

A. Logical Version of the Problem of Evil

Let's turn now to a discussion of the logical version of the problem of evil.

As I say, according to the logical version of the problem, the co-existence of God and the suffering in the world is logically impossible. The atheist is claiming that the following two statements are logically inconsistent with each other:

1. An all-loving, all-powerful God exists.
2. Suffering in the world exists.

The atheist who propounds the logical version of the problem of evil is saying that these two propositions are logically inconsistent with each other.

The first question that needs to be asked is: why think that these two statements are logically inconsistent? After all, there is no explicit contradiction between them. One is not the negation of the other. So if the atheist thinks that these two statements are logically inconsistent with each other he must be assuming some hidden premises or hidden assumptions that would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit. And the question is: what are those hidden assumptions? They seem to be two in number.

3. Necessarily, an all-powerful God can create any world that he wants.

(That is thought to follow from God's omnipotence.) The second hidden assumption seems to be:

4. Necessarily, an all-loving God prefers a world without suffering.

An all-loving and all-powerful God exists; therefore he both can and would create a world without suffering, which contradicts (2) – suffering exists. These do seem to be the two hidden assumptions made by the atheist.

In order for this argument to be a good one, both of these hidden premises (3) and (4) need to be necessarily true. But is that the case? Are these statements necessarily true? Let's think about them.

First let's think about (3) – if God is all-powerful, he can create any world that he wants. Is that necessarily true? Well, no, not if it is possible that people have freedom of the will. It is logically impossible to make someone do something freely. That is as logically impossible as making a square circle or a married bachelor. God's being all-powerful doesn't mean that he can do the logically impossible. In fact, there isn't any such “thing” as the logically impossible. It is just an inconsistent combination of words. So God's being all-powerful doesn't mean that he can do logical impossibilities.

Notice that if the atheist denies this and says, “Yes, a God who is all powerful *can* do logical impossibilities!”, then the problem of evil just evaporates immediately! For then God can bring it about that both he and evil exist, even though that is logically impossible! So if you say that God's being all-powerful means that he can do the logically impossible, then there just is no logical problem of evil because God can bring it about that this inconsistency is true or obtains.

If it is possible that people have free will, then (3) is not necessarily true because if people have free will they may refuse to do what God desires. So there will be any number of possible worlds which God cannot create because the people in them wouldn't freely cooperate with God's desires. In fact, for all we know, it is possible that in any world of free persons with as much good as the actual world, there would also be just as much suffering. That conjecture doesn't need to be true. It doesn't even need to be probable, because remember we are talking about the *logical* version of the problem of evil. As long as it is even logically possible, then it shows that it is not necessarily true that God can create just any world that he wants. So assumption (3) is just not necessarily true. On this basis alone the atheist's argument fails.

Let's go on to the second assumption: "If God is all-loving, then he would prefer a world without suffering." Is that necessarily true? Well, I don't think so. Because God could have other overriding reasons for allowing the suffering in the world. We all know of cases in which we permit, or even inflict, suffering because of some greater good that might be achieved. I am reminded of a comment made by C. S. Lewis, "What do people mean when they say 'I am not afraid of God because I know that he is good.' Have they never even been to the dentist?" Remember, that was written when dentists worked without Novocaine! Those of us who remember those days know that even though the dentist is good, nevertheless, he can inflict considerable suffering.

The atheist might say an all-powerful God isn't limited in the way that, say, your dentist is. The all-powerful God could bring about

this greater good directly without the suffering. But, again, clearly given the freedom of the will, that may not be possible. Some goods, for example, moral virtues, can be achieved only given freedom of the will. It is only through the free cooperation of people that moral growth and moral virtue is possible. So it could well be the case that a world with suffering is, on balance, a better overall world than a world that would involve no suffering. This is, I think, at least possible, and that is all that needs to be the case in order to defeat the atheist's claim that necessarily an all-loving God would create a world without suffering.

The point here is that in making these two assumptions – that if God is all-powerful, he can create any world that he wants, and that if God is all-good, he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering – the atheist is assuming a burden of proof that is simply unsustainable. He would have to show that freedom of the will is impossible and that it is impossible that a world with suffering is better than a world with no suffering. No atheist has been able to carry that heavy burden of proof.

Having said that, we can actually push the argument a notch further. I think that we can make it plausible that God and the suffering and evil in the world are logically consistent with each other. All we have to do is come up with a statement that is consistent with God's existence and entails that suffering exists. Here is such a statement:

5. God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but with less suffering, and moreover God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.

Is that statement (5) true? I don't know. God knows! But as long as it is even possible, it shows that there is no inconsistency between God and the evil and suffering in the world. For if God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but less suffering and he has good reasons for permitting the suffering that does exist, then it follows that suffering does exist. Thus there is no inconsistency. So not merely has the atheist failed to prove any inconsistency between God and the suffering in the world, but I think we can make it very plausible that God and the suffering in the world are logically consistent, namely, the possibility of (5) shows that they are logically consistent.

Let me wrap up this version of the problem of evil – the logical version – by saying that after centuries of discussion, the books are pretty much closed now on the logical version of the problem of evil. Few atheists today will defend this argument. It is widely admitted by both theist and non-theistic philosophers alike that the logical version of the problem of evil is bankrupt. The reason is because the burden of proof that it lays on the atheist's shoulders is so heavy that it cannot be sustained. He would have to prove that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering and evil in the world co-exist, and no one has been able to do that.

The failure of the logical version of the problem of evil doesn't mean we are out of the woods because we still have the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil. This is still very much a live issue that is debated today. You will remember the atheistic claim here is that given the suffering and the evil in the world, it is improbable that God exists. It is highly improbable that God could have good reasons for permitting the suffering in the

world. So even though this is possible, nevertheless it is highly improbable. Much of the suffering in the world looks to be pointless and unnecessary. Surely God could have created a world with this much good but with a little less suffering in it. So the suffering in the world provides evidence that God does not exist.

This is a much more powerful version of the problem of evil. Because the conclusion is more modest, the burden of proof it lays on the atheist is much lighter. Here the atheist doesn't need to prove that it is impossible that God and evil co-exist, but just that it is improbable given the evil and suffering in the world that God exists. We will need to examine next time how we can respond to this evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil.