

Eternal Selves and The Problem of Evil

© William Ferraiolo

You cannot begin to understand suffering from this side of eternity.
Kimber Kauffman1[1]

Some claim that only the intellectually defective can fail to be impressed by the inconsistency between belief in the existence of the theistic God and the recognition of suffering in our world – especially given the quantity and intensity of human suffering. An omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent God would not allow his beloved children to suffer, and certainly not as often or as intensely as they do. A good God would not permit evils to relentlessly afflict human life within His creation. The ubiquity of suffering renders belief in the perfect God of theism irrational. So say anti-theistic proponents of the problem of evil.

Theists, however, may have an insufficiently appreciated response to this line of attack. If theists can avail themselves of the identification of persons with eternal beings (as opposed to mere mortal bodies), then human suffering is more readily reconcilable with the existence of a good God. Identifying persons with eternal souls (or transcendent selves) insulates the theist from the traditional problem of evil by providing a counterweight against the disturbing vicissitudes of embodied existence (though the insulation is, of course, purchased only at the expense of defending the plausibility of postmortem personal survival – no small task). The actual existence of eternal selves is, obviously, a contentious issue and is worthy (or unworthy) of debate on its own merits. Theologians, biblical exegetes and others will likely never tire of debating the proper interpretation of scriptural passages regarding the existence and nature of the soul, the afterlife, etc. I do not, however, need to defend the immateriality or eternity of the soul (or the persistence of a postmortem self) in this paper. My point is merely that a theist who can make the case for a Platonic, Augustinian, Cartesian, or otherwise transcendent account of the “true self” has, thereby, a potentially potent response to the traditional problem of evil. If persons are properly identified with something like disembodied (or resurrected) eternal selves that transcend the material world, then the apparently gratuitous suffering of the better part of humanity may be neatly reconciled with the existence of the theistic God. If our suffering is merely apparent, or afflicts only a minuscule portion of our total existence, then theism (on this score, at least) may be salvageable.

It is not clear that non-physical entities *can* suffer as a result of bodily damage and our variegated encounters with the natural world. Even if immaterial selves can somehow suffer along with the physical body, it seems that an embodied lifetime of suffering must shrink to insignificance by comparison with a postmortem eternity free of all physical frailties. Theists can argue that an obsessive and myopic concern with bodily suffering motivates the problem of evil, and that this obsession is the result of an unenlightened attachment to an ephemeral physical realm. They can, that is, if the case can be made for the eternal postmortem persistence of persons (or selves). If our bodies are not quite ourselves after all, and if the true self is eternal, then comparatively little (if any) evil befalls the beloved children of God in this brief embodied existence (appearances to the contrary notwithstanding).

The Problem of Evil

Theism is plagued with the problem of evil. Not only within philosophical circles, but also among the general public, the most common and persistent challenge to the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing deity is the complaint that human life is saturated with pain and suffering. Everyone suffers to some degree. Some, even apparent innocents, suffer hideous torment and die in ways that many regard as

heartbreaking and irremediably evil. Just consider man's hideous inhumanity to man in the form of phenomena such as slavery or the horrors of warfare and state-sponsored holocaust. Further consider the suffering resulting from natural disasters and plagues that sweep indiscriminately through defenseless populations. Anyone that watches television news broadcasts or reads a newspaper will be confronted with relentless daily images and accounts of disease, famine, oppression, murder, rape, child molestation, and other natural and man-made horrors. The litany of human suffering could continue literally *ad nauseum*. The world is a fearful place, and no one gets out alive. How could a good God allow this?

The problem of evil, as it is typically presented, is really the problem of suffering (particularly *human* suffering). How, we are asked, can an omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent God allow needless and gratuitous suffering in the form of moral evil (e.g. murder, rape, child molestation, warfare, etc.), and/or natural evil (e.g. famine, pestilence, natural disasters, etc.) to befall innocent persons – especially in ways that do not appear to generate commensurate or countervailing goods? Surely, it is argued, a good God with the power and foreknowledge to prevent such suffering would have done so. Clearly, suffering does occur – in fact, a clearly gratuitous quantity of it occurs. In the face of incontrovertible evidence of worldly imperfection, continued belief in the perfect God of theism is, according to proponents of the problem of evil, indefensible. The following is a fairly standard formulation of the argument that the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent God (the “3-O” God for short) is incompatible with the world as we experience it:

1. If God is omniscient, then God knows when, where, and how human suffering will occur if it is not prevented.
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to prevent each instance of human suffering.
3. If God is omni-benevolent, then God wants to prevent each instance
4. So, if there exists a God who knows how to prevent human suffering, has the power to prevent it, and wants to prevent it (i.e. if the “3-O” God exists), then human suffering will not occur.
5. Human suffering occurs (relentlessly and ubiquitously).
-
6. Therefore, the “3-O” God does not exist – and theism is false.

Perhaps there is no deity at all, or perhaps there is a god whose power, or knowledge, or virtue is less than perfect. But clearly the perfect God of theism cannot have allowed the world to come to this sorry state – or so it seems to those who claim that the problem of evil confutes theism.

Theodicies

Theists have constructed a variety of theodicies (i.e. attempts to reconcile the presence of suffering in our world with the existence of a “3-O” God) in response to the problem of evil. These typically attack premise three in the above argument. The free will defense contends that evil is due to the immoral actions of free agents, but that the world is better with free, morally responsible persons in it than with automata who lack moral responsibility altogether. The greater goods defense asserts that evils are necessary for the existence of greater or “second-order” goods such as courage, forgiveness, sympathy, moral urgency, etc., and that the world is better with these greater goods (and the evils that they necessitate) than without them. Irenaen-style “soul-making” theodicies combine the free will and greater goods defenses insofar as humankind is portrayed as imperfect and unfinished, and it is asserted that God offers a hedonically challenging reality so that people can freely choose to improve their souls within a world that provides obstructions, pitfalls, dangers, temptations and so on. In one way or another, all these theodicies suggest that an omni-benevolent God need not oppose the existence of any and all causes of human suffering. Instead, it is suggested that a perfectly good God will create the best of all possible worlds, and that this

best of all possible worlds necessarily involves the existence of various types of evil as ineliminable prerequisites or consequences of higher or countervailing goods (e.g. free will, opportunities for self-perfection, experience of moral urgency, etc.). These goods warrant the evils that they necessitate. Hence, upon careful analysis, we find that there is no inconsistency between the existence of the “3-O” God and the presence of human suffering because human suffering serves a central purpose in the best of all possible worlds. So say the theodacists.

Suffering and a Good God

Proponents of the problem of evil are seldom persuaded by these efforts at reconciliation, as they claim that the theistic God could have obviated suffering altogether in our world or, at the very least, could have prevented much of our suffering without commensurate loss of goods. Surely, the best of all possible worlds ought to contain far less suffering than does the actual world. The quantity and intensity of actual human suffering is clearly gratuitous and unwarranted by the allegedly countervailing goods. No theodicy, they claim, can salvage theism in the face of the world as we experience it.

The pseudonymous B.C. Johnson, for example, argues that all of the aforementioned theodicies are inadequate and/or fallacious. None, he claims, consistently retains God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omni-benevolence in their attempted justifications of human pain and suffering. He concludes:

The various excuses theists offer for why God has allowed evil to exist have been demonstrated to be inadequate. However, the conclusive objection to these excuses does not depend on their inadequacy...Every excuse we could provide to make the world consistent with a good God can be paralleled by an excuse to make the world consistent with an evil God. This is so because the world is a mixture of both good and bad. [1981: pp.107-8]

One cannot, Johnson suggests, reconcile an observably imperfect world with belief in a perfect creator of that world. The various theodicies are vain and *ad hoc* attempts to attribute apparent goodness to God’s will while systematically refusing to acknowledge that the same arguments can be stood on their head and presented as justification for imputing evil to God’s will on the basis of the very same observable phenomena.

Even theists are sometimes hard pressed to find a justification for the horrific suffering in (what they claim to be) God’s creation. Emil Fackenheim, a survivor of Auschwitz, despairs of rationally reconciling the theistic God with the abomination of the concentration camps:

...[T]he search for a purpose in Auschwitz is foredoomed to total failure. Not that good men in their despair have not made the attempt. Good Orthodox Jews have resorted to the ancient “for our sins we are punished,” but this recourse, unacceptable already to Job, is in this case all the more impossible. A good Christian theologian sees the purpose of Auschwitz as a divine reminder of the sufferings of Christ, but this testifies to a moving sense of desperation—and to an incredible lapse of theological judgment. A good Jewish secularist will connect the Holocaust with the rise of the state of Israel, but while to see a causal connection here is possible and necessary, to see a purpose is intolerable. A total and uncompromising sweep must be made of these and other explanations, all designed to give purpose to Auschwitz. No purpose, religious or non-religious, will ever be found in Auschwitz. The very attempt to find one is blasphemous. [1978: p. 29]

To many, it seems that the immensity of human suffering resists reconciliation with the existence of an all-powerful and loving God. Theists, however, can argue that the apparent incompatibility arises from a misguided conception of human suffering and personhood. Critics of theism may be correct in their assertion that the “3-O” God’s existence is inconsistent with human suffering as it is typically characterized. If, however, the typical focus on embodied suffering is misleading or inapt, then the apparent inconsistency may be resolved.

All of the aforementioned theodicies, objections against them, and subsequent replies seem to take for granted the thesis that persons truly suffer, and most take for granted an apparent excess of suffering that, at the very least, requires special explanation. Theodacists seldom challenge premise five in the aforementioned formulation of the problem of evil – and this may be an oversight. That humans suffer a great deal may seem about as obvious and uncontroversial a claim as any philosopher could hope to encounter, but it may be inadvisable for theists to blithely accept this supposition. The theist can argue that, ultimately, the “evils” that befall us may do our true selves less damage than our embodied selves perceive. In fact, it may well be that suffering is, as has been suggested by various philosophers and religious figures, illusory. It is possible that *our true selves* do not suffer at all.

Even if our suffering turns out to be quite real, it is not clear why the theist should find this especially troubling – so long as that theist is also committed to the eternality of the true self. If persons are correctly identified with eternal souls (or imperishable selves), then our concern with human suffering must be altered in light of considerations surrounding the postmortem persistence of persons.

Eternal Selves

If persons are not, as many have suggested, properly identifiable with physical bodies, but rather with (something like) immaterial and/or eternal souls, then it is not at all clear that persons are susceptible of suffering as a result of natural evils or the moral misdeeds of others. Even if injury does somehow penetrate through to the soul or the immaterial self, the totality of embodied suffering would seem to be dwarfed by comparison with an eternity of postmortem experience. Let us first consider just the potential immateriality of the self, apart from considerations relating to eternality.

Immaterial selves cannot be murdered, raped, molested, or otherwise damaged by physical villainy, nor can they be broken, burned, infected, or otherwise injured by the body’s encounters with the natural world. An immaterial being would appear to be well insulated from the kinds of troubles that befall material bodies. Fackenheim tells us that “Eichmann sought to destroy both bodies and souls” (p. 27), but it is not clear how Eichmann could have literally succeeded in the latter project so long as selves are ultimately immaterial entities. If persons are properly identifiable with immaterial beings, then upon bodily death (and, presumably, liberation from the susceptibilities of embodiment), persons will undergo something akin to awakening from a dream (or perhaps a nightmare) to find that their terrestrial experiences have been not quite veridical (or, perhaps, not quite completely understood). Though interpretations of scriptural mention of the nature of the soul and afterlife are contentious, Matthew 10:28 advises us:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. [emphasis added]

Perhaps God can destroy the immaterial soul, but it is not at all clear how a mere man (such as Eichmann) or the physical power of natural forces can do so. The efficacy of the torturer’s instruments seems limited to the physical realm. It is suggested that we, therefore, have no reason to fear despoilers of the body. They cannot harm the true self – or, perhaps, can do it comparatively negligible harm. Suppose, however, that this is mistaken. Suppose that the victim’s soul is a material entity and does somehow suffer along with the victim’s body (or that immaterial entities can – somehow – suffer damage resulting from association with physical bodies). Let us imagine a life like Job’s, but absent the restoration to relative happiness after his encounter with the whirlwind. Let us imagine, in fact, the most hedonically challenged life in human history, complete with the maximum possible dispersal of suffering to the soul (whatever that would mean exactly) over the course of this unfortunate person’s embodied life. If the true self is eternal, then any impingements upon it during the person’s embodied lifetime can amount to no more than a vanishingly minute portion of that self’s experience over the course of its eternal existence. The most hideous embodied life that we can imagine is tantamount to no more than a pin prick by comparison with a postmortem eternity. No matter the severity or intensity of one’s terrestrial suffering, one’s subsequent eternal experience must, of mathematical necessity, dwarf the dissatisfaction accumulated from cradle to grave. Intense, ceaseless suffering throughout a full, torturous lifetime would seem, nonetheless, to be bounded by bodily death. Even if injury is transmitted to the soul or the true self and leaves indelible scarring there, an eternal postmortem existence provides infinite time to heal all wounds.

Since the total accumulation of wounds is finite, an eternity free of them should more than suffice as a palliative. Or so it would seem.

Time Heals All Wounds

Let us imagine that someone recently departed from a miserable terrestrial existence encounters God (however that is best understood) and, in an accusatory tone, instigates the following exchange with the Almighty:

Postmortem Person: Why did you allow me to suffer so much throughout my whole life? I did nothing to deserve so much suffering, and I demand an explanation!

God: I will explain after you have spent 100 billion earth years free from the tribulations that you knew in the body. In the mean time, remember that your life has not ended – in many ways it has really just begun.

While this hypothetical exchange is, admittedly, a bit of a caricature, we can nonetheless suspect that this sort of complaint must diminish over the eons. Whatever the character of the afterlife, must not the eternal experience thereof dwarf the entirety of one's earthly sorrows – however great they may have seemed during the embodied lifetime? Perhaps this is why John Hick says:

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 added]

Surely, the view from eternity must provide something of a new perspective on the evaluation of life in the body. Eternity must trump a finite interval of suffering. It is, therefore, not obvious that human suffering is irreconcilable with theism.

References

Fackenheim, Emil (1978). *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem.* New York: Schocken Books.

Hick, John (1963). *Philosophy of Religion.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Johnson, B. C. (1981). *Atheist Debater's Handbook.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

2[1] Suffering.net website: <http://www.suffering.net/hope.htm>

William Ferraiolo received a Ph.D from the University of Oklahoma in 1997. Since that time, he has been teaching philosophy at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California. Some recent publications include: "Against Compatibilism: Compulsion, Free Agency and Moral Responsibility," *Sorites* (2005) "Stoic Counsel for Interpersonal Relations" *International Journal of Philosophical Practice* (2004) "Intellectual Opacity in the Classroom," *Prospero* (2002) "A Dilemma for Robust Alethic Relativism," *Sorites* (2002) "Embodied Cognition and Correspondence Truth: A Reply to Lakoff and Johnson," *Disputatio* (2002) "Metaphysical Realism," *Dialogos* (2001) "Death: A Propitious Misfortune," *Bridges: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (2000) "The Heaven Problem," *Southwest Philosophy Review* (1999)
