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The Logic of Theodicy: A Comparative Analysis

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1. The topic of this paper is the age-old "problem of evil." However, what we are proposing is neither a new theodicy nor a criticism of any specific existing theodicy. It can perhaps best be described as an exercise in "comparative theology." In this paper we will compare how three theistic perspectives - theological determinism, freewill theism and process theism - do (in fact, must) approach the reality of evil in this world and then reflect on whether any of these approaches can be judged superior to the others.
2. What drives this project are two related assumptions. First, it is inaccurate to portray the debate over the problem of evil as only, or even primarily, a debate between "theism" and "non-theism." Many of the most heated, interesting and controversial discussions take place among theists. In fact, the perceived ability to explain evil is often one of the most important parts of any debate over the superiority of rival theistic systems. Second, the nature of any actual "problem of evil" is determined by the specific concept of God in question. Since the theistic perspectives we are considering conceive of God in significantly different ways, it is appropriate to talk about distinct and in fact rival theistic responses to the challenge evil poses.

What is evil?

3. As we begin our comparative analysis, we must first reflect on the meaning of "evil," and this is no easy task. Philosophers freely talk about the problem of evil but have often been hard pressed to come up with a clear definition. We do not claim to have a privileged position, but we will stipulate how we will be using this term. Evil, in its most general sense, will be defined as any inherently undesirable state of affairs. More specifically, it is a state of affairs that not only lacks inherent value, it has "negative value." That is, when considered in isolation, it actually detracts from or diminishes the value of our world. Some obvious examples of evil would be physical and psychological pain and suffering, disrupted social relations, unfulfilled potential, and natural catastrophes.
4. Evil, understood in this way, can in turn be divided into two basic categories: justified and unjustified. Justified evil is any evil that is necessary for (unavoidably connected to) for the occurrence of a morally acceptable goal (given the evil in question). Sometimes evil is justified because its **actual occurrence** is necessarily connected to a goal that is morally acceptable. For example, some actual pain and suffering (an evil) might be necessary to acquire a certain quality of patience or compassion (a desirable goal). Or, in some contexts, a shot of Novocain may be necessary to avoid the pain of a live nerve being touched by the drill bit.
5. At other times it is the **possible occurrence** of the evil that is necessary for the occurrence of a morally acceptable goal (given the evil in question). Let us assume, for instance, that a teen learning to drive hits a tree and is injured. The actual occurrence of the injury was not necessary for the goal (learning to drive). The goal could have occurred without the actual occurrence of the evil, and the evil adds nothing positive to the situation. But allowing a teenager to learn to drive a car (a good goal) necessitates the possibility of such an injury.
6. Unjustified evil is that evil that is either (1) not necessarily connected to an envisioned goal or (2) is necessarily connected to a goal that is not morally acceptable. For example, spanking a child might be connected to a morally acceptable end (correcting behavior), but there might be ways to bring about the same end without as much pain and suffering. Here the evil would be connected to a goal but not necessarily connected. In contrast, the risk of injury might be necessary (unavoidably required) when allowing a child to drive to a store to rent a movie during an ice storm. But an accident in this instance would clearly be an unjustified evil because, while such evil is connected to a goal, the goal (seeing a movie) is clearly not morally acceptable, given the evil in question.

In what sense is evil a problem for God?

7. The occurrence of an evil event is often not a problem for finite moral agents because they are in no way causally involved (causally responsible) for its occurrence. On the other hand, finite humans are at times responsible for the occurrence of evil. Sometimes this involvement is justified and sometimes it is not. As long as the evil is justified - as long as its actuality or at least its possibility was necessarily connected to a morally acceptable goal - the person is morally justified in doing or allowing the evil. Humans are only morally blameworthy if the evils they perform or allow are unjustified - not necessarily connected to an envisioned goal or necessarily connected to a goal that is not morally acceptable.
8. The same holds true for God. Justified evils in no way count against the goodness of God. God's involvement in the evil events is only blameworthy if such evil is unjustified. Given this fact, it should not be surprising that the generic form of all challenges to God's existence or nature based on evil is the same. The critic must argue that at least some evil is unjustified - is either (1) not necessarily connected to an envisioned goal or (2) necessarily connected to a goal that is not morally acceptable.
9. Likewise, the general form of all theistic responses (all theodicies) is the same. All theists attempt to defend the claim that the actuality or possibility of every evil that occurs is justified - is necessarily connected to a morally acceptable goal. However, the specific manner in which this general theodicy is developed within a given theism is determined by the perceived relationship between God and the world. All three of the theistic perspectives under consideration are similar in that each stakes out a view of the God-world relationship somewhere between deism on the one hand and pantheism on the other. Unlike deism, each affirms that God is personally and immanently involved in the world. Unlike pantheism, each affirms a personal God who transcends the world. Beyond this agreement, however, they differ over the extent to which God is able to providentially influence and control the world process, and this difference is, of course, crucial for theodicy.

Process theism

10. In the context of the problem of evil, the key assumption of process theists is that all actual entities (all individuals that exists in the world) possess some power of creative self-determination (freedom). Hence, God cannot unilaterally bring about any state of affairs in the world. While the God of process theism is at every moment attempting to persuade each entity to actualize its best option, what actually occurs in the world is ultimately the result in part of how each relevant actual entity responds to its past and God's lure. In brief, God does not unilaterally create or cause anything to occur. The actual world is in a quite literal and straightforward sense a "co-creation" of God and all other entities.
11. Given this view of divine power and providence, the basic theodicy of process theism can be summarized as follows. Since God cannot unilaterally bring about any specific state of affairs, God cannot unilaterally bring or prohibit any actual evil. Thus God is not directly responsible for any actual instance of evil. God could, it is true, have chosen not to lure (by noncoercive persuasion) the world to greater complexity - could have rejected this creative goal - and thereby avoided some (much) of the worst evils. Consequently, there is a sense in which God is responsible for the possibility of the kinds of evil which actually occur in our world. But a world with greater complexity, even with the possibility for greater evil, is a better world than one with less evil but more triviality (and thus less possibility for good). Accordingly, since all the possible occurrences of evil are necessarily connected to this morally acceptable creative goal, such evil is justified, and God, therefore, is not morally blameworthy for bringing it about.

12. Critics, however, have questioned whether process theists can justifiably claim that the possibility of all the evil we experience is necessary, given the process metaphysics. Specifically, critics have questioned whether the fact that all entities always possess some measure of self-determination necessitates the possibility of such evil.

13. The key process assumption is that God cannot unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs. But the well-documented ability of advertisers to manipulate our consumer activities and the media to manipulate our social and political perspectives bears witness to the fact that our attitudes and desires, and thus our behavior, can on the whole quite consistently and effectively be controlled by persuasive power alone.

14. Accordingly, it has been argued, since the God of process theism knows exactly what will motivate us to act in certain ways better than even the best psychologist, advertising executive, parent, friend or spouse, there exists no reason to believe that the God of process theism could not more effectively reduce the amount of evil produced by human decision-making, and do so without the use of coercion (Basinger, *Journal of Religion* 332-47; Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism* chapter 1).

15. Process theists, however, are not without a reply. While it may appear to some that the God of process theism could better control human behavior by the judicious use of perfect persuasive power, there is no way to demonstrate objectively, argue process theists, that this is so. Specifically, contends process theist David Griffin, there is no way to demonstrate objectively that God could persuasively control our behavior to a greater degree than has been done (Griffin, *Evil Revisited* 108-109).

16. But even if the possibility of all evil is necessary within the process system, concern about the goal that makes evil a necessary possibility remains.

17. Process theists acknowledge that, although God did not unilaterally bring about anything, God did successfully lure reality into its present general form. And God did so, they maintain, because God values intense novelty (which allows for both greater good and evil) over triviality (which minimizes both good and evil). But to create on the basis of this divine goal, it can be argued, was surely unjustified, given the horrendous evils that have come about as a result of this divine choice (Griffin, *God, Power and Evil* 309; Cobb and Griffin 75).

18. In response, process theists grant that God's desire to lure the world to greater complexity has resulted in many horrendous evils: physical and psychological suffering, individuals like Hitler. But they also point to the value that has also been produced: our conscious ability to engage in meaningful relationships, individuals like Gandhi and Martin Luther King. And, they argue, there is no way to demonstrate objectively that a world with the amount of complexity (and the accompanying goods) ours contains cannot reasonably be considered a morally justifiable goal in spite of the unavoidable evil accompanying this world (Griffin, *Evil Revisited* 108-109).

Freewill theism

19. The key assumption for the freewill theist is that God can and does unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs. Unlike the God of process theism, the providential power of the God of freewill theism is not limited to persuasion. However, the freewill theist's God cannot unilaterally ensure that any creature exercising free choice will make the decisions God would have it make (and thus act as God would have it act). And since humans, as a matter of fact, do sometimes exercise free will, God is not always able to guarantee that what God wants to occur in the actual world will occur.

20. Given this view of God's power and providence, the basic theodicy of freewill theism is not difficult to state. To the extent that God does unilaterally bring about evil, its actual occurrence is necessarily connected to a morally acceptable divine goal and thus justified. However, since God cannot both grant us meaningful freedom and unilaterally control its use, to the extent that God grants us freedom, the possibility of evil is necessitated (cannot be avoided). And since allowing us to exercise meaningful freedom is a morally acceptable goal, God is justified in not prohibiting the evil such freedom generates.

21. Critics again challenge both the claim that all evil is necessarily connected to an envisioned goal and that, if so, the goal is morally acceptable.

22. The freewill theodicy is based primarily on the assumption that God cannot both grant us meaningful freedom and prohibit the negative consequences such freedom can produce. But it is implausible, argue other theists, to believe that God could not have accomplished the stated goals without causing or allowing all actual evils - implausible to believe all evils are necessarily connected to the divine goals in question. For instance, process theist David Griffin argues, surely God could have removed some of Hitler's freedom without negatively affecting the ability of people in general to exercise meaningful freedom (Griffin, *God, Power and Evil* 271; Griffin, *Evil Revisited*, 87-89).

23. Freewill theists acknowledge that it may seem implausible to some that the God of freewill theism could not have granted us significant freedom and yet prohibited or eliminated more evil. But there exists no way to demonstrate objectively, they argue, that God could unilaterally intervene more often without negatively affecting human freedom (Reichenbach 179-88; Basinger and Basinger 11-24; Plantinga *Archivio di Filosofia* 561). Specifically, freewill theists such as Bruce Reichenbach and William Hasker grant that it may appear easy to identify specific "free choices" that God could have vetoed without harming the moral integrity of our universe. They deny, however, that there exists any way to demonstrate objectively that God could unilaterally intervene more often without negatively affecting human freedom (Reichenbach 179-88; Hasker, *Faith and Philosophy* 23-44).

24. But even if all of the evil we experience is necessarily connected to meaningful human freedom, process theists contend, it seems unlikely that a perfectly good being would ever consider this or any other creative goal a morally justifiable basis for allowing the existence of a world containing as much of this type of evil as we experience (Griffin, *Evil Revisited* 17-19, 91-92; Rowe 72; Basinger, *Religious Studies* 1-18).

25. In response, freewill theists contend that there is no way to demonstrate objectively that God's desire to create a world containing such freedom (even given the evil it has caused) cannot reasonably be considered a morally justifiable goal (Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* chapter 10; Christlieb 45-64).

Theological determinism

26. In contrast to both process theists and freewill theists, the theological determinist assumes that divine control is compatible with human freedom. That is, it is assumed God can both grant an individual significant freedom and also control its use (in direct contradiction to what freewill theists affirm). Therefore, all that occurs in the actual world is a necessary component in God's plan. All and only that which God has decided should occur does occur.

27. Given this view of divine power and providence, we have the following basic theodicy. Since no other source of power (including human decision-making) limits God's ability to bring about the divine goals, it is never the case that only the possibility of evil is required for the actualization of any such goal. Rather, every instance of evil we experience is allowed because its actual occurrence is necessarily connected to a morally justifiable goal and is thus justified (Clark).

28. Theological determinists face the same two basic challenges faced by our other theisms and offer similar responses.

29. While process theists can claim that there are many evils God would remove if God had the power to intervene unilaterally, and freewill theists can claim that there are many evils God would remove if God could control free choice, such responses are not available to theological determinists. Since God can unilaterally control even human choice, theological determinists must hold that all evil is actually (and not just possibly) necessary in God's perfect, preordained plan. For instance, theological determinists must acknowledge that all of the evils we experience - the Holocaust, mass starvation, pervasive sexual abuse of children - are actually required in the world God has deemed best to bring into existence. And in the minds of many theists, this seems inconceivable since we can imagine a world without such evils and it is hard to see how these evils are necessary for the goods we seek or how a world without these evils could be considered in a normal sense less desirable than the actual world.

30. Theological determinists readily admit that they cannot demonstrate how every actual evil is necessary connected to a divine goal. However, they point out, for the critic to claim simply that a better world can be imagined is very misleading. What a critic must do is describe a world - in all its interconnected details - which contains all the goods without all the evils. But since this is a task which only an omniscient mind could meaningfully undertake, we as humans, maintain theological determinists such as Gordon Clark, are certainly in no position to argue objectively that any of the evil we experience is not required to meet some divine goal (Clark chapter 5).

31. And both freewill theists and process theists argue that, even if all evil is, as theological determinists maintain, in some unfathomable way actually (and not just possibly) necessary in God's perfect, preordained plan, then the goals necessitating such evils cannot reasonably be considered morally justifiable (Pinnock, *Predestination and Free Will* 57-60).

32. Theological determinists maintain, though, that, since we are not even in a position to know with certainty all of God's goals related to any evil, we are certainly not in a position to argue objectively that the goals that require any evil cannot reasonably be considered morally acceptable (Clark chapter 5; Feinberg 19-43).

Comments on the debate thus far

33. Proponents of each of our theisms have argued that the competing theodicies are flawed and thus that their theistic perspective alone offers an adequate response to the evil we experience.

34. In assessing these claims, it is first important to note that the critics of none of our theisms are claiming (rightly so) that the God-world relationship envisioned by the other perspectives could not possibly exist, and thus that it is logically impossible that the world contains no unjustified evil, given these perspectives. The claim in each case rather is that the theodicy in question is implausible.

35. However, even here we must be careful because there are at least two relevant ways in which we can interpret the contention that a given theodicy is implausible. One interpretation is person-relative: that although everyone need not agree, it is justifiable for a person, herself, to maintain that a given theodicy is implausible. The other interpretation is nonperson-relative: that even though personal opinion on the issue may differ, it can be successfully argued in an objective manner that a given theodicy actually is implausible.

36. The challenges to our three theodicies are best interpreted in this latter sense. For instance, when David Griffin claims that, since there is no reason to believe that the God of freewill theism couldn't unilaterally prohibit more evil without negatively affecting human freedom in general, the freewill theodicy is implausible, or Clark Pinnock argues that, since the God of process theism is clearly not a being worthy of religious devotion, the process theodicy is implausible, what each appears to be arguing is not simply that he, himself, can justifiably make this claim. Each seems to be claiming that no reasonable person can justifiably disagree.

37. Understood in this way, have any of these challenges been successful? The first challenge each of our three theisms faced was the following:

Challenge #1: It is quite likely that God could have done more to eliminate evil without negatively affecting the relevant divine goals. In fact, it is so unlikely that all of the evil we experience is necessarily connected to divine goals that the theodicy (and thus theism) in question must be considered implausible.

38. It might appear initially that the process theist has an advantage at this point. As providential power decreases, the ability to eliminate evil in our world also clearly decreases. The less providential control a God possesses the more this God will be forced to allow evil. Thus, since the God of process theism has the least providential power, the amount and types of evil we experience might seem to be less of a problem for this theistic perspective.

39. There are, however, theistic perspectives in which God has even less providential power than the God of process theism - for instance, certain forms of deism or robust finite understandings of God or metaphysical dualisms in which God faces a rival reality/power. Accordingly, if the process theist wants to argue that she has an advantage over freewill theists or theological determinists because her God has the least providential power, she must then acknowledge that proponents of those theistic perspectives that postulate a God with even less providential power have the same advantage over her.

40. In response, the process theist might argue that when the whole evidential situation is considered - when all of the evidential factors that determine whether a theistic perspective is a plausible option are considered - those theistic perspectives that postulate a God with less providential power do not survive as serious contenders. But then, of course, the freewill theist and theological determinist can use this same line of reasoning to counter any intrinsic advantage process theists might want to claim in this context.

41. Moreover, to return to the general challenge itself, any contention that the God of any theism could reasonably be expected to do more to rid the world of evil is based on the assumption that we are actually in a position to know what evils would reasonably be required (actually or possibly), given any theistic perspective. However, to use a Humean principle (for an unintended purpose), we have no experience of Gods with varying degrees of providential power creating and guiding worlds. Specifically, given our limited perspective, none of us is in the position to know whether any of these Gods could have done more. And, without this experience, we are in no position to determine objectively how much and what kind of evil we should reasonably expect to occur in any world created and guided by the God of any of our theistic perspectives? Accordingly, Challenge #1, as we see it, fails to eliminate, or even seriously harm, any of our three theisms.

42. The other challenge we have considered centers on the moral status of the divine goals that guide God's activity.

Challenge #2: Even if all of the evil we experience is necessarily connected to divine goals, it is unlikely that all of the relevant divine goals are, or could be, morally acceptable. In fact, in relation to some evils, it is so unlikely that any morally acceptable goal necessitating such evil could exist that the theodicy (and thus theism) in question must be rejected as implausible.

43. It might seem that both process and freewill theists have an advantage here. Within both of these theisms the key divine goal is a desire for a world in which individuals have the power to make meaningful moral decisions that shape their lives and the lives of others. And this is a concept gaining increasing acceptance today. On the other hand, while theological determinists give some hints as to the types of goals that guide God's activity, they are the first to admit that we as humans do not know (and perhaps would not understand) the purpose for all the actual evils that exist.

44. However, this seeming advantage is in a very important sense question-begging. It is true that process and freewill theists can cite goals that seem reasonable to many. But it does not follow from the fact that theological determinists cannot always cite reasonable goals that such goals do not exist.

45. Furthermore, it is not clear to us how this challenge could produce a winner. At the human level, we differ significantly not only with respect to which goals are inherently worthy but also on what can be allowed to accomplish such goals and which are most significant when conflicts between inherently worthy goals arise. For example, we differ significantly on the degree to which the greatest good for the greatest number or universalizability or self-interest ought be viewed as morally acceptable general goals. Likewise, we differ on whether bombing buildings containing innocent children or cities containing innocent individuals is justifiable even if it is intended to save more lives or protect freedom for many. And although most of us believe that protecting innocent individuals from harm and protecting individual rights are both morally acceptable goals, we differ significantly on which ought take precedence when the two come into conflict - for example, when we weigh the harmful effects of allowing the mothers of young children to chain-smoke in their own homes against the significant intrusion of personal liberty that would be entailed by laws prohibiting such smoking.

46. The situation becomes even more complex when we begin to discuss the moral acceptability of divine goals that allegedly necessitate the evils we experience. Not only is there no agreement on the moral value of those divine goals clearly acknowledged by proponents of our theistic perspectives - for example, the inherent value of freedom or novelty or maximal good - but neither freewill theists nor theological determinists claim to have exhaustive knowledge of the divine goals themselves. Accordingly, we doubt that it can be argued in an objective manner that all must consider the acceptability of any such goal highly implausible.

47. Or, stated differently, it is clear that moral intuitions significantly differ at this point. Proponents of each perspective do clearly believe that the goals guiding the activity of the God of their perspective are morally acceptable, while claiming that at least some of the acknowledged goals of the other perspectives cannot reasonably be considered to be so. But we are aware of no set of objective, non question-begging criteria for determining which goals can actually be reasonably considered morally acceptable and which can not. Hence, we conclude that Challenge #2 does not render any of our three theisms implausible, or even less plausible than the others.

The debate continued

48. Often the debate does not stop here. A second set of objections (often mixed in with those above) are marshaled against our three theisms. These objections grant the possibility and even internal plausibility of the theodicies, but focus on the two concepts which generate the original problem: God and evil. Even if we assume that all of the evil we experience is necessarily connected to morally acceptable goals - even if it is assumed that all the evil we experience is justified in this sense - the theodicy in question, it is argued, requires us to make assumptions about God and evil that render the theodicy implausible. Specifically, "God" and "evil" are reconciled by either forfeiting an adequate view of God or an adequate view of evil.

49. Let us first consider the challenge related to God's nature:

Challenge #3: Even if all the evil we experience is necessarily connected to morally acceptable goals and the inherently negative value of evil is appropriately acknowledged, it is doubtful that the God postulated by the theodicy in question remains worthy of worship. In fact, since the relevant being so clearly fails to possess the minimum attributes required of a deity, any theodicy (and thus theism) that postulates a being with such attributes must be viewed as an implausible response to the evil we experience.

50. Even if we assume, maintain freewill theists and theological determinists, that harmonious complexity is a morally acceptable goal and that, given this goal, the God of process theism cannot not more effectively reduce the amount evil we experience, a being who cannot unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs is surely too weak to be worthy of worship. For instance, claims freewill theist Clark Pinnock, "a godling of this small proportion is not big enough to satisfy [our] religious needs. [We] would naturally feel that a God who is neither creator or [sic] redeemer of the world in any strong sense does not deserve to be called God, and is vastly inferior to the God of the Bible" (Pinnock, *Process Theology* 318).

51. However, the God of freewill theism, argue theological determinists, is in no better position. Why would anyone, they ask, want to worship a being who has voluntarily given up control of earthly affairs and who is thus so absolutely dependent on the whims of human decision-making (Clark 220-41)?

52. Finally, some theists (often called voluntarists) have maintained that although the God of theological determinism is very powerful, even this being, since it is bound by the laws of logic, is too weak to be worthy of worship (Stewart 21-25).

53. The theological determinist (the *prima facie* loser in the challenges above) might seem to some the initial victor here, with the freewill theist coming in second. Specifically, since only the God of theological determinism can bring about any logically possible state of affairs, and thus unilaterally control what occurs, it might appear that this God is the best candidate for the Greatest Possible Being, and isn't it the Greatest Possible Being who is most worthy of our worship? Moreover, if the general point holds - that the greater the power, the more worthy of praise - then freewill theists would seem to hold an advantage over process theists in this respect.

54. However, this line of reasoning again backfires. Some theistic perspectives, as we have seen, posit Gods with even more power than the God of theological determinism - for example, Gods who are not limited even by logical consistency. Thus, if it really is true that the greater a being's power, the more worthy it is of praise, the God of theological determinism is not most worthy of worship.

55. If theological determinists argue in response that sheer power is not a sufficient gauge of worship worthiness, then this argument can be used against theological determinists by freewill theists, and in turn against freewill theists by process theists.

56. Moreover, we don't see how this challenge could be used as an objective way to comparatively assess our three theodicies. Proponents of each of our theisms respond to this type of criticism in the same basic fashion: while the critic is entitled to her or his own concept of "worship worthiness," there exists no objective basis for the claim that the God in question cannot plausibly be considered worthy of worship. And this seems to us to be an appropriate response in each case. It is certainly true that many individuals do have strongly held opinions on what a being must (or would have to) possess to be worthy of worship. In fact, it may be that a majority of individuals in any specific theistic context (denomination, cultural community) agree on the necessary and sufficient characteristics of such a being. But there clearly continues to be widespread disagreement on such characteristics, and there appears at present to be no set of neutral criteria for worship worthiness that would allow this issue to be decided in an objective manner. In fact we cannot conceive of how any such criteria could be produced in a non question-begging manner. So we conclude that Challenge #3 is also not a decisive, or even a distinguishing, criticism with respect to the plausibility of our theisms.

57. This leaves yet the challenge related to the nature of evil:

Challenge #4: Even if all of the evil we experience is necessarily connected to divine goals that are morally justifiable, the theodicy in question trivializes (minimizes the negative value of) evil too greatly. In fact the "evilness" of evil is so trivialized that the relevant theodicy (and thus theism) cannot be considered plausible.

58. All three theisms are susceptible to this charge to some degree. All of them strive to show that every evil - in either its actuality or possibility - is justified. But is justified evil really evil? While at one level it clearly is - it is still inherently desirable - justified evil is at another level desirable. Its presence or at least its possible presence is necessary for some good end. Without the evil or at least the possibility of the evil, the world as a whole would be less desirable. But does this understanding of the evil we encounter in this world fit with our experience of evil? Doesn't this redemption evil fly in the face of our experience of the utter gratuity or meaningless of evil?

59. This is the precise challenge that process theists and freewill theists fervently marshal against theological determinists. Within theological determinism, every actual evil is necessarily connected to God's purposes. In this sense, every actual evil contributes to making this a worthwhile world. Without any one of the actual evils which have occurred, this world becomes less than it could or should be. But how does this fit with our moral experience? We fight evil on the assumption that there are some things this world would be better without - on the assumption that the actual occurrence of some evil is not necessarily connected to a greater good. And since God commands us and works with us at preventing such evils, we can only assume that God also experiences the actual evils in the same way.

60. In contrast to theological determinists, process theists and freewill theists can argue that, while the possibility of all evil is justified, there are actual evils in this world that are not justified. There are evils - which from both the human and divine perspective - this world would have been better without.

61. The main problem with this line of argument is that it backfires on both freewill and process theists. If the negative value of evil increases in inverse proportion to the amount of providential power possessed by God, then the very reason that freewill theism can claim to take evil more seriously than theological determinism is a reason why process theism can claim to be superior to freewill theism in this respect. But the same holds true for process theism. If the "evilness" of evil increases in inverse proportion to the amount of providential power possessed by God, then those theological perspectives which postulate Gods with less providential power than the God of process theism enjoy an advantage over process theism at this point.

62. Moreover, we don't see how a victor could appear, given this challenge. Once again proponents of each theism respond in the same basic manner: while the critic has every right to hold personally that the evilness of evil is inappropriately minimized, there exists no objective basis for claim that evil does not retain its truly negative value. And this seems to us to be an adequate response. It clearly is the case that evil is equally lacking in inherent value within all three theisms. Furthermore, while it is true that the necessity of a given evil does (or at least can) vary with the amount of power God possesses and/or the goals that guide God's behavior, the question of just how little instrumental value evil must possess to retain its truly negative status seems to come down to some sort of basic intuition. And we can conceive of no objective, non question-begging way to resolves that issue - can conceive of no approach that does not reduce simply to special pleading by its advocates. Accordingly, we conclude that Challenge #4 is also not a decisive criticism of the plausibility of any of the three theisms.

63. Furthermore, we can conceive of no other way to objectively compare the plausibility of our three theodicies (and thus theisms). Hence, it is our overall judgment that there is no objective winner in this respect. That is, as we see it, it cannot be shown objectively that any of our three theodicies is superior.¹

Conclusion

64. It is important in closing to emphasize what we have and have not been arguing. We have not denied that a person can justifiably maintain for himself or herself that one or more of the theodicies in question is implausible. That is, we grant that a person can justifiably maintain that, as he or she assesses the evidence, one or more of these theodicies (and thus the related theism) should be rejected as an implausible explanation for the evil we experience. In fact we are not even claiming that there could be no compelling non person-relative arguments demonstrating the superiority of one of the theodicies. We are saying only that none to date seem to us to succeed in this respect. That is, our claim is only that we are aware of no objective basis for claiming justifiably that any one of our three theodicies (and thus theisms) is in fact more plausible than the others.

65. If we are right - if there is no objective winner - then why, someone might argue, should we even bother comparing theodicies? In other words, if the debate between our rival theisms actually does come down to differing intuitions about God and the world - about how much power a God must possess, how "evil" the evil in this world must be, what divine goals are worth pursuing, to what extent human freedom limits God - then why engage in such an exercise at all?

66. In response, while the type of comparative discussion in which we have engaged may not be able to identify a winner, such discussions can clarify crucial issues. For instance, they can help proponents of the various perspectives (or those seeking a view of their own) become more aware of the assumptions inherent in the various options and the tradeoffs that must be made in the adoption of any position. Such discussions can also help proponents of a given theodicy develop objective - albeit person-relative - arguments defending their position. And this, we believe is reason enough to continue the debate.

Endnote

¹ Some have sought to answer this question by an appeal to probability theory. They have wanted to claim that the probability that process theism or freewill theism or theological determinism is true, given their response to evil, is greater than the other options. However, as Alvin Plantinga has convincingly argued in great detail, the probability that any theistic perspective is true, given any set of evidential factors and using any model of probability, will ultimately be a function of the a priori (inherent) probability accorded the theism in question. And we see no non question-begging way of arguing in this context that the inherent probability of any of these theisms is higher than any other. See Plantinga (*Philosophical Studies*).

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