

The Problems of Evil, Ignorance, and Pain

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In his work *Théodicée* (1710, ‘Justifying God’), Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) stated that God created ‘the Best of all Possible Worlds.’ Leibniz asks, why does an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God create a world that contains evil? By ‘possible’ is Leibniz implying that God is limited in His creative activity? No matter what type of world is created, is it possible for God to create a better one or is there an upper limit to this process?

Expressed more broadly, why did a perfect omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent Brahman-God create an imperfect world? Concerning the imperfections, as a very broad generalization (with many exceptions), Christians emphasize the active evil and sin, Hindus, the mental ignorance and misunderstanding (*avidyā*), and Buddhists, the feeling of suffering and pain (*duhkha*) in the world. Theodicy generally concentrates on attempting to explain why evil exists, but the existence of pain and ignorance should also be considered. There is ‘moral evil’ caused by human failings and ‘physical evil’ such as natural events like disease, famines, and earthquakes.

Many attempts have been made to justify the existence of evil, ignorance, and unhappiness. The view presented is often determined by the person’s metaphysical position and theology.

They include:

1) Problems and obstacles are necessary for personal growth, since we would not

change if we are satisfied with our present state. The pain of receiving bad karma can educate a person leading to personal improvement. Michael Stoeber’s teleological theory of karma considers it to be a ‘vehicle of moral education’. Sri Aurobindo mentioned painful karma as ‘the greatest help and purifier of the soul struggling to unfold itself’.¹ Swami Medhanada refers to this as ‘Evolutionary Karma’ rather than ‘Retributive Karma’.

2) If this world were a *svarga* (a lower heaven) and we lived happy lives without sorrow, there would be less motivation to seek liberation-salvation. The imperfections of this world motivate people to become religious and seek the kingdom of Brahman-God. When this goal is attained they live under the ‘Law of Grace’ rather than the ‘Law of Karma’. This grace frees (liberates, saves) a person from the control of the laws of nature that include the law of karma. This is because the Lord operates outside of the determined laws of nature, karma, and *samskāras*.

3) If suffering was nonexistent, much good would be absent from the world. For example, there can be no virtues like compassion, altruism, or philanthropy if some people are not undergoing hardships causing them unhappiness. We admire a martyr who undergoes suffering for a good cause.

4) Due to His ‘Permissive Will’ God voluntarily surrenders some of His Omnipotence to allow for human free will.

Evil exists because people have free will and some people do the wrong things. By means of His 'Permissive Will', God provides humans with free choice and allows or permits them to sin. This freedom allows some people to fall into sin and God works within the world for its redemption.² Does All-powerfulness imply that Brahman-God has the power to limit Its power or is this paradoxical?

Today, some American evangelical Protestant theologians believe in 'Open Theism', where God does not fully know the future because He has granted free will to people whose choices cannot be known ahead of time.³ Allowing for human free will does not justify the existence of natural disasters like earthquakes or diseases that cause people much unhappiness.

5) God employs 'Divine persuasion' rather than forcing someone to do something (Whitehead, Hartshorne).

6) Deism is the theological belief first articulated by Voltaire (1734) that God created the universe according to scientific laws, but does not interfere in its daily operation and let it run itself. At the beginning of creation it would have been possible for Brahman-God the First Cause to create the initial conditions including the laws and physical constants and then let the finely-tuned universe run itself without intervention. Consider a person or a machine manufacturing a watch or a clock and then letting it run by itself as suggested by William Paley in 1802. In this case there would be no need for God to intervene at a later date. But the future events of the watch and clock are determined and there is no free will. According to Deism, humans are punished and rewarded not by God, but by the moral laws of nature.⁴ This is in agreement with the law of karma.

7) Following the Personal Idealism of George Howison (1834-1916), God is the Final Cause (goal) and not the First Cause (creator) of the universe. He did not create people who are co-eternal with Him. God is the absolute Final Cause, the goal, ideal, and supreme end of human existence toward which all beings are struggling to move. There is a spiritual attraction between God and humans.⁵

8) A limited finite God is not omnipotent (Zarathustra, William James, Edgar Brightman). According to Theistic Finitism, God is omnibenevolent but not omnipotent. This idea was taught by William James (1842-1910) of Harvard University who held conversations with Swami Vivekananda whom he admired and by Edgar S. Brightman (1884-1953), a professor at Boston University and Methodist Minister who 'had a deep and personal appreciation and affection for' Swami Akhilananda (1894-1962), the leader of the Boston-Providence Centres. Brightman stated that Theistic Finitism originated with Plato and was later supported by Marcion, Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, Pierre Bayle, John Stuart Mill, H. G. Wells, and others. Plato through Socrates wrote, 'God is not the cause of all things but only of good things.' For Brightman, though God is an infinite personal spirit, His power is limited. If God were infinite and the all-inclusive whole of reality, then He would include both good and evil, what is true and what is false. Following this line of thinking, God is not the first cause (cosmological argument) nor the creator of all aspects of the universe. The universe has no beginning or end so nothing existed prior to it to cause it. It is not created ontologically since creation involves a degeneration from the perfect to the imperfect. In his application to the PhD programme in systematic theology at Boston University, Martin Luther King

(1929-68), the famous Afro-American Civil Rights leader, noted, 'my thinking in philosophical areas has been greatly influenced by some of the faculty members there, particularly Dr. Brightman.'⁶

9) God is like the light of the sun that reflects off dirty water and loses its lustre or an object that is reflected off a blurry mirror (the human mind) producing a distorted image. Vivekananda mentioned, 'The mind is, as it were, the reflecting mirror of the soul. My mind reflects to a certain extent the powers of my soul; so your soul, and so everyone's. That mirror which is clearer reflects the soul better. So the manifestation varies according to the mind one possesses; but the souls in themselves are pure and perfect.'⁷

10) People suffer due to their bad karma. The law of karma explains why good and bad things happen to people, but it does not explain why evil exists. If Brahman-God cannot override the law of karma, then He/She is not omnipotent, assuming that Brahman-God and the law of karma are two separate entities. But if the law of karma were part of Brahman-God's nature, there would be no need to change the former.

11) What appears to be evil from a limited perspective is good when viewed from the standpoint of the whole (Aquinas, Vivekananda, Abhedananda). Swami Abhedananda explained, 'When we look at the phenomena of nature by piecemeal, without recognizing their connection, we do not get the proper explanation of events. But if we look at the same phenomena as related to one another and to the whole universe, then we discover the true explanation.... It is limitation, the inability to recognize the relation of the part to the whole.'⁸

12) All defects are illusionary appearance of mortal mind. For the

Nondualist only Nirguna Brahman is real and all else including name and form, space, time, and causality are appearances of a finite limited existence. A dualist Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) wrote, 'Standing within the shadow of death-valley, I learned these truths in Divine Science; that all real being is in God, the Divine Mind, and that Life, Truth, and Love are all-powerful and ever-present; that the opposite of Truth called error, sin, sickness, disease, death—is the false testimony of false material sense of mind in matter.... As mind is immortal, the phrase mortal mind implies something untrue and therefore unreal.'⁹ Immanuel Kant taught that in sense perception the human mind sees a phenomenal representation of the object, rather than the Thing-in-Itself. Only the Divine Mind sees and experiences the world as it really is.

13) Ramakrishna stated, 'There is no doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints.' Through the experience of good and evil we gradually learn to overcome our own evil tendencies.¹⁰

14) That the unhappiness we presently go through is outweighed by the fact that eventually all people will attain to the blissful state of Universal Liberation-Salvation, is a point emphasized by Swami Medhananda.¹¹ Ramakrishna emphasized, 'All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self.'¹² Imperfection is only temporary since all people will eventually perform only good action, and be free of ignorance and pain. To suffer in this world is trivial compared to the eternal bliss of the liberated state.¹³

15) Human reason is too limited to understand the workings of God. All of these ideas presuppose that human reason has the ability to explain the defects of the world. By contrast, Skeptical Theism is of the view that because of the limits of human reason we cannot draw conclusions on why God does certain things such as allow evil to exist. These things are beyond human comprehension.¹⁴ Many times Sri Ramakrishna emphasized, 'Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk?'¹⁵ Skeptical Theism is supported by John Calvin (1509-64) who taught, 'If we heard God speaking to us in His majesty, it would be useless to us, for we would understand nothing. Therefore, since we are carnal, He has to stutter or otherwise, He would not be understood by us.' Swami Vivekananda concurred stating, 'Even if a book were given by God which contained all the truth about religion, it would not serve the purpose because nobody could understand the book.'¹⁶ We might think of the logic of a child or of an adult's night dream, where events are connected in a sequence following a logic we are not familiar with. Religious philosophy makes every attempt to explain things using human reason and if successful avoids Skeptical Theism.

Theodicy assumes that the universe is created by Saguna Brahman, a Personal God, the Divine Mind whose intellect is analogous but superior to human reason. If the universe is due to Nirguna Brahman that transcends all conceptions of the human intellect, then theodicy will not provide an unambiguous understanding of why a perfect Brahman-God creates an imperfect universe.

16) Things are not evil in their inherent nature or essence, but as a Privation or an absence of the good (Origen, Plotinus,

Augustine, Ibn al-'Arabi, Aquinas, Vivekananda).

The Church Father Augustine (354-430) who had a Neo-Platonic background upheld the Theory of Privation that, 'Evil is not a natural thing, it is rather the name given to the privation of good (*privatio boni*). Thus there can be good without evil, but there cannot be evil without good.... Therefore, when we call a thing good, we praise its inherent nature; when we call a thing evil, we blame not its nature, but some defect in it contrary to its nature which is good.' 'For what is evil by reason of a defect must obviously be good of its own nature. For a defect is something that is contrary to nature, something which damages the nature of a thing—and it can do so only by diminishing that thing's goodness. Evil therefore is nothing but the privation of the good. And thus it can have no existence anywhere except in some good thing.'¹⁷ An evil will is not an efficient cause, but a deficient cause since evil is the absence of the good, a negative condition of privation without any positive characteristics. Privation is the absence of the virtue that should be present in the object. Evil is ontologically inferior to and dependent on the existence of the good. Similarly, darkness is nothing but the absence of light, ignorance, of knowledge, and pain, of happiness.¹⁸

To quote Thomas Aquinas, 'Evil is the absence of good which is natural and due to a thing.... But Evil has no formal cause, but is rather a privation of form. So, too, neither has it a final cause, but is rather a privation of order to the proper end.'¹⁹ Nothing is wholly evil for the reason that it is not possible for corruption to fully consume what is good. 'Now in things, each one has so much good as it has being, for good and being are convertible.'²⁰ 'The highest good is the cause of every being. Therefore there cannot be any principle opposed to it as the

cause of evils.... Nothing can be evil in its very essence.... every being, as such is good, and that evil can exist only in good as its subject.... every evil is caused by good ... evil can be only an accidental cause and thus, it cannot be the first cause, for the accidental cause is subsequent to an essential cause.²¹ Privation is not a substance or an essence, but its negation, 'as privation of sight is called blindness.' God and His creation would be equal in perfection, if the Supernatural Power is fully objectified in His effects. Each entity receives only a portion of Divine goodness since, 'His effect is always less than His power,' and is ordered according to a hierarchical scale of partial perfection. 'The evil that accompanies one good is the privation of another good. Never therefore would evil be sought after, not even accidentally, unless the good that accompanies the evil were more desired than the good of which the evil is a privation.'²²

There are degrees of privation. For example, dimness is a lesser degree of the privation of light than darkness.

17) Evil, ignorance, and pain occur where Brahman-God is less manifested. Swami Vivekananda explained, 'They are the diverse manifestations of one and the same fact, one time appearing as bad, and at another time as good. The difference does not exist in kind, but only in degree. They differ from each other in degree of intensity.'²³ 'When He is less manifested, it is called darkness, evil; and when He is more manifested, it is called light. That is all. Good and evil are only a question of degree: more manifested or less manifested.'²⁴ Swami Abhedananda agrees, 'The difference between good and evil is not one of kind, but of degree, like the difference between light and darkness.'²⁵

On many occasions, Ramakrishna teaches a Manifestational theory based on

degrees of the presence of Brahman-God in the universe. He states, 'God alone has become all this; but He manifests Himself more in certain things than others.' 'God no doubt dwells in all beings as the All-pervading Spirit, but the manifestations of His Power are different in different beings.' 'Through different instruments God's Power is manifest in different degrees, greater and smaller. Therefore all men are not equal.'²⁶

18) What is good for one person is bad for another. Swami Vivekananda stated, 'The same phenomenon will produce pleasure in one, and pain in another. The eating of meat produces pleasure to a man, but pain to the animal which is eaten.'²⁷ 'The very same phenomenon which is appearing to be good now, may appear to be bad tomorrow. The same thing which is producing misery in one, may produce happiness in another. The fire that burns the child, may cook a good meal for a starving man.'²⁸

19) Humans have only a limited, partial view of good and evil. Things are perceived in relation to the five senses and understood in reference to restricted mental conceptions. Vivekananda stated, 'We only know the universe from the point of view of beings with five senses. Suppose we obtain another sense, the whole universe must change for us.'²⁹ According to Swami Abhedananda, 'That which fulfils our interests is called good, and that which brings us misery or anything which we do not want, is called evil.... If we judge everything from our standpoint, we can never know whether it is really good or evil, because our standard is limited and imperfect. Those who do not recognize the results of acts from different standpoints are liable to all kinds of error. If I judge the whole universe by my standard, my judgment will be very poor. But when I look

at things from various standpoints, I can understand how the same event can produce good and evil in relation to different conditions.³⁰ ‘Again the same thing can appear as good and as evil under different circumstances. That which appears as good in one case, may appear as evil if the conditions change and the results be different.’³¹

20) The world is perfect (objectively), but the human mind misperceives it (subjectively) as imperfect. Sri Ramakrishna transmitted spiritual energy to Swami Vivekananda through a touch and he had the following remarkable religious experience. ‘I was astounded to find that really there was nothing in the universe but God! ... everything I saw appeared to be Brahman.’³²

There are two types of Savikalpa Samadhi. In this example, Vivekananda experienced a Combined Savikalpa Samadhi incorporating both the supersensuous and the sensuous realms. Ramakrishna was in this state when he saw that everything including the cat was full of blissful consciousness. This differs from Transcendental Savikalpa Samadhi, which Ramakrishna often attained, where he was in the supersensuous state and not in the sensuous realm that he had transcended.

When Ramakrishna touched Vivekananda, the latter experienced the world epistemologically through his spiritual senses, that it is pervaded and interpenetrated by a blissful Divine consciousness. This is the way the Divine Mind perceives the world. Following Vivekananda’s realization, the world is already perfect and Brahman-God-like; we simply do not perceive or comprehend that. With a mind in a spiritual state of vibration, one sees and experiences the world as Brahman-God. In a material state of

vibration the world appears to be imperfect. Saguna Brahman-God has ontologically become the universe; while viewed epistemologically, there is a false perception of imperfection. Māyā veils the true reality (Saguna Brahman) and projects a false one that can only be terminated by a spiritual vision. In addition, Ramakrishna saw Brahman-God in other persons, but they did not realize this. This allows the mystic to reverse the epistemological process and to experience the world as it actually is in its a higher state.

Gottfried Leibniz also believed that only God perceives the world as it really is, while humans perceive it confusedly in an infinite number of ways.³³ In other words, God perceives the spiritual world and we, the imperfect physical world. Some may disagree, stating that the omniscient mind of God must experience everything, in both the perfect Divine and the imperfect human way. With the qualification, if God experiences the imperfect as we do, He/She knows it is a misconception.

Is the physical interpretation of the world an imperfect copy, reflection, or representations of the spiritual world? Is this false perception due to māyā that veils the true reality and projects a false one, which can only be terminated by a spiritual vision? Our mind is a fragment of the Universal Mind (*Mahat*). Does a quantitative difference (being a part) bring on a qualitative difference that causes our misperception to fall short of Brahman-God’s correct perception?

The mystic has some realization of this when he/she perceives the world through the spirit. People experience the world as imperfect. This is due to the limited nature of their perceptive apparatus and the imperfect thoughts in their mind that they project into the outside world. Is it paradoxical that the world is

objectively perfect, while subjective perception is imperfect?

That this world is Divine is an example of Substitution (the opposite of superstition a

term coined by Terry Pratchett), meaning that which is true but believed by only a few. This is the opposite of superstition that which is believed by many but is untrue.³⁴ ■

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