THE THEODICY TRAP

Steven M. Cahn

A theodicy is shaky if it explains only some evils but not all. For if certain possible evils are inconsistent with the existence of God, then their occurrence would disprove theism. But if a theodicy offers a justification for all possible evils, then it leads into a trap. After all, if God's existence is compatible with every horrible occurrence imaginable, why should belief in God afford any comfort?

The world is beset by evils. In the memorable words of Demea, the orthodox theist in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

> The whole earth. . .is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent; weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life, and it is, at last, finished in agony and horror.[1]

Could such a world have been created by an omnipotent, omni-benevolent God? Epicurus thought not and put the point most succinctly: Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then God is impotent. Is God able, but not willing? Then God is malevolent. Is God both able and willing? From where, therefore, comes evil?

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This line of argument is commonly known as 'the problem of evil', and developing a solution is the goal of theodicy, a term derived from the Greek words *theos* and *dike*, meaning 'God' and 'righteous'. If a theodicy works, then it demonstrates at least that a world containing evil could have been the creation of an omnipotent, omni-benevolent God. But is that situation merely an unlikely possibility, or a probability? The most successful theodicy would show that the world's widespread evils should have been expected, given that the creator was omnipotent and omni-benevolent.

A theodicy is shaky if it explains only some evils but not all. For if certain evils are inconsistent with the existence of God, then their occurrence would disprove God's existence. Yet as experience makes all too clear, if a form of evil is possible, then it likely has occurred or will occur. Thus a successful theodicy needs to offer a justification for all possible evils. Only then is theism secure.

Suppose, for example, an earthquake occurs, killing thousands. Some might suppose that such an event would undermine belief in an all-powerful, omni-benevolent creator of the world. With a successful theodicy in hand, however, theism would be safe from refutation by such an event; its occurrence could be explained without limiting the power or goodness of God.

No wonder, then, that theists have long sought a successful theodicy. Were this goal attained, however, it would lead into a trap. For if God's existence were compatible with all evils, why should belief in God afford any comfort?

For example, Psalm 23 refers to God as our shepherd. Even as 'I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me.'[2] But why shouldn't I fear harms? They may befall me even if I am in God's care.

So Job learns, when he suffers grievously despite having not sinned. He was being watched over by God, but to no avail. Granted, in the end he is rewarded, but his ten dead children are not so fortunate. Yet they, too, presumably were being watched over by God.

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Perhaps comfort is supposed to be found eventually in a next world, although that obscure concept is not a central theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. As to this world, though, not only can good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people, but the most wonderful things may happen to the worst people, and the most awful things may happen to the best people. A successful theodicy envisions and justifies all these possibilities.

That the world was designed by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God might appear to be a basis for optimism. A successful theodicy, however, proves that God's plan could include every horrible occurrence imaginable, thus destroying any reason to be hopeful about events in this world.

Consider an analogous case. Suppose I recommend a restaurant, praising it for the excellence of its management. During your visit, though, you find the ambience gloomy, the service poor, the food unpalatable, and the cost high. When you express disappointment about your visit, I present an argument proving that all these conditions are consistent with the management's excellence. Indeed, I even show that such conditions are to be expected in a restaurant with excellent management. You may not know how to refute my argument, but the next time I recommend a restaurant on the basis of its excellent management, you won't be eager to eat there. After all, my argument that an excellent management is consistent with an inferior dining experience implies that you have no reason to suppose that conditions at a restaurant with an excellent management will be in any way satisfactory.

Similarly, if God's plan for the world is consistent with a succession of the worst evils, you have no reason to suppose that conditions in the world need ever be in any way satisfactory. A drought, for example, might persist for years, while a successful theodicy would provide a justification for the continuing oppressive condition. Moreover, praying to God for rain in those circumstances appears to make little sense, for if the draught is justified, why should God stop it?

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To highlight this problem, consider the well-known theodicy offered by Richard Swinburne. He assures us that God's plans require 'much evil'. Moral evils, those human beings inflict on each other, are necessary as a corollary to free will. Hence my suffering as a result of your freely chosen evil action is not entirely a loss for me, because I have contributed to the cause of freedom. 'Those who are allowed to die for their country and thereby save their country from foreign oppression are privileged.' Thus according to this theodicy, being the victim of injustice has a good side, even for the victim.

As for natural evils, those for which human beings are not responsible, according to Swinburne they give us the opportunity to perform worthy acts. Pain, for instance, helps develop patience. Therefore injustice contributes to the good not only as a by-product of free choice but also as an effective means for victims to develop moral virtue.

Swinburne's theodicy is so powerful that it implies not only that our world would be worse without evils but that heaven would be better if it contained evils. In fact, Swinburne doesn't hesitate to draw this confusion. He notes that heaven 'lacks a few goods which our world contains, including the good of being able to reject the good'.

No wonder that, in reflecting on his theodicy, Swinburne warns: 'I would not in most cases recommend that a pastor give this chapter to victims of sudden distress at their worst moment, to read for consolation. But this is not because its arguments are unsound; it is simply that most people in deep despair need comfort, not argument.'[3]

Swinburne recognizes that his theodicy offers no comfort. The crucial point, however, is that no successful theodicy does; it justifies whatever events occur.

The sad fate of some is to suffer through years filled with sorrow and suffering, anguish and agony, even tortures of mind and body. A successful theodicy, however, would demonstrate that such ghastly lives, no matter how common, do not conflict with belief in an omnipotent, omni-benevolent God. If they did, then theism would fall prey to the problem of

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evil. A successful theodicy would solve that problem but leave believers without any reason to expect support from God.

In that connection, recall the moving words of the Levite benediction:

> The Lord bless you and protect you!
> The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!
> The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace![4]

A successful theodicy would prove that even with the Lord's blessing and protection, the Lord's kindness and graciousness, and the Lord's favor, your life on earth may be filled with evils, and you shouldn't expect God to alleviate them. After all, a successful theodicy has demonstrated that whatever evils occur, God views them as contributing to a greater good.

If this conclusion is unacceptable to theists, one way out would be to cease searching for a successful theodicy, instead continuing to conceive God as omni-benevolent but recognizing God's power as limited. In that case, faced with a pandemic, for instance, theists could perhaps find some comfort in the realization that God wished to provide immediate relief, even if not able to do so. Moreover, praying to God would still be appropriate, although God could not grant every worthy request.

Admittedly this account of God's nature would likely appeal to few theists. By accepting it, however, they would escape having to embrace the implausible claim made by every successful theodicy that God considers all evils, including all pandemics, to be enhancements of life.

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Notes

[1] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Natural History of Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 96. Spelling and punctuation updated.

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[2] Psalms 23:4. The translation is from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

[3] Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96, 102, 113.

[4] Numbers 6:24–26.

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