

The Heaven Problem¹

The two most noteworthy theistic attempts to respond to the problem of evil are: 1) the free will defense, and 2) the greater (second-order) goods defense. These lines of defense have met with objections that are now fairly well known.² Philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and John Hick have presented admirable responses to the standard objections (the adequacy of their responses is, of course, a matter of some debate), and so disputes concerning the efficacy of the problem of evil have taken their now-familiar shape. In this paper, I wish to sidestep the familiar disputes, in order that I might introduce a slightly different kind of difficulty for proponents of the aforementioned lines of defense against the problem of evil (at least those with certain other common commitments). I will argue, in particular, that both the free will defense and the greater goods defense are incompatible with a particular conception of heaven. I call this "the heaven problem".

The Problem of Evil

Theists claim that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (call this the 3-O God). This characterization of God appears

¹The impetus for this paper came, in large part, from a conversation that I had with Professor Wayne Riggs while I was a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma. Professor Riggs deserves substantial credit for alerting me to the possible existence of "the heaven problem," but is in no way responsible for any mistakes that I may have made in attempting to articulate that problem.

²Some opponents of theism, for example, have argued that neither the free will defense nor the greater goods defense seems to explain away the existence of seemingly gratuitous evil, and that the free will defense does not seem to be able to explain why it should not be logically possible for an omnipotent God to create a world with free will, but without evil.

(at least initially) to be inconsistent with the presence of evil in the world. The problem of evil, for the theist, may be stated as follows:

1. If God is omniscient, then God knows when, where, and how evil will occur if it is not prevented.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to prevent each instance of evil.
3. If God is omnibenevolent, then God wants to prevent each instance of evil.
4. So, if there exists a God who knows how to prevent evil, has the power to prevent evil, and wants to prevent evil (i.e. if the 3-O God exists), then evil will not occur.
5. Evil occurs.
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6. Therefore, the 3-O God does not exist.

Theists have responded to the problem of evil in a variety of ways. Any attempt to defend the view that the existence of evil can be reconciled with the existence of the 3-O God will, for our purposes, be called a *theodicy*. There have been a number of theodicies (and theodicists), but there have been two especially prominent and attractive types of attempt to prove that the third premise in the above argument is false (i.e. that its antecedent does not imply its consequent). These attempts to respond to the problem of evil are commonly called: 1) the free will defense and, 2) the greater goods defense. I will briefly present and explain each.

The Free Will Defense

Some theodicists argue that human free will is intrinsically good, and that its goodness more than counterbalances the moral evil that sometimes results from humans exercising their freedom. An omnibenevolent God

wants to create the best of all possible worlds. The presence of human free will in the world entails the occurrence of evil human behavior. Moral evil (i.e. evil resulting from human free agency) is, therefore, a consequence of God's creating the best of all possible worlds (in which there exist free agents). Hence, the existence of moral evil is not incompatible with the existence of the 3-O God. God's omnibenevolence does not entail that He has the desire to prevent every instance of evil. Interestingly enough, God's omnibenevolence entails that He *must* create a world in which there is evil. Theodocist, Richard Swinburne articulates a version of the standard free will defense which he takes to be a "filling out" of a version previously set forth by Alvin Plantinga³:

The free-will defense must claim, however, that it is a good thing that there exist free agents with the power and opportunity of choosing between morally good and morally evil actions, agents with sufficient moral discrimination to have some idea of the difference and some (though not overwhelming) temptation to do other than the morally good. Let us call such agents humanly free agents. The defense must then go on to claim that it is not logically possible to create humanly free agents such that necessarily they do not do morally evil actions. [1977: p. 87]

So, premise three in the aforementioned formulation of the problem of evil is false. God creates humanly free agents, and this is a good thing - good enough, in fact, to warrant the morally evil actions of free agents. We need not, therefore, accept the conclusion of the argument. That is, we need not reject the existence of the 3-O God.

³See Plantinga (1965) and Plantinga (1967 - chapters 5 and 6) for his version of the free will defense.

The Greater Goods Defense

The compatibility of the existence of *natural* evil with the 3-O God, however, must also be explained.⁴ Why, for example, must there be suffering as a result of natural disaster, famine, disease, etc.?

Some theodocists argue that there are intrinsically good phenomena (other than free will) which require the presence of certain evils in the world (hence, these phenomena are called *second-order* or *greater* goods), and that a world in which these goods exist is better than a world in which they do not. Furthermore, the presence of these greater goods more than counterbalances the presence of the evils that are prerequisites to the existence of the greater goods. For example, compassion requires suffering, and a world with compassion *and* suffering is better than a world without either. A world with courage *and* peril is better than a world without either, etc. Furthermore, the suffering, peril, etc., must be genuine in order that compassion and courage would not be predicated upon God deceiving human kind. A world in which there is compassion, suffering, and wholesale deception of persons by God, is inferior to a world in which there is compassion, suffering, and no such deception. Swinburne also sets out this defense very clearly:

Thus for a man to bear his suffering cheerfully there has to be suffering for him to bear. There have to be acts which irritate for another to show tolerance of them. Likewise, it is often said, acts of forgiveness, courage, self-sacrifice, compassion, overcoming temptation, etc., can be performed only if there are evils of various kinds. Here, however, we must be careful. One might reasonably claim that all that is necessary for some of these good acts (or acts as good as these) to be performed is belief in the existence of certain evils, not their actual existence. You can show compassion toward someone who appears to be suffering,

⁴Unless a plausible case can be made that natural evil is a result of the immoral use of free will (e.g. a result of disobedience that caused the fall from Eden). Plantinga (1974 - chapter 9) develops such a case.

but is not really; you can forgive someone who only appeared to insult you, but did not really. But if the world is to be populated with imaginary evils of the kind needed to enable creatures to perform acts of the above specially good kinds, it would have to be a world in which creatures are generally and systematically deceived about the feelings of their fellows--in which the behavior of creatures generally and unavoidably belies their feelings and intentions. I suggest, in the tradition of Descartes (*Meditations* 4, 5 and 6), that it would be a morally wrong act of a creator to create such a deceptive world. [1977: p. 89]

Again, it is interesting that an omnibenevolent God is not merely *permitted* to create a world in which there is evil, He is morally *bound* to do so. God creates a world in which there is compassion, courage, forgiveness, etc., and this is a good thing - good enough, in fact, to warrant the suffering and other evils that are prerequisites for the existence of greater goods. The greater goods defense is intended (as is the free will defense) to show that the third premise in the aforementioned formulation of the problem of evil is false. Again, if one of its premises is false then, of course, the argument fails.

The Heaven Problem

Free will theodicians have made the case that a world with free agents entails the existence of (at least some) moral evil, and furthermore, that a world *with* free will *and* its correlative moral evil is superior to a world that lacks evil altogether but in which there also exists no free will.

Greater goods theodicians have made the case that the existence of second-order (greater) goods such as compassion, courage, etc. entails that there must exist certain evils such as suffering and peril. This brand of theodicy further asserts that a world with second-order goods and their correlative natural (or moral) evils is better than a world that lacks evil altogether but in which there exist no second-order (greater) goods.

So, each of the two major theodicies holds that an omnibenevolent God, in creating the best of all possible worlds, is bound to (or, at least, permitted to) create a world in which there exists some evil. That is, the best of all possible worlds is a world in which there exists at least some suffering, or some injustice, or some ill-will, etc. It is important to point out that the theodist's project involves an attempt to justify a belief in the 3-O God, even in the face of the presence of evil of various kinds and degrees in the world. Swinburne himself states that he "shall conclude that it is plausible to suppose that the existence of these evils is compatible with the existence of God," and he has earlier, in the same paper, stated that "God is, by definition, omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good." [1977: p. 81] If, however, the theodist in question intends to defend not merely the justifiability of his belief in the existence of the 3-O God, but also intends his theodicy as part of an overall attempt to underwrite the plausibility of something like the traditional Judeo-Christian story about God, His creation, and mankind's place within that creation, then he may find that the account of heaven in that story does not comport at all well with his theodicy.

What, one might ask, are theodists such as Swinburne and Plantinga independently committed to regarding the status of our potential existence in heaven relative to the status of our existence in the actual, terrestrial world in which we are living, suffering, imperiled victims of our freely evil fellow persons and/or the forces of nature? Does not the New Testament account of the nature of heaven proscribe evil such as suffering, injustice, and ill-will from paradise? In *Revelation* 21: 3-4, we are given the following glimpse of heaven:

Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and **death shall be no more,**

neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more,
for the former things have passed away. (emphasis mine)

It appears that this revelation is supposed to be a suggestion of the fulfillment of a vision, offered in *Isaiah* 65: 1-2, of a return to a paradise the likes of which mankind enjoyed in the original Eden.

The absence of mourning, crying, and pain seems to suggest a pristine place in which there exists neither suffering nor the perpetration of evil. Now, if a theodicy is not committed to any belief in such a heaven (or any "otherworldly reward" of similar description), then he does not suffer from what I have here called "the heaven problem". It is worth noting, however, that it has been suggested that a commitment to some such "paradise" may be a prerequisite for any successful theodicy at all. John Hick, for example, claims that this is the case:

It is the promised fulfillment of God's purpose for man, in which the full possibilities of human nature will be realised, that constitutes the "heaven" symbolised in the New Testament as a joyous banquet in which all and sundry rejoice together. As we saw when discussing the problem of evil, **no theodicy can succeed without drawing into itself this eschatological faith in an eternal, and therefore infinite, good which thus outweighs all the pains and sorrows that have been endured on the way to it.** [1963: pp. 52-53 - emphasis mine]

I am not certain whether Hick is correct here. Why cannot the "good which thus outweighs all the pains and sorrows" be contemporaneous and compresent with the pains and sorrows that it outweighs? If, for example, the existence of free will is a good that outweighs the suffering that is sometimes caused by free agents, then it is unclear why any resort to some *future* or *eternal* good in *another place* (heaven) would be required as part of the warrant for the creation of free agents.

In any case, *if* the free will theodicy or the greater goods theodicy does take himself to be committed also to the existence of something like the

New Testament heaven, then he owes some explanation as to how it is that his theodicy may be reconciled with his conception of that heaven. In "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," Plantinga indicates that he is committed to the existence of the 3-O God, *and* to a "unique way of salvation"; an expression suggestive of something like Hick's eternal, infinite good:

I believe both

(1) The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal being (one that holds beliefs; has aims, plans, and intentions; and can act to accomplish these aims).

(2) Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son. [1998: p. 518]

But can Plantinga consistently assert the existence of a state of "salvation" (if that is taken to entail the absence of suffering, injustice, ill-will, etc.) while clinging to his free will theodicy? Does not the greater goods theodicy also have a difficulty from which he must extract himself?

Either of the two major theodicies would appear to entail that a "heaven" in which there exists no suffering, no injustice, and no ill-will must be inferior to our familiar terrestrial existence on the grounds that in such a place there could be no free will, nor any greater goods such as compassion, courage, or forgiveness. The theodicy's "heaven" (if he believes in one) is a world that is inferior to our terrestrial existence here in the *best of all possible worlds* (which, according to the theodicy, *necessarily* comes complete with evils of various kinds).

Perhaps the theodicy can escape the difficulty by allowing that, contrary to traditional conceptions of paradise, there is (at least some) evil in heaven after all? If so, then we are owed some account of what it is (if anything) that would make heaven superior to our familiar terrestrial existence. Is there, perhaps, *less* evil in heaven than there is here on earth? If

so, would there not be fewer of the greater goods mentioned earlier and less opportunity for the expression of free will? Furthermore, positing a heaven in which there exists pain and suffering appears to run contrary to descriptions of heaven such as the aforementioned excerpt from *Revelation* 21.

On the other hand, it may be that there is a crucial mistake in thinking of heaven as being a *place* in the way that *the world* is a place, or in thinking of our existence in heaven as being analogous to our existence here on earth. The theist's heaven may be altogether different from anything that we can conceive in our current circumstances. If this is so, then "the heaven problem" may be ill-conceived. Perhaps all that is needed to dissolve the apparent problem is a clearer understanding of the nature of heaven. Of course, thorough characterizations of the nature of heaven are not easy to come by, and such accounts do not seem to appear very frequently in scripture or in literature regarding issues in the philosophy of religion. A bit of clarification on this score might obviate further dispute over the apparent difficulty that heaven presents for the theodicians.

So, if it turns out that Swinburne and Plantinga are not committed to the problematic conception of paradise that would generate the heaven problem, then they have my apologies for my presumptuousness. Even so, it seems likely that there are others who do occupy the position that I have suggested might be an inconsistent one (e.g. Hick). Any free will theodician or greater goods theodician who is also committed to the idea of a heaven without evil or suffering owes some response to the difficulty that I have outlined here.

If theists cannot answer the problem of evil without undermining their very own conception of heaven, then something must give. Some theodicy

other than the free will defense or the greater goods defense must be adopted (and it must be impervious to "the heaven problem"), or it must be demonstrated that there is some tenable notion of heaven with which one or the other theodicy can peacefully coexist.

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