

The Problem of Evil and the Grammar of Goodness

The Problem of Evil poses the greatest trouble for the Theist. Traditional arguments *for* the existence of God may fail, and yet there remains room for rationally believing in God only if there are not any sound arguments concluding that God does *not* exist. And the Argument from Evil can appear to be just such an argument. Since evil exists, and yet if God were to exist, he would eliminate said evil, it follows that God must not exist. Or so the Argument from Evil implies.

Here I aim to defang the Argument from Evil. I will argue that the fact that people suffer unnecessarily is not grounds for concluding that God does not exist. In order to do this, I will rely upon some mildly technical work in 20th century metaethics.¹ The upshot of this work, as applied to the Problem of Evil, will show that there are no moral standards that apply to God. This means that we

¹The roots of the idea, however, can be found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I:6.

cannot legitimately make inferences about what God, should He exist, would do or allow.

There are very many ways the Argument from Evil can be formulated. For the most part, these differences will not affect the issue at hand in this paper. So here is one rough but standard way of putting the Argument:

1. If God exists, then a being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good exists.
2. A being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good would not create a world in which there is (avoidable) evil.
3. But there is (avoidable) evil in the world.

Therefore, God does not exist.

The first two premises of the Argument employ the notion of a being who is (perfectly) good. Here I will question whether it even makes sense to say of a being that it is good.

But why think that there is anything amiss in saying that something is good? It will be instructive as a point of comparison to briefly review the history of one of the most influential arguments in moral philosophy, G. E.

Moore's Open Question argument, an argument whose cogency depends entirely upon the logical grammar of goodness. Moore held that it always makes sense to ask, of any natural property, whether something that has that property is good.² (For example, visiting the Dr. Pepper Museum here in Waco would be pleasant, but would it be good?) From this fact, Moore concluded that goodness is not identical with any natural property; for if the two were indeed identical, then it would not always make sense to ask whether something that has that natural property is good.

The lesson that Moore took away from this observation is that since goodness is not a natural property, it must be a nonnatural property. Noncognitivists, by contrast, conclude that goodness is, strictly speaking, not a property at all, and so moral language is to be understood as doing something other than describing how the world is.³ And the Cornell realists point out yet another option: they argue that the Open Question argument does not rule out the

² G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

³ C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

possibility of a *posteriori* necessary moral truths, and so goodness might still be a natural property after all.⁴

But one typically overlooked response to the problem Moore poses originates in the work of Peter Geach.⁵ Geach draws our attention to two different ways adjectives can logically function. They can function either as predicative adjectives or as attributive adjectives. Most adjectives function as predicative adjectives. Most color concepts work this way. Because 'white' is predicative, the fact that the Washington Monument is a white building strictly implies that the Washington Monument is white. The noun that the adjective is modifying in the original claim can be dropped, and the adjective still can be truly predicated of the subject. (More formally, if F functions as a predicative adjective, then "x is a F K" implies that "x is F".)

But this sort of implication is not available in the case of the use of every adjective. For attributive adjectives, the adjective cannot be meaningfully detached from the specific generic noun it modifies. The adjective

⁴ Richard Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist" in G. Sayre-McCord (Ed.), *Essays on moral realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 181-228).

⁵ Peter Geach, "Good and Evil", *Analysis*, Vol. 17 (1956), 33-42.

'large' works this way. The fact that Y is a large microprocessor does not strictly imply that Y is large. The fact that Z is a heavy atom does not imply that Z is heavy. And, most importantly, the fact that N.N. is a good robber does not imply that N.N. is good.

For attributive adjectives always, at least implicitly, need an associated generic noun to modify in order even to make sense. To say that Houdini is good probably is to mean that he is a good magician or a good entertainer. It probably does not mean that he is a good son or a good business associate.

Mistakenly detaching attributive adjectives from the generic nouns to which they attach often results in contradictions. For it might both be true that a particular painting is both a genuine van Meegeren and a fake Vermeer (to use a standard example). Yet it is nothing but confusion to say that some particular painting is both genuine and fake. Terms like 'genuine' and 'fake' mean something only when they modify some noun.

Now Geach proposed that the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' *always* function attributively. Nothing is simply good or bad, but instead is a good or bad instance of some kind or other. If right, then Moore was incorrect to hold

that it always makes sense to ask, in response to the claim that some object has some natural property, whether it is also good. For if Geach is correct, then it *never* makes sense to ask of some object simply whether it is good. That would be like asking whether it is large or heavy or genuine. Nothing is simply good. We can sensibly ask only whether something is a good K (where K denotes some generic kind), and then the answer to that question essentially depends upon *what* kind of thing is under discussion.

This is obviously true in the case of artifacts. It makes no sense just to say baldly that some particular object [hold up an iPod here] is good; rather, it makes sense to say that it is a good (or bad) music player, or a good (or bad) doorstop, or a good (or bad) theft deterrent, or a good (or bad) anniversary present, and so on. Something can be a good or bad instance of its kind (which themselves can be multiple), but nothing is good or bad *tout court*.

What does Geach's account of the grammar of goodness imply about morality? There are many possibilities, but his account fits very nicely with a view of morality developed by Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Michael

Thompson.⁶ On this view, whether some *operation* or *state* of yours is good or bad depends upon the kind of creature you are. It would be a defect in *me* were I not to care for my offspring. Ignoring one's offspring is a bad human action. This has to do with natural facts about human beings. But it is not a defect in each and every fish were *they* not to care for their offspring. In their case, ignoring one's offspring is not a bad operation (at least for some species of fish). What counts as a good or bad operation depends crucially upon the kind of creature operating.

So you are a good human being to the extent that you approximate what human beings are. There are natural facts about how human beings live and operate, facts that set the standard of goodness for particular human beings. For instance, it is a natural fact that human beings have ten fingers. But Uncle Joe here has only six fingers. He is, for all that, a human being; but to that extent he is defective or disabled. It might not be a defect in some

⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Good and Bad Human Action" in *Human Life, Action and Ethics* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006), 195-206. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life" in *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 247-296.

particular creature of some other kind to have six fingers, but it is for humans.

These natural facts are neither merely statistical nor purely normative. As Anscombe noted, human beings have thirty-two teeth, even if most of them do not. [Refrain from making any jokes about the British.] And to say that humans beings have thirty-two teeth is not merely to say that they *should* have thirty-two teeth. For I might say of a rotary saw blade that I am now forging that *it* should have thirty-two teeth, and I would mean something very different by that utterance than I mean when I say that human beings have thirty-two teeth.

Now there are natural facts not only about the number of fingers or teeth humans have, but also natural facts about their wills. The will of a human being is characteristically a certain way, taking certain specific considerations to be reasons for certain specific actions. And to the extent that my will differs from this standard, my will is thereby naturally defective or bad. When we say that So-and-so is a (morally) bad person, we usually mean that So-and-so's will is bad, bad by comparison to the way that human beings are motivated. Whether some feature or operation of me is good or bad never floats free of the

kind (or kinds) of creature I am, but makes sense only in reference to this more general thing: my species. An immoral human being thus has a will that is abnormal for human beings to have.

I propose to take this account of goodness in general, and moral goodness in particular, very seriously. I admit that there are objections to this view, objections that merit careful consideration. Some of these objections seem *prima facie* powerful. But this is not the place to weigh them.

Instead, I want to see what follows from this account. If the previous points are correct, then goodness is a two-place relation between a particular and a kind, a kind of which the particular is a member. This applies as well to moral goodness -- some creature is morally good just in case its will is as the will of their kind is. What does this imply about the Problem of Evil?

I will initially argue that 1) God is not a member of any kind; then, more modestly, 2) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it; then, finally and sincerely, 3) God is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it such

that He would be defective with respect to said standards by failing to prevent suffering.

First, consider the claim that God is not a member of any kind. There is no kind *K* of which God is a particular member. God is completely *sui generis*. On one conception of the divine, a particular god might be a member of the kind of gods. This may be the proper way to understand certain mythological polytheisms. We might think that Mars, for instance, is a particularly good or bad god, because he has or lacks most of the characteristics gods have. But many Theists today can reply that God is instead *utterly unique*, without committing any severe heterodoxy. And if there is no kind *K* of which God is a particular member, then God cannot be a good (or bad) *K*.

It may be objected that there are indeed some true things that can be said about God. For instance, God has existed for more than four minutes. So God is a member of the kind of things that have existed for more than four minutes, just as you and I are. Thus it appears false to say that God is not a member of any kind whatsoever.

Nonetheless, this is not enough to establish what is needed for the Argument from Evil to work. The kind of more-than-four-minute-existents does not give rise to any

standards according to which a particular entity could be a good or bad instance of its kind. There is no such thing as a bad (or good) more-than-four-minute-existent. (Any particular entity that has *not* existed for more than four minutes is not a bad more-than-four-minute existent.) So while God may be a member of some kinds, He is not a member of any kind that has standards of goodness internal to it.

But it may now be objected that God is *indeed* a member of a kind that has standards of goodness internal to it. By any orthodox account, God is an intelligent being. An intelligent being is good qua intelligent being, in so far as it is knowledgeable, logical, and has all the other intellectual virtues. So it is indeed possible for God to be a good or bad intelligent being. Thus, the objector concludes, there are indeed standards of goodness that apply to God.⁷

Still, this is not enough to rescue the Argument from Evil. It is true that God would be a bad intelligent being if He should fail to be clever or rational or critical. God is indeed a member of some kinds that have standards of goodness internal to them. But He is not a member of any kind that characteristically alleviates avoidable

⁷ I thank GS for raising this objection.

suffering. That is, there is no kind of entity that typically prevents pain of which God is a member. So God is not bound by any kinds to which He *does* belong to eliminate our woes. The fact that God can be good in some ways does not mean He would wipe the world of evils, should He exist.

Some will want to insist that God, like all humans, is a member of the class of Rational Beings, and as a result God is governed by exactly the same rules of rationality as are humans, and that these rules imply, among other things, that God should prevent suffering, and so on. But the tradition of morality I have been referencing understands rationality too as something species-dependent. What counts as practically rational for members of one kind can differ, at least within limits, from what counts as practically rational for members of some other kind.⁸ There could be creatures for which practical rationality is simply instrumental rationality, while for other kinds of creatures practical rationality is more complex. What it is for a particular creature to be rational again depends upon more general truths about the species to which it

⁸ Michael Thompson, "Three Degrees of Natural Goodness" *Iride*, April 2003.

belongs. So we cannot infer from the fact (if it *is* a fact) that it would be irrational for *us* not to prevent needless suffering the conclusion it would be irrational for any being not to prevent needless suffering.

The most important implication of this line of argument is that we have no grounds for saying that if God is good, God will not create a world in which there is evil. For the antecedent, strictly speaking, makes no sense. God cannot be good or bad, in just the same way that the number 3 cannot be good or bad, or that the set of molecules in this room cannot be good or bad. So at least one of the premises in the traditional Argument for Evil is not true. And thus the Argument is not sound.

My proposal here differs from other responses to The Problem of Evil. Some see a way out by radically altering what is meant by 'God'. Others, for instance, have thought that God has no interests or desires or aims, and that this is one reason why it does not make sense to say that God is good, for goodness is always relative to these things. But nothing I have said commits me to the thought that God is without interests or desires or aims. All I have held is that God is not a member of any kind that characteristically minimizes suffering.

Likewise, some have proposed what is called negative theology, the view that we can say only what God *is not*, not anything about what God *is*. Others have argued that God is hidden, and we just do not know why God would permit suffering unnecessarily. This may be true, but it too differs from what I have been arguing. We may know *exactly* what God is like, yet this would give us no grounds for judging that God is good or bad. My proposal really requires no major revision in the traditional conception of God, only a revision in the common (but mistaken) conception of the grammar of goodness.

But even if I am correct that there are no standards of goodness or badness that apply to God, the Problem of Evil may return in some other form. Instead of predicating goodness of God, one might predicate omnibenevolence of Him. The existence of evil seems to imply that there is no omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being. Does this show that God does not exist?

I do not think so. There is no reason for insisting that if God exists, He is omnibenevolent. Most religious traditions *do* hold that God sometimes acts benevolently. But these traditions do not supply sufficient grounds for insisting that God *always* does the *most* benevolent thing.

God may be selectively benevolent, but not necessarily omnibenevolent. So shifting the focus from God's goodness to God's omnibenevolence will not enable to us to infer that God does not exist.

I also have no solution to the question why we should *worship* a being who does not alleviate avoidable suffering. One might sensibly wonder why we should submit to the will of a being who could easily improve our lives, and yet does not. There may be a good answer to this problem, but I have nothing on offer here.

Still, I have suggested a way Theists can defang The Problem of Evil, a way to block the argument that God does not exist. The solution is heterodox in so far as I do not maintain that God is good. But I am still entitled to say that God is free of defect. God is without flaw. God is in no way bad. Maybe that is all the orthodoxy we need.