

Constructing a World Without Evil: Some Conceptual Obstacles in Discourse on the Problem of Evil

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the problem of evil, specifically the possibility of constructing an evil-free world. Someone might assert that God could and should actualize a state of affairs such that the evils characteristic of lived experience should be prevented or rendered impossible. "If God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient, then God should be able to create a world without evil," one might say. If such a God exists, it is not immediately obvious how such a God could simply actualize some state of affairs, *P*, that excluded evil. To suggest that God could do this presupposes that *P* is actually conceivable and within God's power to bring about. If one concedes that an omnipotent God could do only that which is not logically impossible for God to do, then a person, *S*, who proposes that God should bring about *P* seems to shoulder a burden of proof for demonstrating how the actualization of *P* is not impossible. If *S* suggests that God can and should bring about *P*, then it is not unreasonable to expect *S* to spell out the particulars of an evil-free state of affairs. Suppose *S* succeeds in showing that it would not be impossible for God to actualize *P*. In that case, *S* is readily justified in inquiring why God, provided he actually exists, has not done so. However, perhaps it is the case that this concept of an evil-free state of affairs, one compossible with the stipulations of some semblance of free agency and regularity in the laws of nature, is somehow incoherent.

In this paper, I aim to identify two potential problems related to proposing an evil-free world and suggest that one should, at best, remain agnostic about the possibility of whether an omnipotent God could actualize any such state of affairs.

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Someone might assert that God should actualize a state of affairs such that the evils characteristic of lived experience, especially those evils classified as horrendous evils, should be prevented or rendered impossible. "If God is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient, then God should be able to create a world without evil," one might say. Assuming that such a God exists, it is not immediately obvious how God could simply actualize a state of affairs that satisfactorily eliminates evil. To suggest that God could do such presupposes that some ideal state of affairs, *P*, is actually conceivable. Allow me to define *P* as "a state of affairs in which: (1) various kinds and degrees

of evil are no longer possible, (2) sentient beings retain some semblance of free agency, and (3) the regularity of natural laws obtains.” I assume that freedom and regularity in the laws of nature are goods worth retaining.

If one concedes that an omnipotent God could do only that which is not logically impossible for God to do, then any person, *S*, who proposes that God should bring about *P* seems to shoulder a burden of proof for demonstrating how the actualization of *P* is not impossible.¹ If *S* suggests that God can and should bring about *P*, then it is not unreasonable to require *S* to spell out the particulars of an evil-free state of affairs. If *S* succeeds in showing that it would not be impossible for God to actualize this state of affairs, then *S* is justified to inquire why God, provided he actually exists, has not done so. However, perhaps it is the case that this concept of an evil-free state of affairs, one compossible with the stipulations of free agency and the laws of nature, is incoherent. I contend that a demonstration of the coherence of *P* will involve at least two obstacles:

(1) *The Problem of Conceiving Coherent Alternatives*. *S* should be able to propose an account of the conditions that obtain under *P*. She might surmise that an omniscient and omnipotent God can account for the contingencies, so she exempts herself from the responsibility to explain *how* everything would work out under *P*. “Let God handle the particulars. After all, God is omnipotent and omniscient,” she might say. However, if the implications of *P* are such that *S* cannot coherently account for contingencies with respect to the elimination of just *one kind of evil*, or if *S*’s proposed account of *P* yields a contradiction, should one suppose that God could actualize *P* for all sorts of evils? Perhaps *S* expects something from God that is impossible for him to do.

(2) *The Gaunilo’s Island Problem*. Somewhat correlated to the previous problem, the Gaunilo’s Island Problem suggests that, unlike God—whose conception entails maximal-perfection—there is no conceivable, maximally perfect state of affairs. Any proposed state of affairs could vary with respect to the preferences of the person(s) advancing it, and the circumstances could constantly improve with the addition or subtraction of just one constitutive feature. In addition, there seems to be no consensus as to what satisfies an “evil-free” world.

Thus, in the absence of a plausible construct of *P* that properly addresses concerns about (1) free will, (2) natural laws, (3) the potential improbability of *S*, and (4) the problem of consensus on what constitutes “evil,” I suggest that one should, at best, remain agnostic about the possibility of whether an omnipotent God could actualize any state of affairs satisfying with the demands of *P*.

The Problem of Conceiving Coherent Alternatives

Becky’s car breaks down on I-95, and a tow-truck transports her to the nearest garage. She is understandably upset in these circumstances. In a moment of frustration, Becky shouts at the nearest mechanic, “Mechanics and engineers should just produce a car that cannot break down! Cars should never have flat tires, blown engines, failed brakes, etc.” Becky, who is not as knowledgeable of the workings and design of automobiles as the mechanic, wants the mechanics and engineers to build a line of super-cars immune to damages and systems failures. Somewhat

amused by the idea, the mechanic replies, “Becky, what would such a super-car look like? Can you explain your design plan and how would it work?” Off the top of her head, Becky describes a number of features such a car would have (impenetrable tires, maximally efficient engine, etc.), without bothering to explain the structural composition of any of the features or how they properly relate to one another in generating a super-car. After all, Becky is not a mechanic; why expect her to know how everything in the super-car should work? All she knows is cars *should be better* than they are.

When pressed for answers, Becky says the impenetrable tires would be made of indestructible materials that could withstand the most intense obstacles of road travel and never need service. Still intrigued, the mechanic asks, “What material(s) should we utilize to build these tires? And if the tires are indestructible, how would one go about disposing of or recycling these tires? What happens if two of these super-cars crash into one another at full speed?” These are fair concerns that introduce variables Becky has not contemplated up to this point. Becky is unaware of any existing materials that are indestructible, and she cannot account for what would happen if—supposing those materials existed—someone ever needed to dispose of anything made from those materials. On the question of these cars meeting in a collision, Becky, whose high school education in the principles of physics eludes her in the moment, cannot account for the aftermath of the scenario. If Becky claims that mechanics and engineers should do otherwise than they have done when building cars, is it fair hold Becky to account? It would seem she bears a burden of demonstrating why her suggestion is, at best, plausible and, at a minimum, worthy of consideration. However, Becky realizes she cannot satisfactorily explain how the super-car would actually work. In this case, Becky’s super-car is nothing more than a wishful idea that raises a number of puzzles she is ill-equipped to solve. Even for a team of the wisest and most skilled mechanics, building a machine satisfying Becky’s idea of a super-car seems highly improbable, if not impossible.

To conceive of a state of affairs in which the evils normative to human experience are no longer a possibility, one should be able to at least account for what the world would look like if God eliminated just one kind of evil. There are a number of apparently-natural² evils at one’s disposal: hurricanes, cancers of various kinds, volcanic eruptions that displace large populations, etc. For the sake of simplicity, let’s consider just one kind of evil to eradicate. Consider a dog dying a slow, painful death after being crushed by a fallen tree.³ All persons—theists and non-theists alike—will probably agree that the dog’s gruesome death is unfortunate and apparently meaningless. In other words, the dog’s death is not immediately indicative that some sort of greater good results from the extreme suffering. Let’s let *F* represent “the evil of some sentient creature experiencing death by a fallen tree.” Suppose that *S* considers *F* and contends that God should actualize a state of affairs, *P*, in which evil *F* is no longer possible. It seems intuitive to *S* that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God *could* and *should* actualize *P*.

Reflect on what *P* would actually look like with respect to *F*. *S* contends that on *P*, *F* would

be impossible. So it is not unreasonable to expect *S* to account for what *P* would entail. Would *P* involve, for example, God fashioning the world such that trees are unable to fall on any sentient creatures, including even the smallest of creatures? For this to be possible, maybe God would sweep away all objects in the path of a falling tree. Must God exercise control of creatures such that he ensures none wander in vicinity of trees prone to fall? Suppose a man and his son explore the same wooded area as the dog. Must God arrange a course of events that precludes the men from wandering the wooded vale with any possibility of *F*, or even merely the possibility of being struck by a stray branch? How far away must they be? Can they cut down a tree for firewood? Can they even witness a falling tree?

In any case, it seems that in order to prevent catastrophe and preserve the well-being of all creatures, God has a lot of work to do. God must limit the course of action of creatures and/or manipulate the laws of nature to the extent that *every time* a tree should begin to fall that it never falls on any sentient beings. This might imply that God's occasional manipulation of freedom and/or the laws of nature in order to preserve the well-being of sentient beings is a good thing. However, if *S* believes free will and regularity within nature are goods, God's interference with those laws of nature and/or creaturely autonomy might be an evil in itself. If *S* allows God's intervention in autonomy and/or the laws of nature, then this violates the very conditions of *P* that involve retaining regularity in the laws of nature and creaturely autonomy. In other words, God's restriction of the goods of autonomy and/or natural laws in order to prevent an evil becomes an evil in itself. *S*'s account of *P*, then, appears contradictory, since it entails that God should actualize a state of affairs such that the possibility of *F* is always eliminated by divine interference with human free will, the laws of nature, or some combination of the two.

Some might wonder what exactly qualifies as a "satisfactory account" of *P* that addresses any problems that crop up. Consider Peter Van Inwagen's expectation for those designing a world:

One should start by describing in some detail the laws of nature that govern that world. (Physicists' actual formulations of quantum field theories and the general theory of relativity provide the standard of required "detail.") One should then go on to describe the boundary conditions under which those laws operate; the topology of the world's space-time, its relativistic mass, the number of particle families, and so on. Then one should tell in convincing detail the story of cosmic evolution in that world: the story of the development of large objects like galaxies and of stars and of small objects like carbon atoms. Finally, one should tell the story of the evolution of life. These stories, of course, must be coherent, given one's specification of laws and boundary conditions. Unless one proceeds in this manner, one's statements about what is intrinsically or metaphysically possible—and thus one's options about an omnipotent being's "options" in creating a world—will be entirely subjective, and therefore without value.⁴

This appears to be an enormous task, even given the restricted attention to just one particular kind of evil. The smallest change to any feature of reality yields variables for which *S* should be

expected to give an account in order to demonstrate the coherence of her construct of *P*. Perhaps, *S* concedes, it is acceptable for God to occasionally intervene in freedom or the laws of nature to prevent serious evils. Where should *S* draw the line concerning how much intervention on God's part is too much? What constitutes a "serious evil," and is it the same for everyone? John Hick raises a similar concern as to whether or not God could eliminate evils in a way that would satisfy everyone. "There would be nowhere to stop, short of a divinely arranged paradise in which human freedom would be narrowly circumscribed, moral responsibility largely eliminated, and in which the drama of man's story would be reduced to the level of a television serial."⁵

Over time, *S* might find God's occasional intervention arbitrary or annoying. Perhaps she would grow frustrated with God's constant intervention in the affairs of the world. To stave off this kind of cynicism she would need to have keen perception of God's purposes behind intervening in a given situation, in order that she could discern when his intervention was appropriate. It is not obvious that *S* could always adequately discern that God was only intervening for the prevention of some evil.⁶ In any case, if God has to eliminate *F*, then it seems he has to (1) exercise control over creaturely actions such that no creatures are susceptible to death by fallen trees, and/or (2) interrupt laws of nature to preclude the possibility of trees falling on creatures. This creates a larger worry about whether or not such intervention itself becomes an evil on God's part by gerrymandering with freedom and psychical laws such that nature becomes an inscrutable mess. If this is the case, God's intervention becomes problematic.

Another variable to consider in a state of affairs in which *F* is impossible has to do with the mortality of sentient beings. If *F* is impossible, what—if any—forms of mortality are appropriate (i.e., not evil) for sentient beings? If *S* considers *F* a truly horrendous evil, then *S* purports to know at least one form of creaturely death that is an evil which God should render impossible. "God should construct the world such that sentient beings only die peaceful deaths in their sleep after living long, fruitful lives," says *S*. Let *X* represent this proposal of peaceful death. While *X* sounds preferable, *S* must once again confront the ramifications. Can God actualize *X* without regularly violating free will or manipulating natural laws? In the case of humans, it seems that *X* *prima facie* rules out participation in any number of activities (i.e. bungee jumping, driving on the interstate, football, etc.) and occupations (i.e. construction, airline industry, crossing guard, etc.) in which a degree of risk is involved. One would have to account for all activities in which there is even a marginal risk of fatality. In the case of non-human animals, for example, what would *X* entail concerning the food chain? Lions, for example, would starve and die were it impossible for them to hunt gazelles. These examples give rise to legitimate concerns for anyone who supposes God could eliminate a given evil with the wave of a hand.

It is important to clarify that just because *S* cannot immediately offer a coherent account of *P* that answers all the variables does not necessarily entail that *P* is *actually* impossible. Absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. However, to confidently assert that God could have done better without adequately addressing the variables in one's notion of *P* is not to argue anything.

Instead, it is little more than asserting what might otherwise be impossible. As Michael Peterson notes:

Even the slightest modification may produce manifold and intricate differences between this present natural order and the envisioned one. The whole matter becomes so complex that no finite mind can conceive of precisely what modifications the envisioned natural world would have to incorporate in order both to preserve the good natural effects and avoid the...evil ones. And if the desired modifications cannot be detailed, then the further task of conceiving how the proposed natural world is better than this present one seems patently impossible.⁷

If *S* maintains that God could and should actualize *P*, then it is reasonable to expect *S* to offer an explanation of how the actualization of *P* is not contradictory or incoherent. In the absence of a coherent account, then perhaps one need not expect God to actualize a different state of affairs.

The Gaunilo's Island Problem

In addition to the above problem of conceiving alternative states of affairs that harmonize (1) human autonomy and (2) reliability within the laws of nature, another concern involves whether or not a maximally great state of affairs is possible. If God can and should create a much better world than this one, why is there a lack of consensus as to what actually constitutes an evil-free world, such as *P*? I find Anselm's well-known dialogue with Gaunilo relevant to this concern. Responding to Anselm's ontological argument, Gaunilo proposed a perfect island, akin to God in terms of possessing supremely good properties. Anselm objected to Gaunilo by pointing out the contingency of the island and its lack of intrinsically maximal qualities. For example, if one's concept of perfect island contains 100 trees, someone else could conceive an island with more or better features, like 105 trees and numerous soda machines. In short, Anselm believed that it was impossible to conceive of a contingent object having maximally good properties, at least the kinds normatively bound up in a classical Western notion of God. I think Anselm's reply is on point and worthy of consideration in any discussion of actualizing an evil-free state of affairs.

For any account of *P*, someone could, in principle, conceptualize a better state of affairs by adding or subtracting certain features from *P*. If this is the case, it is unlikely that account of *P* will unanimously satisfy everyone. If *S* takes the actual world as a model from which she begins constructing *P*, then it seems that the results of *P* will largely depend on certain convictions she holds.⁸ Any feature of the world which a person counts as an evil might be something which another person counts as a good. Hence, perhaps any one individual's construction of *P* would not be an account satisfying all persons; thus, perhaps there is no maximally great state of affairs.

For example, suppose God granted five lucky people the opportunity to actualize their own version of *P*. Instead of constraining each participant to account for all the contingencies of their respective states of affairs, God merely asks them to verbalize whatever version of an evil-free world is in their mind so that he can actualize it. Supposing we could zoom out and observe these five evil-free worlds alongside one another, we would notice unanimity in the elimination of some evils

(cancer, homelessness, war, rape, natural disasters, etc.). However, we would also notice a few differences between them.

One of the participants, Alice, is a vegan who is passionate about animal suffering and believes human consumption of animals is morally reprehensible. On her account of P , P^A , human beings would no longer consume animals and follow a vegan diet. Another participant, Brad, is likewise concerned about animal suffering. In fact, his account, P^B , looks nearly identical to P^A in multiple respects. However, Brad is not a vegan. He enjoys the occasional ribeye steak, so he does not eliminate the possibility of animal consumption because he does not consider it an evil. Brad tries to brush off the differences as insignificant, but Alice's conviction regarding animal consumption prevents the parties from coming to a consensus. Though this is one seemingly-small detail of the two worlds, P^A and P^B demonstrate a fundamental disagreement on what qualifies as an evil worth eliminating. What Brad considers an insignificant evil, Alice considers a significant evil. Thus, the two "perfect" worlds stand in tension.

Notice that the moral assumptions of the participants regarding what properly constitutes P play into their respective constructions. Like Anselm's observation of Gaunilo's "perfect island," perhaps there is no way of constructing P in a way that meets the demands of every person. Even the smallest details of the worlds are subject to scrutiny. Thus, some degree of evil will likely remain on any construct of P .

Conclusion

While reconciling the concept of a God that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent with the evils normative to this world has proven difficult, it is equally—if not more—difficult to put forth a preferable, coherent state of affairs that does not include problems of its own. A satisfactory account of an evil-free state of affairs should not contradict itself by compromising goods like creaturely autonomy and/or regularity within nature, nor should it have wiggle room for further improvement by successive addition or subtraction of certain features. If any state of affairs is such that it could incessantly be improved upon by even the slightest of modifications, then it seems that no state of affairs will meet universal criteria for an evil-free state of affairs. In agreement with Anselm, the nature of contingent objects is indicative that any state of affairs could, in some manner, always be better. In the absence of an alternative, comprehensive proposal that accounts for the problems of (1) free will, (2) the laws of nature, and (3) potential improbability, it seems reasonable to remain agnostic about the prospect of God actualizing any evil-free state of affairs.

Endnotes:

1. Peter Hare and Edward Madden, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), 55–59. Hare and Madden insists that the concept of a perfect world as "one in which there is no positive evil" is possible because the concept is not self-contradictory.
2. I need to qualify this term "apparently-natural evils." There are a number of apparently-natural evils

for which humans, in some form or another, are culpable. For example, while no person deliberately develops cancerous lesions on the lungs, scientific research indicates life-long smokers are, to a degree, responsible for such a state of affairs. While humans cannot manipulate the weather according to their will, there is extant evidence that humans impact the climate in ways that can alter the weather. Thus, I contend that while some natural evils are largely out of our hands, there are ways in which humans contribute to certain natural evils.

3. The inspiration for this example is William Rowe's "suffering faun" case in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16.4 (1979): 335-41.
4. Peter Van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, The Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. 5, Philosophy of Religion (1991): 146.
5. John Hick, "Soul-Making and Suffering," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Robert Merrihew Adams and Marilyn McCord Adams (Oxford: University Press, 1990), 181.
6. This might raise concerns about divine omniscience, the inscrutability of God's ways, trust that divine intervention is always good, etc.
7. Michael L. Peterson, *Evil and The Christian God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 115-6.
8. Van Inwagen, 181-2. Van Inwagen suggests that the only model we have for designing a better world can only begin from our experience and perspective in this world.

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