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Final Project Essay: Squaring the Circle, or the Problem of Evil

“Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?”

— Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*

The existence of evil and reconciling the terrible things which happen in the world is a ubiquitous and universal conundrum, wherever and whenever humans have flourished—and those humans have been asking themselves for centuries: what is evil, where does it come from, and what is to be done about it? Put simply, evil is when "bad things" happen—and bad things happen unceasingly, to everyone on Earth, regardless of race, creed, religion, economic station, or geographical location. How the problem of evil is understood, addressed, and potentially resolved has a dramatic impact upon how humans understand the world and live their lives. The approaches to the problem of evil vary from East to West. Whereas Eastern philosophy and religion are less concerned with the first causes of evil and primarily seek to understand how to deal with the effects of evil at a societal and individual level (Loy), Western philosophy and theology wrestle mightily with the fact of the very *existence* of evil, because the ramifications for the existence of evil when compared with the described nature of the Western, Judeo-Christian God can be difficult to reconcile (Beebe). Western monotheistic exclusivist and universalist traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with their various schools and denominations, view their deity as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (all-good). The existence of evil, both natural and moral, seems to contradict some or all of what

these traditions consider to be those intrinsic qualities of their deity, creating logical tension in their fundamentalist, literalist theology. Christian apologetic philosophy attempts to explain the contradictions away, yet these attempts to explain away the “problem of evil” can be an insurmountable logical obstacle for an agnostic or atheist, or even for a non-Christian theist, when it is argued from a Western Christian universalist perspective, which begs many questions. However, the problem of evil is not truly a problem at all, when the “god issue” is removed from the equation. Evil, both natural and moral, are problems which exist without a need for a supernatural causal agent; these issues must be dealt with individually and societally, and Eastern philosophy’s non-theistic approach such as Buddhist practices provide practical tools to do so (Hanh).

Evil as a concept is an amorphous one that has different shades of meaning for each person, but in general, “evil” is defined by Oxford Languages as, “profound immorality and wickedness, especially when regarded as a supernatural force.” Note that in the very definition of the term there is a strong implication that evil is viewed as having an external cause, and that cause is a supernatural one. According to Western philosophy, there are two main types of evil, distinguished as either natural or moral evil. Natural evil is, according to modern Christian apologist Nick Trakakis, a negative occurrence for which “no non-divine agent can be held morally responsible” and is chiefly derived from the operation of the laws of nature (Trakakis 263). Natural evil events such as fires, floods, storms, famine, and plague wreak havoc and cause tragedy at the individual and communal level, and one reason natural evil is so feared is because it is so unpredictable, impersonal, and unfocused: it strikes everyone, regardless of station in life or their behavior. Moral evil, on the other hand, is clearly focused: this is the evil perpetrated by humans, such as rape, murder, theft, and other actions done by humans, usually against other

humans (Pecorino). It is deemed “moral” evil, because morals are, according to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, “concerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior and the goodness or badness of human character.” Though the specifics of what is and is not “moral” vary widely from culture to culture, in general, things such as murder, rape, theft, and fraud are frowned-upon, so for someone to perpetrate these actions against another person is considered “evil.” There is a personal hurtful element to moral evil that natural evil does not have, specifically because moral evils are usually committed deliberately to harm another. Regardless of which variety of evil is being discussed, evil is extant and obvious in every human culture, and evil and its consequences touch every human, though “natural” evil events such as earthquakes, fires, floods, and plagues do harm to more than just humans and their civilization. After classifying evil, the natural inclination of the human mind is to look for causal agents, to ask the question, “Why?” This is where philosophy enters the conundrum.

As previously discussed, Western universalist theology defines the character of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. All things are created and ordained, purposefully and with foreknowledge of outcome, by an all-loving God; logically, that same deity, through that almighty power and complete knowledge of the world and its inhabitants, has some agency in the existence of evil, but to what extent, and why? The existence of evil, both natural and moral, seems to contradict some, or all, of those supposedly intrinsic qualities of the deity, thus undermining fundamentalist, literalist theistic beliefs. If a deity is all-loving, why would He choose to inflict suffering and pain upon His creation, including upon animals and innocents such as children? The problem of evil has been sufficient to drive many theists toward agnosticism and even atheism, as many people are unable to reconcile the concept of an all-loving, all-powerful deity who still chooses to inflict (or at least allows) moral and natural evil

(Dougherty). However, most Western Christian theists are much less willing to accept that their deity is not as they believe He is and engage in philosophical apologetics to “square the circle” of the apparent contradiction. There is a philosophical term for this: theodicy.

Theodicy defined by Oxford Languages dictionary as, "the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil." The study of theodicies is a branch of theology and philosophy specifically studying the “problem of evil,” a problem which naturally rises when attempting to reconcile the apparent contradictions and conflicts of the observed existence of evil with the assumption of an all-benevolent and all-knowing deity. Many theodicies have evolved over the centuries as Christian doctrine has changed with the times. One current prevailing theodicy is the “free will” theodicy, where the God-given ability of humans to make free choices about their actions explains why moral evil exists—humans choose to do awful things to one another, and that is not God’s fault, according to apologist theologians. Seminal philosophers such as St. Augustine (who took his cues from Aristotle) and his intellectual descendants including Alvin Plantinga, use the free will defense to place responsibility for moral evil squarely upon the shoulders of humankind, though the problem of natural evil is not addressed (O’Connor, et al). Another popular Christian theodicy is the “soul-making” philosophy first developed by the ancient Christian church father, Irenaeus, and further developed by John Hick, C.S. Lewis, Richard Swinburne, and others. In soul-making, evil is a force for the development of good within humanity; the evils of pain and suffering as serving God's good purpose of bringing "imperfect and immature" humanity to itself "in uncompelled faith and love (“Irenaean Theodicy”). This view of the “refining fire” abilities of suffering to help develop positive character traits is not inherently Christian, as the other Abrahamic faiths have similar views about the positive effects of suffering, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism,

but the “soul-making” theodicy in Christianity is unique in that suffering is integral to salvation (Tooley). Another popular theodicy is the “original sin” theodicy, originally proposed by St. Augustine and further developed by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. The Book of Genesis states that Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s admonition for them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. From this original sin sprang both moral and natural evil, as the Bible states that when sin happened, sickness, corruption, and physical death entered the world, and thus evil is not God’s fault, but Man’s (“Augustinian Theodicy”).

Each of these theodicies has their problems, and none of them satisfies all the contradictions in the Christian universalist description of the basic nature of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent on its own—the answer to these gaps is to plead that not all things can be known, and to rest on faith (McCloskey). Some modern theologians and philosophers attempt to weave together these theodicies and explain the contradictions. Dr. Eleonore Stump, a very well-known modern professor of philosophy who has taught at many universities and is currently the Robert J. Henle Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, writes, lectures, and speaks in depth on this subject. She posits that the ultimate nature of humanity yearns for perfect union with the Creator, who is perfect—but the imperfection of sin has divided humans from that perfect Creator, which makes that perfect union with Him impossible. Due to the fallen nature of creation, suffering and evil (both natural and moral) are unavoidable, lamentable and are never “good” (Stump, “Wandering in Darkness”). However, in her theodicy, suffering is a way that humans can use to eliminate the divisions inside themselves that keep them separated from the divine, and to become “better” people in the process; the process is completely voluntary by way of free will (Mitchell). Stump proposes that understanding these concepts makes the unavoidable natural and moral evils of the

world bearable, and that suffering is even to be welcomed, as the result will be a joyous and perfect relationship with God. Professor Stump states, “all human beings since Adam’s fall have been defective in their free wills, so that they have a powerful inclination to will what they ought not to will, to will their own power or pleasure in preference to greater goods (Stump, “Philosophy of Religion,” 230).” This strongly echoes Stump’s theological roots in the teachings of St. Augustine, Aquinas, and Plantinga.

Despite the interweaving of theories, theodicies such as those propounded by Professor Stump and her peers remain contradictory, both epistemologically and logically; there is no agreement amongst apologists and Christian philosophers, especially between those who are more literalist and those who are more figurative in their interpretation of Biblical scripture and principles. For example, Trakakis proposes that natural evil has a “non-divine” origin, yet there are fundamentalist theologians who believe God is the author of all in the world, including natural disasters—after all, they are still called “Acts of God” in insurance language. The Christian argument for evil asserted as the universal explanation for why evil exists is not applicable to any worldview that is not theist, or even more narrowly, if the worldview is not specifically Christian, thus excluding billions of humans from consideration. Even when the theodicies are “successful” in explaining away moral evil, they do not adequately address the problem of natural evil, and most modern theodicies (including Stump’s) basically dismiss this conundrum by stating that what is not known, is unknowable or “inscrutable” (Dougherty). Stump’s theodicy, as well as those of other apologists, presuppose many things: that a deity exists, that the deity is the Christian deity, and that the world operates by that faith’s mechanisms alone. It is extremely limited and chauvinistic. Pushing the burden of evil from Creator to created does not explain why, for example, if the experiences of suffering help make people better and

provide a pathway to reunite with God, of what benefit is suffering to those who will not see Heaven? An all-knowing God knows that there are those who will not accept the Christian doctrine of salvation through accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, and an all-powerful God made this situation possible. The rebuttal to the argument from evil can be distilled down to a few simple logical, evidentiary, deductive steps of critical thought:

1. "If God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
2. "If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate all evil.
3. "If God is omniscient, then God knows when evil exists.
4. "If God is morally perfect, then God has the desire to eliminate all evil.
5. "Evil exists.
6. "If evil exists and God exists, then either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil.
7. "Therefore, God doesn't exist (Tooley)."

One common rebuttal to the problem of evil is for theist philosophers and apologists to assert that the non-theist (both agnostic and atheist) assessment of the problem of evil contradicts itself, because theists assert that the non-theist assessment requires the existence of God to be able to argue against the existence of said deity (Trakakis). If atheism is correct, theists posit, and God does not exist, then there is no objective evil, because God provides the context of such concepts as "good" and "evil," as God's all-goodness grounds all concepts of goodness, and therefore against its opposite, evil. Without the Western God providing this framework for goodness, there is no template for evil or suffering, and so the theist states that the non-theist

contradicts themselves, by unintentionally providing an indirect argument for the existence of the very God they believe they disprove through the argument from evil (McCloskey).

This assessment of the validity of a non-theistic argument against the problem of evil is logically unsound. The argument from evil can be viewed as a form of *reductio ad absurdum*. Though it may be a philosophically naïve premise, to render the problem of evil absurd, one must only look at the state of the world, where millions suffer evils both natural and moral, and in a world that was designed, created, and ruled in every fashion by an all-powerful all-knowing, and all-loving deity, such death and suffering is not compatible with that “all-loving” nature. If one “assumes that the conclusion— (7)—is false, and then shows that the denial of (7), along with premises (1) through (6), leads to a contradiction. Thus if, contrary to (7), God exists, it follows from (1) that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. This, together with (2), (3), and (4) then entails that God has the power to eliminate all evil, that God knows when evil exists, and that God has the desire to eliminate all evil. But when (5) is conjoined with the *reductio* assumption that God exists, it then follows via *modus ponens* from (6) that either God doesn’t have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn’t know when evil exists, or doesn’t have the desire to eliminate all evil. Thus, we have a contradiction, and so premises (1) through (6) do validly imply (7) (Tooley).” The only way theodicy apologists can rationalize the existence of evil, and to justify the suffering of those who will never receive any benefit from it, is to resort to special pleading about “inscrutable” divine methods and reasons (Dougherty), such as when or they assert that belief in a deity is the default position of humanity a la Pascal’s Wager (Hájek), thus removing any intellectual or logical burden from their argument, rendering it absurd. The crux of this argument is that there is no need for non-theists to quantify an objective concept of evil or suffering to make the argument work. Instead, all that must be shown is a conflict

between the benevolence of God and the state of the world, which is apparent without qualification—and in a world full of evil, dealing with the actual evil itself on a personal and societal basis is a more productive strategy, as the “source” of evil is not something which humans can ever fully explain or quantify to everyone’s satisfaction. Apologetics in this area end up relying on special pleading and fall apart from one sect to another.

The problem of evil is not truly a problem at all, however, when the “god issue” is removed from the equation. Evil, both natural and moral, are problems which exist without a need for a supernatural causal agent; even if there is a supernatural cause for any or all instances of evil, it does not change the fact that evil must be still dealt with individually and societally. Eastern philosophy’s non-theistic approach such as Buddhist practices provide practical tools to do so, such as equanimity, mindfulness, and compassion (Hanh). The Four Noble Truths begin with a remarkably simple pronouncement: “Suffering exists.” There is no implication of merit or blame—it simply *is*. “Buddhism focuses on the three unwholesome roots of evil, also known as the three poisons: greed, ill will, and delusion. In place of the struggle between good and evil, Buddhism emphasizes ignorance and enlightenment. The basic problem is one of self-knowledge: do we really understand what motivates us?... Because this view offers us a better understanding of what actually motivates people—all of us—it also implies a very different way to address the problems created by ignorance and desire and violence: not a new holy war against evil, but a less dramatic struggle to transform our own greed into generosity, ill will into love, and ignorance into wisdom (Loy).”

The problem of evil is a real one and need not be metaphysical. Practicing mindfulness, compassion, generosity, engaging in the exploration of self, tolerance, and equanimity in the face of the evil that exists in the world is a more logical and practical approach and can mitigate some

of the suffering caused by that evil (Hanh). Though humans will never stop seeking a cause for evil, the real-world battle with both natural and moral evil must lie with the individual person and their individual responses; these individual actions combine with those of others, creating societal change, regardless of what religion they may practice, if any at all.

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