

On page 3 of her essay, Mercedes suggests, "The opposing arguments between faith and atheism rest mainly on the dichotomy between faith and reason." In this piece, she intentionally (and, in my view, appropriately) takes a very narrow view of faith, speaking mostly to thoughts on the existence of a creator god who is involved in the dealings of humankind in a very personal way. The thinkers and the schools of thought she cites describe god and its attributes in human terms.

It is an intriguing thought, and she has spent considerable time summarizing her research, calling on various authors and thinkers to lead her thoughts to this conclusion. But is it compelling?

I see that there is an inherent problem here. Mercedes, as with the authors that she cites, takes the position that God can, and should, be defined and judged in human terms. And, as such, this leads to the conflict in that the differing viewpoints seek to define and judge God according to human values, as these individuals understand these values to be. But can a concept as large and as dynamically abstract as "god" be described in such a way?

I will take a section of the paper, that of theodicy, and see if I may make myself more clear:

In this paper, and in other writings on the topic, quite a bit of time is spent on the problem of evil, and how this concept, as it exists outside of God, creates a problem for the existence of God. Because those in several religious traditions (especially those in the Abrahamic tradition) seek to describe god as unlimited, and because humankind has a cultural norm of identifying god with our idea of "good," we run into trouble when we speak of our idea of "evil." In Mercedes' words (page 14), "The search for a theodicy or reasons why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil..." A perfectly good God *permits evil*. This implies that "evil" is something that exists *outside* of God. Can something exist outside of God in Christian theology? And, in the west, perhaps much of our definition of god in these terms can hearken back to the Zoroastrian views of contrasting moral gods, represented in the Persian view of what constitutes "good" and "evil" in their cultural understanding. As this is a human definition, put forth by mortal consciousness limited in its scope and often distracted, we find ourselves unable to agree on what we're trying to do with a definition of god itself. It is difficult to discuss the reality of something when we cannot express what this something is or, for that matter, what it is not. Does "faith" play a role in believing in something when that something is ill-defined?

Simply put, theodicy fails as a proof of god's existence or non-existence because it strives to put a limit onto a concept which we are asked to believe is something limitless. Because we are approaching evil as a moral construct *as it applies to our limited and dynamic cultural mores*, then evil exists within this discussion as the truth that proves the lie, on whichever side of the atheism/faith continuum we find ourselves. What seems never to be considered is the possibility that evil absolutely exists *as a part of God*, and exists to serve a purpose of God's. The reality of evil, ironically, defines the reality of good and, thus, defines the terms of humankind's imaginative need to feel a sense of purpose in an otherwise absurd existence. But, as it does so, evil may only be defined in a way that is dynamic, existing in dynamic contrast to the concept of "good."

Is a black hole evil?

From a human cultural viewpoint, a black hole is far more destructive than the most immoral or amoral of human endeavors, as we define morality. Does this make it immoral or, perhaps, even evil? An argument about this seems rather pointless, as our interest in the existence of black holes, until very recently, has been focused not on their application to our sense of existential purpose, but only upon

whether or not a mathematical “quirk” was describing an actual, tangible thing. Our recent findings that prove the existence of black holes actually expand our ability to experience the universe. In this way, in our discovering tangible evidence of a concept that could well be defined as evil, we have expanded our ability to experience the universe. As such, in religious terms, we have moved a little bit closer to understanding god itself.

Might the evil we have known in human history do the same? Might our experience of evil directly actually expand our understanding of reality, as it exists in our perception? Might evil itself, then, serve a purpose of god’s? As such, is it not logical that a creator god, one who “created” ex nihilo, be responsible for evil itself? And, assuming such a god creates for purposes of its own, might it make sense that we must know evil in order that we might know a little of the god itself? Might evil serve a purpose of divine self-expression, in order to serve a purpose of this god?

For what it’s worth, once we open our eyes to this possibility, we may find ample examples of ancient authors making this point throughout the canonical texts of at least two of the Abrahamic religions (with apologies, I must confess that my experience with the Quran is significantly limited). As this is not my essay, I will not delve into these here. Suffice it to say that, by applying an exegesis, as opposed to an eisegesis, approach to Biblical study, we may find things therein we neither were taught in our denominational educational programs nor have experienced in the cultural norms of our societies. And, as such a study might well undermine the arguments of the atheists, it might be compelling to try it out.

Can God be defined by human understanding? Might the existence of human understanding, and its ability to think beyond our doctrines, our science, and our experiences serve a purpose of God’s? Indeed.

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