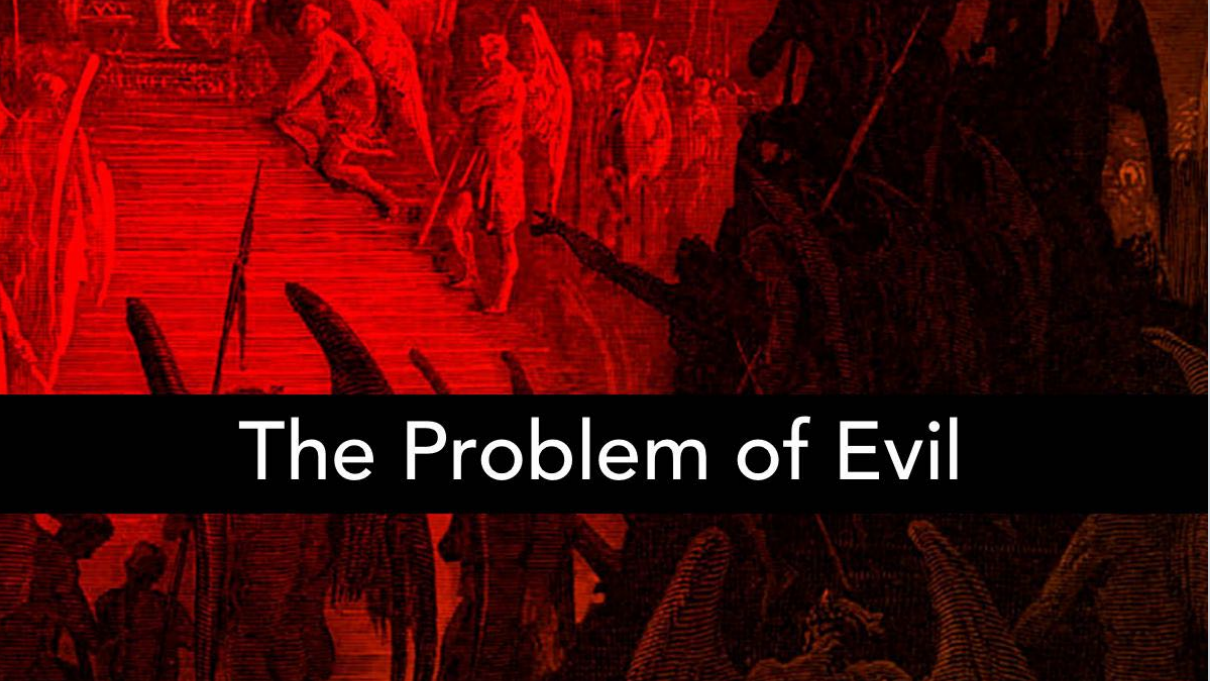

The Problem of Evil

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Reminder

Is religious faith rational, or can it be?

- It is difficult to talk about God (perhaps we can, by analogy)
- What does it take a belief to be rational? Does it need sufficient evidence? If yes, what counts as sufficient evidence? If not, can we believe what we will?
  - Arguments for God's existence: ontological, cosmological, design, . . . – if these work, that would count as sufficient evidence
- Maybe it is rational to believe in God even if we cannot demonstrate his existence, and even then this belief would not be completely arbitrary
- Or maybe: religious belief is irrational if it leads to absurdities.
  - e.g., you may think that divine foreknowledge leads to denying human freedom.
  - if there is a God, God is a creator. But can we make any sense of creation?
  - Perhaps the existence of evil excludes God's existence.

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The Problem of Evil

How is evil possible if God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing?

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. There is evil that if God is morally perfect, then God would have the desire to eliminate.
5. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.

$\therefore$ Therefore, God doesn't exist.

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Deductive vs Inductive Formulations

2 different versions:

- Deductive (Logical problem of evil): the existence of evil is *incompatible* with God's existence;
- Inductive (Evidential problem of evil): the existence of evil in the world makes God's existence unlikely.

Cf. P4 above: "If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil."

- but maybe there are goods that outweigh evils, but these evils are necessary for them.

P4*: there are certain evils that an omniscient and omnipotent person could have prevented the existence of, without thereby either allowing equal or greater evils, or preventing equal or greater goods.

- this (modified) premise can only be supported by inductive reasoning → inductive problem of evil.

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The Evidential Problem of Evil

How is evil possible if God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing?

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. There are certain evils that an omniscient and omnipotent person could have prevented the existence of, without thereby either allowing equal or greater evils, or preventing equal or greater goods. A morally perfect person would have prevented these.
5. If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.

$\therefore$ Therefore, God doesn't exist.

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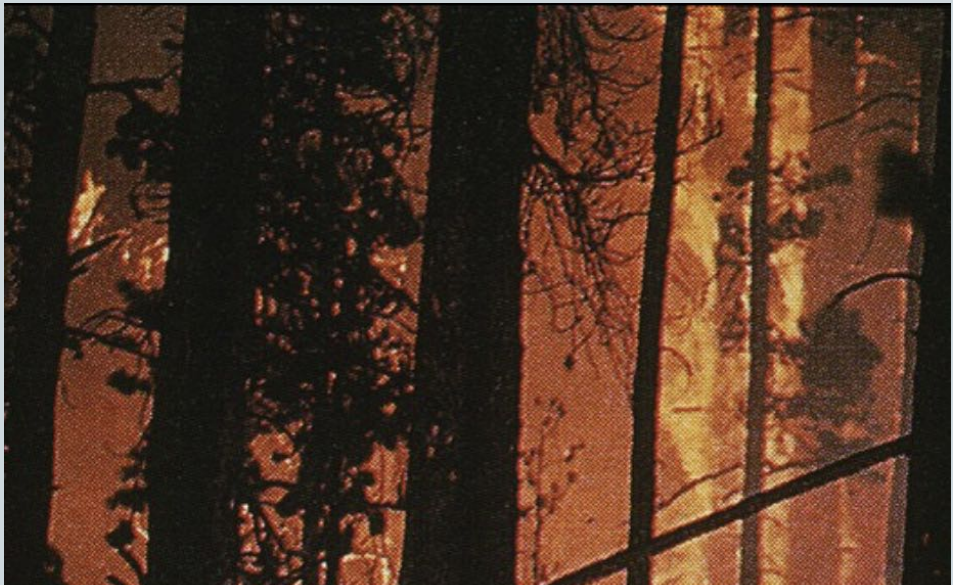

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The Evidential Problem of Evil

Ivan Karamazov's complaint (Dostoyevsky, Brothers Karamazov)

Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'! Too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. . . . It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.

- there seem to be instances of *gratuitous evil* — evil that leads to nothing.
- there also seem to be instances of *radical evil* — evil that seems unjustifiable no matter what.

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Responses to the Problem of Evil

Features of the Problem of Evil:

1. there are facts about the evils in the world that make it *prima facie* unreasonable to believe in the existence of God;
2. the situation is not solved by our other justified beliefs ($\rightarrow$ belief in God is unreasonable given our total evidence).

3 main kinds of response:

1. Refutation: challenge claim (1) above.
2. Theodicy: accept (1), but then argue that for every evil in the world we can find a justifying reason why God would allow it.
3. Defense: to show that God is not *incompatible* with evil; that we can give a possibly true story that contains both God and the existing evils.

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Refutations

Refutations can take multiple forms:

1. Human epistemological limitations (skeptical theism)
2. There is no "best possible world"
3. If the ontological argument is correct, then evil doesn't matter.

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Theodicies

- Soul-making theodicy (John Hick): the world is designed by God as an environment in which people can undergo spiritual growth by their own free choices.
- Free will defense: it's better to create a world with libertarian free will, but libertarian free will leads to bad choices.
  - Augustine: evil is the result of free choice
  - Anselm: evil is the result of free choice, which comes about from the bad interaction between the will for beatitude and the will for justice.
  - Aquinas, in general, is not a fan of the free will defense – more metaphysical explanation
- The need for natural laws: having natural laws is good; but these laws sometimes lead to suffering.

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Overview: Claims and Assumptions

- Evil is not a positive thing (cf. Augustine; evil is a lack of good)
- Evil does not have a proper cause
- Evil is accidentally caused by something good

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Augustine

Evil is not a positively existing thing

"For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present – namely, the disease and wounds – go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance" (*Enchiridion*, ch. 11).

Aquinas agrees.

- This does not mean that evil is not *real*: if I have a hole in my sock, even though it is a lack of wool, it is a perfectly real hole. (Example is from Herbert McCabe)
- It also does not mean that whatever is bad is lacking some parts. Having extra parts that shouldn't be there may just as bad! (E.g., if I fill my keyboard with glue...)

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Natural Evil and Moral Evil

There are 2 kinds of Evils, and they will require slightly different explanations.

1. Natural evil: forest fires, illnesses, etc.

2. Moral evil: stealing, wickedness, etc.

So, how can the good cause natural evil and moral evil?

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Natural Evil: A bit of Metaphysics

How do we explain things, and what do we mean by 'causes'?

- 4 causes: efficient, formal, material, final
- causes are *things* (substances), causing other things (substances or accidents)
- causes have *proper effects*, which are commensurate with them and are explained by them
- Example: heat is a proper effect of fire. A painting is a proper effect of a painter (or his painting skill).
- When we give a causal explanation of a thing, we usually look for its proper efficient cause (like in the examples above).

Since evil is not a positive thing, it cannot have a proper efficient cause!

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Accidental Causes

Besides proper efficient causes, there are also accidental causes, which are somehow accidentally related to the cause or to the effect.

1. On the side of the agent: e.g., when Mozart composed the *Magic Flute*, we can say that a white man composed the *Magic Flute*. But of course Mozart was not composing it by his whiteness but by his musical talent.
2. On the side of the patient: e.g., when I bake a cake and frost it, I am causing whiteness. But causing whiteness was not the primary aim of my action, but instead, causing a cake was!

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Applying to Evil

Evil can have accidental causes in all these ways (but again, it does not have a proper cause).

1. On the side of the agent: when the agent's power is deficient, it produces a deficient effect (e.g., if I'm a deficient painter, my painting will be deficient; a deficient stomach causes indigestion). Still, I'm not painting with my deficiency but with my painting skill; so it is an accidental cause.
2. On the side of the patient: if the matter is not disposed to receive the agent's imprint (e.g., if I try to paint on sand; or if an animal is born with some defect); or, since the generation of one thing always entails the decomposition of another, the flourishing of lions entails the decomposition of gazelles.

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What about Moral Evil?

Problem: for a will to be evil, there must be some defect in it.

- Is this defect natural? – No, because then the will would *always* be defective, but that does not seem to be the case.
- Is this defect voluntary? – If it is, then it seems to presuppose a previous evil will, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Solution: the defect is voluntary but not itself a moral fault (hence we avoid the infinite regress).

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Evil Will

"When the will tends to action moved by a reasoned perception representing to it its due good, right action will result. But when will breaks out in action under the stimulation of sense-perception, or of reason itself but presenting the will with some other good than its due good, morally faulty action will ensure. . . . What precedes the faulty action in the will is thus a *defect of orderedness to reason and a due goal*" (ScG 3.10, p. 288–289).

- Thus, the defect is voluntary: the will has in itself the power to will or not to will, or make reason consider one thing or stop considering.
- But it is not a moral fault: reason can consider this or that or nothing at all, without any fault, until the will tends towards the undue goal.

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Taking Stock

Evil as such has no proper efficient cause.

1. Natural evil: incidentally caused by the agent, or by the indisposition of the patient, or as a "side-effect".
2. Voluntary evil: caused by the inordered will – inordered with respect to reason and its due goal. The inorder itself is voluntary, but not yet morally blameworthy. God is cause of these deficient acts insofar as they are acts, but God is not cause of them insofar as they are deficient.

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