

The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy

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In his work on the problem of evil, Alvin Plantinga has made a useful distinction between "giving a theodicy" and "giving a defense."¹ To give a theodicy is to "answer in some detail the question 'What is the source of the evil we find, and why does God permit it?'"² To give a defense is to construct a story according to which both God and evil exist and to attempt to show that this story is "possible in the broadly logical sense."³ The purpose of giving a theodicy is "to justify the ways of God to men."⁴ The purpose of giving a defense is, in the first instance, to show that the co-existence of God and evil is possible. (In the first instance. But one might have further projects in mind—such as the project of showing that the existence of God is not improbable on some body of evidence that includes a description of the amounts and kinds of evil that actually exist.)

Plantinga is rather down on theodicies. I have heard him say that to give a theodicy is "presumptuous." I propose, nevertheless, to offer a theodicy. I propose to explain God's ways—or at least to offer a partial and speculative explanation of those ways. I am sufficiently sensitive to the merits of Plantinga's charge of presumption, however, to wish to say something in response to it. I will make three points.

(1) I do not claim that the theodicy I shall offer is *comprehensive*. That is, while I shall ascribe to God certain reasons for allowing evil to exist, I do not claim to give *all* of His reasons, or even to claim that the reasons I shall give are His most important reasons. For all I know, God has reasons for allowing evil to exist that no human being could understand; perhaps, indeed, He has hundreds of perfectly good reasons that no *possible* creature could understand. What I claim for the theodicy presented in this essay is this: it alleges a reason, or an interconnected set of reasons, that

our universe would have moral depth, this wouldn't help the theist, because of monstrous problems of circularity, demon tables, and the like. *Those* problems," though interesting, now look more like shadow monsters.

Athea: Perhaps so. I too think we've made progress. But it's way past midnight, dear friends, and I'm too tired to say anything with confidence just now. It's time to go back to my place and turn in. We need sleep before we visit Iris in the hospital this afternoon.

Agnes: I just want to thank you both; I haven't had a night like this since our college days. Remember how Iris loved our all-nighters? If only philosophy could help her through her pain now—instead of just giving me a break from it. And I still don't know what I believe.

[Agnes looks out upon the street.]

But it seems a little less dark out there, doesn't it? Do you know, I've never seen the sun come up. I've heard about "false dawn," when sunrise seems near but is really still hours away. But I've never seen that either. Which is this, I wonder?

NOTES

* For the most part, Bea Leaver's arguments come from S. Wykstra, while Athea Isc's arguments come from B. Russell. Russell thanks Wykstra for laboring to improve the dialogical style. Wykstra thanks Russell for initiating and managing the project.

God has for allowing evil—of the amounts and kinds we observe—to come to be and to continue; if these were the only reasons God had for permitting evil, they would by themselves justify this permission.

(2) The theodicy I shall present is not in any large part my own invention. I do not claim to be the first human being in history to have fathomed God's purposes. Nor do I claim to be the recipient of a special revelation from God: I do not claim to be a prophet whom God has charged with the task of disseminating an explanation of His ways. The method of this paper is simply philosophical reflection on the data of Christian revelation—or, more exactly, on what one tradition holds (in my view, correctly) to be the data of Christian revelation. (Those who do not share my allegiance to these data may wish to regard this paper as providing one more defense, in Plantinga's sense.)

(3) Insofar as anything in this paper is original, it is speculative. I do not claim that what is unique to this paper has any authority over those who accept the data of Christian revelation referred to above. But I claim more for these speculations than that they are "possible in the broadly logical sense." I offer them as consonant with and a plausible elaboration of the data of Christian revelation. (This, by the way, could not be claimed for them if they contained any element that was improbable on the known facts of science and history. I therefore explicitly claim that no proposition contained in the theodicy presented in this paper is improbable on the whole set of propositions endorsed by the special sciences.) One might object that someone who offers a theodicy in such a tentative fashion as this is not really "giving a theodicy" in Plantinga's sense. To "give a theodicy," one might argue, is to represent oneself as *knowing* that every proposition one puts forward is true. Perhaps there is some justice in this protest. If so, however, there is certainly *room* for the kind of thing I propose to do. There seems to be no reason to require that everyone who tells a story about God and evil must either claim to know this story to be true, or else claim only that it is possible in the broadly logical sense. And I think that if one does put forward an admittedly speculative, but (or so one believes) plausible account of God's reasons for allowing the existence of evil, one is not abusing language if one describes one's offering as a theodicy.

These three points, it seems to me, are sufficient to disarm the charge of presumption.

I

It is generally, but not universally, conceded by Christians that the existence of evil has something to do with free will. The theodicy I shall present is of the "free will" type. That is to say, it proceeds by extending and elaborating the following story:

God made the world and it was very good. An important part of its goodness was that it contained creatures made in His own image—that is, created beings capable of understanding (to some degree) their own nature and their place in the scheme of things entire; creatures, moreover, that were fit to be loved by God and to love Him in return and to love one another. But love implies freedom: for A to love B is for A freely to choose to be united to B in a certain way.³ Now even an omnipotent being cannot *insure* that some other being *freely* choose *x* over *y*. For God to create beings capable of loving Him, therefore, it was necessary for Him to take a risk: to risk the possibility that the beings He created would freely choose to withhold their love from Him.

To love God and to desire to submit to His will are very closely related—at least as closely as the love of one's offspring and the desire to nurture and protect and raise them. God's free creatures—or some of them—, instead of loving Him and submitting to His will, chose to turn away from Him and "to follow instead the devices and desires of their own hearts." It was thus that evil entered the world. A husband and father who turns away from his wife and children and suppresses his natural desire to live with and to love and protect them, and chooses instead to indulge a desire for fame or sexual adventure or "self-realization," turns himself into something unnatural and harmful. Likewise, a creature who turns away from God turns himself into something unnatural and harmful. Having turned away from God, His creatures laid violent hands on the created world. They snatched it out of His grasp, and turned it to their own purposes. We are now living with the catastrophic consequences of that act.

This is the beginning of our theodicy. At its heart is what is a familiar "move" in discussions of the problem of evil, the insistence that even an omnipotent being cannot insure that someone *freely* do one thing rather than some contemplated alternative. Some philosophers have said that the proposition

An omnipotent being cannot insure that a creature who has a free choice between *x* and *y* choose *x* rather than *y*.

is false—and, of course, necessarily false, for, owing to its modal character, this proposition is necessarily false if it is false at all. The issues raised by this contention have been extensively debated, and I have nothing new to say about them. I shall simply assume that this proposition is true.

I proceed now to elaborate the above very sketchy narrative of the origin of evil. It is obvious that this must be done. As it stands, the narrative accounts for the existence of only, as we might say, "some evil or other." It says nothing about evil of the kinds or in the amounts we actually observe, or anything about its duration—thousands upon thousands of years—or anything about the fact that its worst effects are distributed apparently at random and certainly without regard for desert. I shall elaborate this narrative with certain propositions drawn from Christian theology. All Christian theologians who could lay any claim to the titles "orthodox," "Catholic," or "traditional" would accept the following theses:

—All evil is the result of the primordial act of turning away from God; there is no source of evil other than creaturely rebellion.

—The creatures who committed the initial act of rebellion received sufficient warning that their act would lead to disaster. While they may have been unlike us in many ways, they were not children and were at least as intelligent as we; they fully understood the warning and the wisdom and authority of its Source.

—Among the creatures who rebelled were an entire generation of human beings, all of the human beings who were alive at some particular moment. [In my view, it was the *first* generation of human beings. But I shall not build this into our theodicy because (a) it is not necessary, and (b) to argue that the proposition that there was a first generation of human beings is compatible with what we know about our evolutionary history would require a lengthy digression. The digression would involve the removal of two sorts of misunderstanding: misunderstandings about what it would be for there to be a first generation of human beings, and misunderstandings about what scientific study of the evolutionary history of our species has actually shown.] Before this rebellion, there was no evil—or at any rate none that affected human beings.¹

—In turning away from God, our ancestors ruined themselves; they became unable to turn back to Him of their own power, as someone

who ignores a warning not to go too near the edge of a pit may fall into it, injure himself, and be unable to climb out. Thus, the act of rebellion, or its immediate consequences, may be called "the Fall."

—Their ruin was in some way inherited by all of their descendants. [This does not necessarily mean that their genes were altered by the Fall. I believe that it is possible to construct models of the Fall according to which its hereditary aspect is due to the effects of unaltered genes operating under conditions for which they were not "designed"—namely, conditions attendant upon separation from God. But I will not argue for this here.] Thus, evil is a persisting and—by any natural means—unalterable fact of history.⁵

—God has not left His creatures to their misery—not, at any rate, His human creatures. He has inaugurated a plan whose workings will one day eventuate in the Atonement (at-one-ment) of His human creatures with Himself. (Or, at least, the Atonement of some of His human creatures with Himself. It may be that some of His creatures will, by their own free choice, resist Atonement forever.) In order to achieve Atonement with God, a ruined creature must turn to God and ask for His help and accept that help. The undoing of creaturely ruin must be a cooperative endeavor. The creature cannot accomplish it for himself, and even an omnipotent being cannot effect the required sort of regeneration of a creature if the creature refuses to be regenerate. Any aspect of the creatures' environment that would tend to discourage them from turning to Him and asking for His help would therefore be an obstacle to the completion of His plan.⁶

—Every human being has an eternal future (and, therefore, the human species has an eternal future). We are now living, and have been living, throughout the archaeologically accessible past, within a temporary aberration in human history, an aberration that is a finite part of an eternal whole. When God's plan of Atonement comes to fruition, there will never again be undeserved suffering or any other sort of evil. The "age of evil" will eventually be remembered as a sort of transient "flicker" at the very beginning of human history.