

Swinburne's response to the problem of evil

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Swinburne's aim is to respond to the problem of evil by constructing "a theodicy, an explanation of why God would allow . . . evil to occur." (95) In order to do this, he divides evil into two different kinds: moral evil and natural evil. He deals with the two separately.

1 Moral evil

Moral evil includes "all evil caused deliberately by human beings doing what they ought not to do . . . *and* also the evil constituted by such deliberate actions or negligent failure." (97) Swinburne's first aim is to construct a theodicy which explains the presence of moral evil.

Swinburne expresses his view as follows:

"The central core of any theodicy must, I believe, be the 'free-will defence', which deals — to start with — with moral evil . . . The free-will defence claims that it is a great good that humans have a certain sort of free will which I shall call free and responsible choice, but that, if they do, then necessarily there will be the natural possibility of moral evil. . . . A God who gives humans such free will necessarily brings about the possibility, and puts outside his own control whether or not that evil occurs. It is not logically possible . . . that God could give us such free will and yet ensure that we always use it in the right way."
(98)

Why this seems to make moral evil consistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good thing. Logical consistency as a restriction on God's omnipotence.

We now need to consider a number of objections to this proposal.

Objection 1: God could have given human beings free choice, and ensured that they always did the right thing. (Mackie)

Swinburne does not discuss this important objection to the free-will defence of moral evil. What should the theist say in response to it?

Two conceptions of free will: libertarianism and compatibilism.

Objection 2: Even if God had to allow human beings the possibility of choosing wrongly, God could have made the consequences of wrong choices much less bad than they actually are.

Swinburne gives the following reply:

“A world in which agents can benefit each other but not do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. . . . A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details. . . . A good God . . . will delegate responsibility. In order to allow creatures to share in creation, he will allow them the choice of hurting and maiming, or frustrating the divine plan.” (99-100)

Why would this explain the fact that we have the capacity to do harm with our free choices?

Objection 3: A good God would not make me suffer for the benefit of your freedom.

The analogy between God and the evil doctor. Swinburne’s reply.

2 Natural evil

Natural evil includes “all evil which is not allowed by human beings to occur as a result of their negligence.” (97)

Swinburne also thinks that free-will plays a role in explaining natural evil, though not as direct a role as in the case of moral evil:

“Natural evil is not to be accounted for along the same lines as moral evil. Its main role rather, I suggest, is to make it possible for humans to have the kind of choice which the free-will defence extols.

There are two ways in which natural evil operates to give humans those choices. First, the operation of natural laws producing evils gives humans knowledge . . . of how to bring about such evils themselves. . . . Natural processes alone give humans knowledge of the effects of their actions without inhibiting their freedom, and if evil is to be a possibility for them they must know how to allow it to occur.

The other way in which natural evil operates to give humans their freedom is that it makes possible certain kinds of action towards it between which agents can choose. . . . A particular natural evil, such as physical pain, gives to the sufferer a choice — whether to endure it with patience, or bemoan his lot. . . . The pain makes possible these choices, which would not otherwise exist.” (107-9)

Now we consider some objections to this view of natural evil:

Objection 1. Mackie on higher-order evils.

Swinburne tries to justify natural evil partly in terms of the good which it makes possible. But isn't this just like Mackie's discussion of the justification of first-order evils in terms of the possibility of second-order goods? And didn't Mackie show this kind of justification to be a nonstarter?

A difference between the justification of a natural evil in terms of the possibility of a certain kind of moral choice and the justification of lower-order evil in terms of a higher-order good. The role played by free-will here.

Objection 2. Animals do not have free will; so the suffering of animals cannot be explained in terms of the free choices of animals in response to such suffering. So why would God create a world in which animals suffer?

Swinburne on value in the lives of animals (111).

Can you think of any other objections to Mackie's treatment of natural evil?

3 Two conceptions of the problem of evil

An argument from plausible premises to the non-existence of God vs. a requirement for explanations of certain phenomena.