



The evidential problem of evil

The evidential problem of evil is a modern development and offers a new way of looking at the age-old problem of evil and suffering in the world

The evidential problem poses challenging questions for supporters of the traditional views of theism — evil and a God of love.

‘There is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of a theistic God. But while God may permit evil, there are not good reasons for the amount of suffering. Such suffering suggests an absent God.’

Rowe 1996

The existence of evil

The evidential argument comes from the view that there are some forms of evil and suffering which are just too extreme and pointless and which, therefore, cannot possibly be justified

— and the evidential fact that such evil exists strongly suggests that the theistic God *probably* does not exist. Notice that it only offers probability against God — this is because, being ‘evidential’, it relies on what observers can clearly see for ourselves. Nevertheless, the evidence is compelling.

It is difficult to define exactly what extreme and pointless evil actually is. Traditionally, evil has been defined by scholars as the ‘privation of good’ — that is, it encompasses pain, injustice, suffering and wrongdoing. Evil can be either ‘natural’ (the suffering caused by acts of nature such as earthquakes) or ‘moral’ (the suffering caused by human wickedness, such as murder).

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IT IS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE EXACTLY WHAT EXTREME AND POINTLESS EVIL ACTUALLY IS.

The traditional theistic view in the Western world is of God being seen as all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing. Such a God should act to stop evil and suffering, and the fact that evil and suffering exist in the world is used by some to argue that the God of theism does not exist. However, theists believe that God uses evil and suffering to help humanity towards goodness and moral virtue, and that suffering is part of God's divine plan for 'soul-making' and helping humans to develop into perfection. In addition, the existence of free will suggests that God allows evil to happen as part of human freedom.

Criticisms

Critics have long argued against the traditional view. Alvin Plantinga (1974) highlighted the difficulty many theists find in justifying suffering as part of God's divine plan:

“The theist may find a religious problem in evil...faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God's face, or even to give up belief in God altogether.”

Similarly, H. J. McCloskey (1986) claimed that theists were trapped in a dilemma:

“Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil, on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other.”

Despite these powerful arguments, scholars had been slow to offer a different viewpoint. Enter William Rowe and a new approach — the evidential argument from evil. In his work 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism' (1979), he attempted to show that God's existence was 'improbable' in the face of evil. He argued that the presence of extreme and apparently pointless evil in the world strongly supported the claim that the loving God of theism does not exist. He claimed that there was ample evidence in the world of 'intense human and animal suffering' which an omnipotent and omniscient God could have prevented without losing some greater good. In other words, the suffering of humanity is too great to justify any claims that God uses it for free will and soul-making. Certainly, Rowe accepted that a certain level of evil and suffering might be necessary for

human development, but the extreme evil that happens far exceeds this, suggesting that God does not exist. Thus:

- 1 If pointless evil exists, then God does not exist.
- 2 Pointless evil does exist.
- 3 Therefore God does not exist.

This is the essence of Rowe's view — that there is so much excessive evil in the world that is pointless and unnecessary, and God could achieve his purposes without permitting such evil to occur. The fact that such extreme evil does exist suggests that God does not exist. Rowe used two examples to illustrate what he called the 'factual premise':

- The case of Bambi: in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. (Natural evil)
- The case of Sue: a 5-year-old girl is beaten, raped and strangled by an intruder in her house. (Moral evil)

Rowe argued that both examples are instances where no good state of affairs comes by God allowing this suffering to occur — it is pointless and God has no moral justification for allowing these things to happen.

The sceptical view

Marilyn McCord Adams (2000) called such events 'horrendous evil', and described them as actions where:

“the suffering of which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could be a great good to them on the whole.”

This view found support from Howard-Snyder (1999), who wrote:

“the idea that God may well permit gratuitous evil is absurd. After all, if God can get what he wants without permitting a particular horror, why on earth would he permit it?”

This is sometimes called the sceptical view of theism — that humanity is limited and cannot know what the 'greater good' might be in God's eyes. Therefore:

- 1 If pointless evil exists, then God does not.
- 2 God exists.
- 3 Therefore pointless evil does not exist.



However, critics of Rowe have argued that he states that the existence of extreme and pointless evil is a reality which could have been prevented by a loving God without the loss of some greater good — but there is no way of verifying this. We do not, for instance, know exactly what a 'good state of affairs' really means. Moreover, even Rowe admitted that he cannot know or prove that cases of extreme suffering are indeed pointless, only that we have rational grounds for supposing that they are pointless. It is also the case that it is difficult to draw a line demarcating when an act becomes pointless. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

“Natural evils are a consequence of living in this world. God freely willed to create a world 'in a state of journeying' towards its ultimate perfection...with physical good there also exists physical evil so long as creation has not reached perfection.”

Inconclusive

So, is the evidential argument from evil convincing — and does excessive, pointless suffering mean that God does not exist? Certainly, there is widespread evidence of horrendous suffering that seems to question seriously the existence of an all-powerful and loving God. However, while the existence of evil

seems to make atheism more convincing than theism, it is not conclusive and that is why Rowe offered it only as a 'probability' rather than a 'certainty' that God does not exist. Why? Well, if God does exist, he knows more than we do about the great scheme of things. There may be hidden reasons which explain the apparent pointlessness. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

“Who has known the mind of God?”

Romans 11:34a

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References



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