

The Problem of Evil and its Solution

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The problem of evil can be captured by the following four statements which taken together are inconsistent:

- (1) God made the world
- (2) God is a perfect being
- (3) A perfect being would not create a world containing evil
- (4) The world contains evil

Traditional attempts to grapple with this problem typically center on rejecting (3).

Thus Descartes, following Augustine, rejects (3), arguing that evil is the result of man's exercise of his free will. However, given Descartes plausible claim that God could have created man in such a way that through exercising his free will man comes to only virtuous actions, it is not clear how the problem is solved.

Descartes also repeats the Augustinian orthodoxy that though the world contains evil it does not contain it as a positive existence; evil has no real being but is simply the reflection of the inherent lack of full-being in merely finite individuals. Again, that this is a solution is open to serious doubt.

Descartes briefly canvasses the Augustinian suggestion that the world only appears to contain evil and that seen from the right perspective (God's perspective) the appearance of evil vanishes.¹ This view suffers from the fact that it is near impossible to imagine a perspectival point from which all the evil so apparent to us no longer appears so. For Voltaire the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 precluded this possibility.² I prefer to take the horrors of Europe in the period from 1939-45 as a paradigm of non-perspectival evil.

Gnostics have attempted to solve the conundrum by rejecting (1), arguing that the world is the creation not of God but of a lesser demiurge, archon, or angels. This is the position taken by Basilides who worshipped a primal “non-existent” God and, according to Irenaeus, argued that it was not Jesus but Simon of Cyrene who died on the cross. Still it leaves us with the problem of who created the demiurge and why God did not supplement or prevent this demiurge’s work.³

I wish here to canvass a solution that I have yet to find in the literature and one I take to be more satisfying and less evasive than those mentioned above.

Grant me that each of God’s thoughts is both complete and has some grade of reality. Now God has had all possible thoughts. Given our previous two assumptions this amounts to the claim that God has thought all possible worlds in their entirety. Indeed we may take each possible world just to be one of God’s thoughts. So far this is nothing more than Leibnizean orthodoxy – see, for example Leibniz’s *Monadology*, paragraph 43.⁴ Now consider the world we know and inhabit. It is a possible world, hence one that God has thought of. Furthermore, our world pretty clearly, pace Descartes, contains evil. Now God being perfect would not create a world containing evil. *Ergo* God did not create this world, he merely thought of it. Our world then is a merely possible world, one God thought of but chose not to create. Presumably it was his knowledge of the evil in this world which led him to decide that it was beneath creation. The actual world is some other world that contains none of the evil of this world or any other possible world.⁵

Which then of the four premises does this solution reject. A number of responses are viable here. We can say that this solution rejects (1) taking the phrase 'the world' as it occurs in (1) to refer to this non-actual possible world. Here we would be claiming that God merely thought of this world but he did not make it in the sense of choosing to create it. God did give substantiality to one of the possible worlds, to one of his thoughts, our world however is not that world. Alternatively, we can say this solution rejects (4) taking the phrase 'the world' as it occurs in (4) to refer to the world God chose to actualize, a world that is not this one we inhabit, but a world that contains no evil. Rather than explicitly rejecting (1) or (4) I prefer to see this as a case of ambiguity: All of (1)-(4) are true. The phrase "the world" as it occurs in (1) refers to the actual world which is not the world we inhabit.⁶ "The world" as it occurs in (4) refers to this world, a merely possible, non-actual, world. Disambiguated and expanded a little the four premises read as follows

- (1*) God created the actual world (and merely thought of the other possible worlds)
- (2) God is a perfect being
- (3*) A perfect being would not create, that is, make actual, a world containing evil
- (4*) This world, a possible non-actual world, contains evil

These four claims are jointly consistent. However this solution exploits a Leibnizian perspective that is not popular among certain current possible world theorists. It takes actuality to be defined from God's point of view and thus rejects the kind of indexical account of actuality favored, for instance, by David Lewis.

For Lewis (4*) is false in each possible world, since for any given world W the claim "This world is actual" is true in W, actuality being indexed to worlds. Hence for Lewis (4*) is necessarily false. It is perhaps worth pausing here to note that this leads to the, arguably, infelicitous result that 'This world is actual' is a necessary truth. For Leibniz (4*) is true in some worlds and false in at least one world. In fact the Lewisian account is not congenial to theism since, in combination with theism, it leads to the following dilemma: Either God exists in each possible world in which case we reintroduce the problem of evil since God would then exist in worlds containing evil. Or, on the other hand, if we take God to exist in some, but not all, worlds it seems then that there could be a greater being, namely one who did exist in all possible worlds. However if, contra Lewis, we allow for the notion of non-wordly existence, though reserving it for God alone, this allows us to avoid the notion of God coexisting with evil. Furthermore, it allows for a sense of God's existence that is not diminished by being limited to only some worlds. As noted above, a God who exists in some worlds but not in others seems to have a lesser existence than one who exists in all worlds. On the other hand, an extra-wordly God who is the source of all worlds, some worlds having existence merely as his thoughts, others having existence as a matter of divine creation, is in no way diminished by not having wordly existence. Furthermore the idea of God as an extra-wordly existent has the inestimable virtue of fitting such scripture as Is. 43.24, Rev. 5.11, Cor. 8.6, Col. 1.16 and Maccabees 7.28. In particular, Hebrews 11.3, "[t]hrough faith we

understand the worlds were framed by the word of God”, lends further credence to the idea that God is the extra-wordly creator of all worlds

While ours is a genuine solution to the problem of evil, I do have qualms. In particular, it is not clear to me that this world really is a possible world. It may well be an impossible world. An impossible world is a world in which some contradiction is true; it is a world God never thought of. If, *pace* the above solution, (1)-(4) are in fact jointly true of this world, so that ‘the world’ in (1) and (4) refers to this, our, world, then this world is an impossible world. The claim that this world is an impossible world of which (1)-(4) are all true is, presumably, to be preferred to the abomination of atheism.⁷

Endnotes

¹ The free will, non-existence, and perspectival “solutions” are all, briefly, canvassed, with specific reference to the problem of error, in Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy*, edited and translated by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996. For Descartes, error and evil are of a kind in the sense that both are, *prima facie*, incompatible with God’s perfection. Augustine while generally adhering to a combination of the free will and non-existence solutions does occasionally advocate the perspectival solution – see, for instance, *Confessions* VII, 13 & 15.

² See his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*.

³ There is some controversy over the exact nature of Basilides views. The major historic sources on Basilides, namely Hippolytus, Clement, Origen, and Iraneaus give conflicting accounts of his thought. For more on this see Kurt Rudolph’s *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer Spätantiken Religion*, Koehler & Amelang, Leipzig, 1977. Borges’s attribution to Basilides of a cosmology of 365 Gods, each a lesser creation of his predecessor, and such that “[t]he L-rd of the lowest heaven is that of the scriptures and his fraction of divinity tends towards zero” is profound and probably erroneous.

⁴ Cf. *The Monadology and other Philosophical Writings*, translated by Robert Latta, O.U.P., London, 1898. I pause here to note that if we take God to be a being who exists outside of all possible worlds, a claim endorsed by Leibniz (see below), we can give some sense to Basilides aforementioned view that God is

non-existent. He is non-existent in the sense that he does not have worldly existence.

⁵ Of course, in a trivial sense this world, the world we inhabit, is actual *for us*.

The point here is that from God's perspective, hence as a matter of absolute fact, it need not be the actual world. For Leibniz the actual world is simply that one of the possible worlds that God chose to make substantial.

⁶ I allow that we may have counterparts in the actual world.

⁷ In my forthcoming "Impossible Worlds Semantics" I canvass the formal, though not theological, advantages of doing away with possible worlds and countenancing merely impossible worlds.