
Unit 9 THE PROBLEM OF EVIL*

Structure

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9.0 Objectives

In this unit, we will discuss one of the important problems in the philosophy of religion and theology; the problem of evil. Considering the wide arena of debate, even contemporary philosophers and theologians are contesting the discussions around the problem of evil. The problem of evil as discussed by contemporary philosophers presupposes the idea of a single god which is all benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. This presupposition gave the problem of evil its basic structure that we are going to discuss.

At the end of this unit learner will be able to understand,

- The logical and evidential problem of evil
- The concept of theodicy; free will theodicy, soul building theodicy, best of possible worlds theodicy.

9.1 Introduction

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What do the two literary texts – *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* – have in common? The protagonists of both the texts – Jude and Ivan respectively reject the idea of God. Their rejection of God is based on the presence of evil in society. For Ivan the suffering of children is the embodiment of evil, he argues that if a God exists, who promises harmony and forgiveness, then what explains the suffering of children. Because of this presence of evil in the form of the suffering of children Ivan rejects the idea of God. Jude's rejection of God is not based on the logical argument like Ivan, his reasons for the rejection of God are more personal and intimate. Through multiple failures in his social life Jude moves away from the idea of God, he argues that if God had existed then I would not have failed in my life. Both texts shed light on important aspects of the idea of evil and its connection with the presence of God.

Here the question arises: what do we mean by the concept of evil? In our daily lives, we face different types of evil, some are explainable, and some are not. In a general sense, pain and suffering are closely associated with the aspect of evil. Anything that brings a drastic discomfort to human life is usually bracketed in the very category of evil. But are these the only criteria to define it? Are there any other parameters that one needs to consider while categorizing evil? In this regard, the existence of Omni-qualities or the supreme being also comes under purview.

Generally, all monotheistic religions believe that there exists a divine being who is all benevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient. The evils of this world that we face in our daily lives pose a challenge to the very existence of such a being, and thereby to all such religions. This means that such a divine being has all the power, knowledge, and moral disposition to prevent all kinds of evil, and the presence of evil creates a situation that is logically not possible. This logical inconsistency between all benevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and the evils of this world give rise to *the logical problem of evil*. Furthermore, the evils of this world generate possibilities in which the existence of such a divine being is improbable. From an epistemological point of view, evils of this world provide evidence against the existence of such a divine being, when we specifically focus on the evidence part then the version of this problem is known as *the evidential problem of evil*.

Philosophers and theologians have reasoned that why would a being who is all benevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient cause, allow or permit evil. This exercise of finding God's reasons for permitting evil is known as theodicy. There are different versions of theodicies

available in theological and philosophical literature. The most prominent of all these theodicies is free will theodicy, which states that evils are not due to God rather they are due to the free actions of human agents; the soul building theodicy states that God permitted evil in order to inculcate different virtues; an interesting theodicy is due to Leibniz, this is known as possible worlds theodicy, which proposes that God would have allowed evils because best of all possible worlds contain evils and because God is all benevolent he has the moral disposition to offer best of all possible worlds. This suggests that the problem of evil is based on a basic question that these theodicies are raising, i.e., whether God has reasons for not preventing evils.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1. What is the problem of evil?

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9.2 The Logical Problem of Evil

The logical problem of evil possibly finds its origin in the works of ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Many believe that it was Epicurus (who, some say, was an atheist) who rejected the idea of God on highlighting the logical inconsistency. David Hume also credited Epicurus for the formulation of the logical problem of evil. Hume's character Philo in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion states that:

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then from whence comes evil?"

(David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 1779, p.186)

The Epicurean saying quoted above focuses, basically, on two aspects 1) God's ability, and 2) God's disposition/will, which means that God's omnipotence and omniscience provided him with all the abilities to prevent all kinds of evil, and his goodness shows that God has dispositions to prevent every kind of evils which he can prevent. From this, we can deduce that there is a logical inconsistency between God and evil, which means if there is God then there would not be any evils, and if there are evils then there would not be such God which has all the qualities mentioned above. Alvin Plantinga argues that "most contemporary philosophers who hold that evil constitutes a difficulty for theistic belief claim to detect logical inconsistency" (Plantinga, 1982, p.83). To understand this logical inconsistency, let us put the matter a bit formally:

- (a) A divine being who is all benevolent, omnipresent, and omnipotent exists.
- (b) Evil exists.

We can describe two propositions as logically incompatible if we can derive contradiction by adding them to other propositions which are logically necessary propositions. The logical inconsistency between (a) and (b) can be seen in virtue of the following two propositions:

- (P1) An all benevolent being prevents *every* evil it can prevent.
- (P2) An omnipotent and omniscient being *can* prevent all evils.

The basic analysis of proposition (P1) and (P2) shows that both these propositions are necessarily true because the truth of these propositions is, in some sense, warranted by the meaning of the terms like "omniscient", "omnipotent", "all benevolent", etc. In (P1) the presence of "all benevolent" shows that God has the disposition to prevent *every* evil it can prevent, similarly in (P2) the presence of "omniscience" and "omnipotent" shows that God has all the knowledge and power to prevent all evils. So that is why these propositions are necessarily true. Now if club together these necessary propositions with propositions (a) and (b), then we reach a kind of contradiction. The combination of (a), (P1), and (P2) imply that there is no evil, but there are evils in this world, which simply means that the logical implication of the above combination contradicts with (b).

It seems that the alleged logical inconsistency between the existence of God and the existence of evil is based on the fact that both (P1) and (P2) are necessarily true. So, to resolve the logical problem of evil, one need to show that either of (P1) and (P2) are not necessarily true.

Nelson Pike argues that (P1) is not necessarily true because from all benevolence of God we cannot deduce that he will prevent every evil which he can prevent. He argues that the logical problem of evil is wrongly based on the premise that God will prevent every evil which he can prevent. He tries to resolve the problem of evil by weakening the basic premise of the logical problem of evil. He introduced a weakened premise:

(P3) An all-benevolent being will prevent every evil which he can prevent unless it has *sufficient reason* for permitting evil.

The very introduction of the proposition (P3) as a premise weakens the logical problem of evil. Because it shows that if God has sufficient reason for allowing evil, then God will allow evil, and by the very implication of that there remains no logical inconsistency between the existence of God and evils in this world. So, the logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the evils of this world are eventually based on the fact that whether God has sufficient reason for permitting some evils. If God has sufficient reason for not preventing some evils, then the logical problem of evil fall.

Does God really have sufficient reasons for not preventing some evils? The answer to this question will be explored in the next section.

9.3 The Evidential Problem of Evil

In the previous section, we have seen that the logical problem of evil was based on a very logical strong relation, the relation is so strong that the mere introduction of a weakened premise which talks about God's sufficient reasons for not preventing evils collapse the complete structure of the logical problem of evil. Philosophers who have strong contention that the evils of the world pose a challenge to the existence of God would not find the logical solution to the problem of evil constructive and conclusive.

The basic challenge to the belief in the existence of God does not come from the basic fact that there exists evil in the world, rather the challenge comes from how much and how severe kinds of evils exist in the world. The challenge to the theistic belief comes from what Marilyn McCord Adams calls "horrendous evil":

Among the evils that infect this world, some are worse than others. I want to try to capture the most pernicious of them within the category of horrendous evils, which I define (for present purposes) as 'evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole'. The class of paradigm horrors includes both individual and massive collective suffering . . .

[E]xamples include the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's own deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs overpopulated areas. (Adams, 1999, p. 26).

The evils which Adams' characterized as horrendous are harder to deal with from a logical point of view, and a mere logical theodicy cannot answer why there are such evils exist in the world. Such evils provide strong *evidence* or reason against the existence of a being who is all benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Even if we consider the weaker premise (P3), there are no sufficient reasons which can justify the existence of such horrendous evils. Therefore, it is extremely unreasonable for one to think that God might have sufficient reasons for not preventing such evils, which, in some sense, means God also lacks the capacity to have sufficient reasons altogether.

The problem posed by the evidential relation between the horrendous evils of this world and the existence of God is much more serious and problematic than the problem posed by the logical inconsistency between the existence of God and the evils of this world. To understand the difference between these two problems we first need to consider the difference between what *we consider as God's reasons* for not preventing evils, and what are *God's actual reasons* for not preventing evils. This difference is sufficiently highlighted by David Lewis in his 1993 paper *Evil for Freedom's Sake?* He makes a difference between "defence" and "theodicy", defence refers to what we think God's reasons for not preventing and evils, and theodicy refers to God's actual reasons for not preventing evils. The resolution of the logical problem of evil by introducing a weaker premise can be classified as a defence, but that defence is not sufficient to resolve the evidential problem of evil. To resolve the evidential problem of evil one need to know God's actual reasons for not preventing such evils, but knowing God's actual reasons would be unwise, here Lewis suggested a middle path. He argues that one can start from somewhat plausible hypotheses like the weakened logical premise and from there one can advance to more complex hypotheses to understand God's actual reasons for not preventing such evils. In the upcoming sections, we will be discussing various attempts about finding God's reasons for not preventing evils.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use space provided for your answer.

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1. What is the logical problem of evil?

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2. Discuss the difference between the logical and evidential problem of evil.

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9.4 Free Will Theodicy

One of the earliest attempts to understand God’s reasons for not preventing evil was developed by St. Augustine. He argues that God has created human beings in his own image and provided them with free will for their development and flourishing. But instead of using this free will for development humans misused free will and chose the path of sin. This sin is the origin of every kind of evil in this world, which means that it is not God who is responsible for free will rather it is the free actions of human beings that resulted in different evils. Augustine clearly stated that evil does not exist as an independent ontological category rather it is the “privation of good”, which means evils exist only in the absence of good, and this privation of good happen only because of the free actions of human agents.

The debate between free will and predetermination is a complex one. The free will theodicy talks about the libertarian idea of the existence of free will that is not bound by any external force, not even God. In this manner, the idea of ‘freedom of man’ takes frontal importance. Thus, any action taken by man is not an impact of any force, highlighting the importance of his free will. This can be propounded by a three-step theory- i) the idea of libertarian free will of utmost importance; ii) considering the freedom of the subject, not even God can cause the person to do what is truly right; iii) in this regard, God should create a world where agents have free will.

The argument that therefore lies here is that even though libertarian free will is appealing, there are satisfactory accounts of libertarian free will are not yet available. It is because to claim that there is no external force in causal of action is a problematic aspect. This is to claim that the agent is in some way a cause of the action. But the very understanding of causation becomes complicated here and brings up multiple questions. Besides, the very unrestricted aspect that follows the idea of free will is problematic in every way. At what point does one restrict the other to practice their free will? Should one let heinous crime happen without intervening, considering the idea of libertarian free will? Another point being, that just because libertarian free will is an utmost important concept, would that warrant one to exert power and cruelty among others. Further, some evils are caused by natural actions like accidents or calamities like earthquakes, unprecedented fires, floods, etc. This being not caused by any agent or morally wrong character defies the entire debate over the existence of evil and the debate around the problem of evil.

9.5 Soul Building Theodicy

Developed by John Hick, the soul-building theodicy propounds that the evils of the world can be justified if one views God as an environment. This environment facilitates people with experiences, through which people can practice their personal choice and undergo spiritual growth. This thereby would result in their communion with God. In this process, Hick suggests that an individual undergoes the phase of soul-making. The idea herein is that God created the world for the greater good and hence is justified with a specific purpose in mind. This is to say that the world is perfectly designed and when one views evil as a problem, they assume the world to be a hedonistic paradise.

The problems with this theodicy are multifold. If God is really justified in designing this world, then what about horrendous atrocities meted out on humankind like the holocaust, and even the widespread of a global pandemic? Plus, it seems very inappropriate that the world should contain such horrible sights merely to gain spiritual growth and insights while growing up. Further Hick does not provide any justification for animal pain and the atrocities that children and kids go through- be it through disease or through the ills meted out by adults. Moreover, if soul-building is actually the purpose of life, then with the present situation on earth, the human race is failing at it (with many people dying young before

responding to temptations, facing challenges, and undergoing spiritual growth). On the other hand, many people live the life of luxury without any moral baggage that accompanies them in the journey.

9.6 Best of Possible Worlds Theodicy

This was the theodicy that was posited in contrast to the problem of evil by the medieval philosopher Leibniz. The idea behind this theodicy is based on the fact that God is omnipresent, all-benevolent, and omnipotent. Hence, God created the existing world. In this regard, God could have created a different world or no world at all, which by extension means that there are multiple worlds. Because God is Omnipresent and Omnipotent, he knew which possible world would be the best and therefore led to its creation and since he is all-benevolent, he chose to create that world. This, therefore, means that God created the best possible world. Leading the argument further, Leibniz argues that if there is a possibility of the existence of a better world, God wouldn't have created the present world, which is the best possible world. Against the argument that one can always imagine a world that is less evil than one present, Leibniz posits the argument that this merely remains a product of an individual's imagination. Thereby, he says that any world that does not contain the evils of the present world can very possibly contain the evils of a much greater extent. Thereby, one can very well claim that God created evil to which Leibniz claims that evil is not a thing in its essence but a source to move an individual away from the goodness of The One. Criticized for its overly optimistic approach, Voltaire made a satirical commentary against Leibniz stating that the world contains many evils that forgo such a positive perspective. Even Bertrand Russell rejected Leibniz's theory and claimed that moral and physical evil necessitates its origin from a metaphysical evil. Whereby, meaning that evil in its essence is a thing and according to Leibniz all things are good, which is why evil is also good.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit

1. What are the relations between free will theodicy and soul building theodicy?

9.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the problem of evil and its various formulations. The logical problem of evil states that there is a logical inconsistency between the existence of God and the evils of this world. We have seen that the logical problem of evil can be resolved by developing a mere logical theodicy that we can develop by introducing weaker premises to show the connection between God and the evils of this world. We discussed that the evidential problem of evil is much harder than the logical problem of evil because it is based on the evidential relations between the God and evils of this world, and no theodicies can possibly resolve this problem. After discussing these two primary formulations of the problem of evil, we discussed various attempts to find out God's reasons for not preventing some evils.

9.8 KEY WORDS

Omniscient: A being who has the knowledge of everything

Omnipotent: A being who has the power or ability to perform every action which he wants to perform

Omnibenevolent: A being who possess unlimited goodness

Theodicy: Philosophical or theological attempts to find out God's reasons for not preventing some evils.

9.9 Further Readings and References

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9.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The problem of evil is a philosophical problem that attempts to understand the relationship between the existence of omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being with the evils that exist in the world. Generally, all monotheistic religions believe that there exists a divine being who is all benevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient. The evils of this world that we face in our daily lives pose a challenge to the very existence of such a being, and thereby to all such religions. This means that such a divine being has all the power, knowledge, and moral disposition to prevent all kinds of evil, and the presence of evil creates a situation that is logically not possible. This logical inconsistency between all benevolent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and the evils of this world give rise to *the logical problem of evil*. Furthermore, the evils of this world generate possibilities in which the existence of such a divine being is improbable. From an epistemological point of view, evils of this world provide evidence against the existence of such a divine being, when we specifically focus on the evidence part then the version of this problem is known as *the evidential problem of evil*.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The logical problem of evil possibly finds its origin in the works of ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Many believe that it was Epicurus (who, some say, was an atheist) who rejected the idea of God on highlighting the logical inconsistency. God's omnipotence and omniscience provided him with all the abilities to prevent all kinds

of evil, and his goodness shows that God has dispositions to prevent every kind of evils which he can prevent. From this, we can deduce that there is a logical inconsistency between God and evil, which means if there is God then there would not be any evils, and if there are evils then there would not be such God which has all the qualities mentioned above.

2. The logical problem of evil was based on a very logical strong relation, the relation is so strong that the mere introduction of a weakened premise which talks about God's sufficient reasons for not preventing evils collapse the complete structure of the logical problem of evil. Philosophers who have strong contention that the evils of the world pose a challenge to the existence of God would not find the logical solution to the problem of evil constructive and conclusive. The basic challenge to the belief in the existence of God does not come from the basic fact that there exists evil in the world, rather the challenge comes from how much and how severe kinds of evils exist in the world. The challenge to the theistic belief comes from what Marilyn McCord Adams calls "horrendous evil". The evils which Adams' characterized as horrendous are harder to deal with from a logical point of view, and a mere logical theodicy cannot answer why there are such evils exist in the world. Such evils provide strong *evidence* or reason against the existence of a being who is all benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Even if we consider the weaker premise, there are no sufficient reasons which can justify the existence of such horrendous evils. Therefore, it is extremely unreasonable for one to think that God might have sufficient reasons for not preventing such evils, which, in some sense, means God also lacks the capacity to have sufficient reasons altogether.

Answers To Check Your Progress III

1. Free will theodicy and soul building theodicy are related to each other in an interesting manner. Human free will is the first step towards the development of the human soul or soul building. St. Augustine argues that God has created human beings in his own image and provided them with free will for their development and flourishing. But instead of using this free will for development humans misused free will and chose the path of sin. This sin is the origin of every kind of evil in this world, which means that it is not God who is responsible for free will rather it is the free actions of human beings that resulted in different evils. Augustine clearly stated that

evil does not exist as an independent ontological category rather it is the “privation of good”, which means evils exist only in the absence of good, and this privation of good happen only because of the free actions of human agents. The soul-building theodicy propounds that the evils of the world can be justified if one views God as an environment. This environment facilitates people with experiences, through which people can practice their personal choice and undergo spiritual growth. This thereby would result in their communion with God. In this process, Hick suggests that an individual undergoes the phase of soul-making. The idea herein is that God created the world for the greater good and hence is justified with a specific purpose in mind. This is to say that the world is perfectly designed and when one views evil as a problem, they assume the world to be a hedonistic paradise. This shows that both theodicies are related to each other, and the soul building is not possible with free will, and free will is there because the process of soul building is still going on.



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