THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A REVIEW ESSAY

Bruce Ballard
Lincoln University, Jefferson City, MO

"If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent, then why is there (so much) evil in the world?" runs the inevitable question of the problem of evil. Or alternatively, doesn't the occurrence of (so much) worldly evil actually imply the non-existence of such a God, as the leading atheological gambit, the "argument from evil," contends? Apparently inexhaustible, the topic has recently received newly challenging and insightful, if very different, treatment in the hands of two Christian analytic philosophers, Brian Davies, in his book *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*,[1] and Peter van Inwagen, in his contribution *The Problem of Evil*.[2]

Especially interested in how the argument from evil might be blocked, neither aims at a full theodicy. "I do not claim to be able to *explain* why evil exists on the scale it does or why it exists at all . . . In my view, there can be no such explanation," writes Davies.[3] Yet on his account of God's unique being, this lack of explanation in no way counts against the existence of a good God, as proponents of the argument from evil want to argue. Similarly, for Peter van Inwagen, living in a fallen world "means being the playthings of chance. It means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, and it means something worse than that: it means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly *for no reason at all*."[4] In a

1. Davies, *Reality of God*: vi + 264 pp., pb. $29.95, ISBN 0-8264-9241-X.
2. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*: viii + 183 pp., hb $35.00, ISBN 9-19-924560-6.
3. Davies, *Reality of God*, 246.
4. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 89.

seeming paradox, for van Inwagen, there is yet "an explanation of why evils happen to people without any reason."[5] Van Inwagen's short answer here is that the incomparable good of an eternity of love with God requires our free choice and the cost of that freedom is the evils of this world (or evils as bad or worse). Davies proposes an apparently simpler but more radical solution to the problem: God is by definition beyond moral evaluation. Since he also offers reasons to dismiss other approaches, including van Inwagen's "free will" defense, beginning with Davies allows us to set the stage by way of a challenge for van Inwagen's account.

Davies' book ranges very broadly over the problem of evil. He surveys a wide array of challenges and responses to the problem, offering his own critical comments on each. In the end, typical responses are rejected, a negation highlighting the alternative Davies will supply with positive reasons. One is never in doubt about Davies' sincerity or honesty employing this well-known argument strategy. But whether a burn-all-bridges-but-my-own approach is the wisest course on the problem of evil seems debatable. As the title of his book implies, Davies' second chapter augments his treatment of the problem of evil with an argument for the existence of God developed out of Aquinas. If that argument succeeds in proving that the existence of this world requires the existence of a perfectly good God, the argument from evil in the world to the non-existence of such a God is pre-empted, on Davies' view.

Space does not permit a thorough analysis of Davies' argument for the existence of God here. Yet no such analysis is really necessary since even were the proof successful, it would not per se eliminate the argument from evil. If both arguments could be successfully formulated, a stand-off would result, something like a Kantian antinomy of reason. Perhaps the rest of the book is an implicit acknowledgment that more is needed to defeat or nullify the argument from evil. In what is probably the most interesting contention of the book, Davies argues that "God

---

5.   van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 89.

is not a moral agent subject to moral praise or censure."[6] Thus, to charge God with moral failure involves a category mistake, treating him as something he could not be.

Davies' negative theology of God's attributes is not wholly new. But he forcefully develops and employs key differences between divine and human goodness, both from philosophical theology and from biblical sources, to make his own argument. For one thing, since the timeless God is not one existent among others in a changing universe, he makes no progress and has no character, if we think of character as something displayed over time. Similarly, God does not engage in practical reasoning, another diachronic process. With R. F. Holland, Davies claims that having moral reasons for our acts only makes sense for us as mutually accountable members of a moral community. But God is no such community member. And since reasons for acting depend on unsatisfied needs, God has no such reasons, although he does act for a purpose.

The Bible describes God as holy, righteous, just, faithful, merciful and loving, but rarely as morally good.[7] As Davies reads Scripture, it never depicts God as good by virtue of conformity to a rule: "We go badly astray if we think of God as an invisible person anxious to do what it is right for him to do (what any decent God ought to do, so one might say)."[8] Among other references, Davies appeals to Job putting God above human moral ideas and to Romans 9, in which God's election of people is independent of moral merit. One might also consider Jesus explaining to the apostles that they did not choose him but he them, or the election of the nation of Israel as described in Deuteronomy, among many other examples. Davies sees the biblical God, without implying the least censure, as incredibly partisan.

Nonetheless, Davies does see God as perfectly good, in Aquinas's sense of a being fully actual, a being for whom there is no potential for improvement in any way. With Aquinas,

---

6. Davies, *Reality of God*, 88.
7. Davies, *Reality of God*, 101.
8. Davies, *Reality of God*, 253.

Davies also has it that being good is succeeding in being in some way. Thus, for God to create anything is to create something good to some extent. Evil is a kind of lack where "existing things fail to be as good as they could be."[9] Because God only creates what is, he can never be the source of evil. To the typical objection that a good God would still either prevent or curtail evil, Davies responds that since God is not obligated to create any amount of goodness, he cannot be faulted for not producing more than he has. So again it is the difference between God's moral standing and ours which reduces the challenge to a category mistake.

But even granting Davies' point about God being beyond moral criticism, what about the love of God? Davies follows Aquinas' saying that to love is to will good to something. And God's love pours out and creates the goodness of all things. This love is not to be confused with emotion, a passive effect in which one is moved by something or someone else. Only figuratively may we ascribe emotions to God, in the same way that Scripture attributes eyes or wings to God.[10]

There is much to commend in Davies' worthy and challenging account. But is there enough to meet or invalidate the problem of evil? Two possible objections seem open. First, to say that what God creates is good just because it exists to some extent still leaves the question of evil, lack of being, unanswered. Acknowledging that Jill is God's good creation still leaves us wondering why, say, she was born without those physical structures which would have allowed her to see or hear, which God could have as easily supplied. Davies grants the unanswerability of such questions, contenting himself with showing that God is beyond blame for such evils. Perhaps this result is the best that philosophical theology can offer, disappointingly incomplete as it is.

Secondly, Davies' gap between God's goodness and human moral goodness is too great. And the same may be said of love. Further, if Davies' proof for God's existence understands God's

---

9.   Davies, *Reality of God*, 177.
10. Davies, *Reality of God*, 209.

goodness too abstractly, it does not successfully counter the argument from evil, as that argument relies on our more ordinary conception of good. Of divine and human goodness, Paul Helm writes: "If God is worshipful as good (because of his goodness), then that goodness must bear some fairly close relationship to the goodness which, from time to time, we ascribe to human actions and which is ascribed supremely to Christ."[11] If Christ is the exact representation of God's nature, as the book of Hebrews tells us, are we really to discount all of his expressions of emotion as only figurative? Isn't it the emotional love of the prodigal son's father, who runs out to him and falls on his son's neck, kissing him repeatedly, that attracts believers to the Christian God? Are we not attracted to the Jesus who weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus or says how often he would have huddled his children together as a hen her chicks? Admittedly, synthesizing a coherent and systematic understanding of God from the many varied Scriptures is a daunting task. Yet Davies' philosophical theology seems to differ in identifiable ways from the biblical portrait of God.

Finally, let us consider Davies' challenge to the free will defense as a prelude to van Inwagen's use of that response. Davies says that just as an underestimate of God's uniqueness leads to confusions about his moral standing, so it does concerning his causal action. As God is not one existent within the spatio-temporal universe, his causal action should not be confused with the cause and effect sequences prevailing there. Yet this confusion is central to the understanding of God implicit in the free will defense. As Davies notes, our acts of choice are real things, as real as any physical object. And God is the creative-sustaining cause of the reality of everything in the universe. Yet the free will argument treats human choices as though they came to be independently of God, as though God were an onlooker only. As such, for Davies, "the Free Will Defence is worthless as a piece of theistic apologetic."[12]

---

11. Helm, *Providence of God*, 167.
12. Davies, *Reality of God*, 122.

To the objection that making God the cause of all acts, including the free acts of human beings, leads to determinism, Davies again sees misleading univocation on the term "cause." As timeless, God's causal action is not "prior to" effects, the way causes are in the physical world. But that is the notion of causal action motivating the free will defense. That is, for me to choose freely requires that there be no *prior* cause outside me making me so choose. It follows from Davies' account of divine causation that God could have created human beings such that they always freely choose the good. The reason this does not lead to a new formulation of the problem of evil, as Mackie believes, is again the fact that God is beyond moral accountability.

A key element of Davies' account of God is that God is outside of time. And this is something van Inwagen denies. With many others, van Inwagen sees God as everlasting but in time. The negative theology of divine timelessness does not form a sufficient platform for discussion of human free will in relation to God. As van Inwagen has it, "I do not really know how to write coherently and in detail about a non-temporal being's knowledge of what is to us the future."[13] The same might be said concerning atemporal causation of events in time as well. Also, if we assume that the God-in-time view *could* be true, the free will issue in relation to God's *fore*knowledge poses the sharpest challenge, a challenge van Inwagen looks to meet. Arguably, he goes a long way in that direction here in his usual clear, illuminating, witty and compelling fashion.

Although van Inwagen is keen to keep close to an orthodox Western view of God's omniscience (one Jews, Christians, and Muslims agreed on at least until the last century or two), his way out of the dilemma of human free will and divine foreknowledge is simply to deny that God knows our future free acts. This qualification of omniscience in no way lessens the concept of God as the greatest possible being, since God still retains the highest metaphysically or intrinsically possible knowledge. Just as God is still considered omnipotent though he cannot make a rock too large for him to lift (a contradictory "thing" or no-

13. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 81.

thing), so the no-thing of foreknown free human acts is no impediment. Van Inwagen also claims biblical support for his view of God's ignorance of future free human acts. Here, like Davies, he can adduce some scriptural support for his view. As also with Davies, there is ultimately too much else in the Bible pointing away from van Inwagen's contention to secure his claim.

Unlike some other defenders of freedom, van Inwagen does not see human free will as a good in itself. Rather, it is good as a necessary condition for relationships of love. Since God's purpose for humanity is an eternity of love with him, and free will can be abused, this means "that God was *unable* to bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse)."[14] Granting van Inwagen for the moment that bad consequences must follow from free will abuse and that for a truly free will, abuse is always possible, must there be the amount and severity of evils we see in the world? Van Inwagen comments, "However much evil God shields us from, he must leave in place a vast amount of evil if he is not to deceive us about what separation from him means."[15] With the Bible, van Inwagen sees natural evil occurring since the fall as an effect of free will abuse by human beings. Once nature is broken, much evil can occur in the world simply by chance, whence our inability to answer such questions as "why him?" or "why this?"

The atheist will object that God should only have allowed the minimum number of horrors necessary for his plan to reconcile men to him and this he has failed to do.[16] Intriguingly, for van Inwagen no such minimum can be conceptually specified here since "the minimum number of horrors necessary for humans to see that human life is horrible without God" contains an element of vagueness. It is like the minimum number of raindrops consistent with the twentieth century fertility of France. The concept of fertility is too vague to enable us to specify an exact number

14. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 68.
15. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 88.
16. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 106.

of corresponding raindrops. We can't really think of *n* number of drops making France fertile but *n*-1 drops making it infertile. Similarly, since by the nature of the case no minimum number of evils can be specified, God "had to draw an arbitrary line and he drew it. And that's all there is to be said."[17]

But even if there had been such a number, it would still be consistent for the theist to claim that the number having occurred by the end of this world is just that minimum. Although this seems impossible to show, it may be equally impossible to gainsay due to human ignorance of the endless number of elements and variables in play. Given van Inwagen's primary goal of blocking the argument from evil, perhaps this appeal to ignorance may serve, short as it is of theodicy. One might also frame the question about the number of evils in terms of the longest run, eternity. As van Inwagen puts it, "At some point, for all eternity, there will be no unmerited suffering: this present darkness, 'the age of evil,' will eventually be remembered as a brief flicker at the beginning of human history."[18]

In his final chapter on the hiddenness of God as a ground for the argument from evil, van Inwagen reasons in a way which might also be employed for the free will defense, as we shall see further on. God's obscuring himself from the clear view of human beings seems to be a type of evil ideally suited for the argument from evil. But as van Inwagen notes, the occurrence of even many more supernatural signs would not really show what the objector wants to establish. Finite signs, as they must be, never show themselves to be, per se, the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent being.[19] But even if they did attract more belief, God is not looking for belief by any means necessary. In fact, this kind of belief "might make it difficult or even impossible for that person to acquire other features God wanted him or her to have."[20]

---

17. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 108.
18. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 89.
19. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 142.
20. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 146.

Van Inwagen imagines a Russian strategist whose contribution to his country's war in Afghanistan is to place powerful bombs "disguised as bright shiny toys in the vicinity of unreliable villages" who then dies and goes to hell.[21] That van Inwagen should speak with the evident and richly deserved moral contempt such an exemplar of evil merits is perfectly understandable. And philosophers are certainly free to choose the examples of good or evil they find conducive to their purpose. For the largely American and British proportion of his audience, however, it may have been more relevant to note that the cluster bombs dropped on Afghanistan by the Bush administration, often unexploded, did in fact appear as such shiny toys, with the predictable result for children, and that even when this became known, it was not stopped; or that food packages dropped for Afghan relief during the war were the same color and size as unexploded cluster bombs, offering a predictably hellish dilemma for the children of Afghanistan, again with the same actual consequences; or that despite desperate international pleas, World Food Program trucks full of food for the starving were kept from entering Afghanistan via Pakistan by the same administration with the resultant death of some 50,000 Afghan refugees.

In van Inwagen's narrative, the Russian strategist dialogues with Abraham as the rich man did in Luke 16, but is then allowed to return as a ghost to warn his living brother of what lies ahead. We are then to imagine a purely fear-oriented change in the brother's behavior aimed at the minimum necessary to avoid hell, a result very different from the Christian God's objective. So van Inwagen makes it easy to agree with his point that a vast array of miracles could be counterproductive to God's plan.[22] Clearly the same might be said of the relief from many evils. If, for example, all who professed belief in Christ were shielded from every major kind of evil, the incentive to believe might be corrupted. Indeed, this corruption seems to be taking

21. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 146.
22. van Inwagen, *Problem of Evil*, 148.

place in the Gospels, in some, after the miraculous feedings or some of the healings.

Both van Inwagen and Davies are concerned with what van Inwagen calls the apologetic problem of evil, that is, how one may respond to the argument from evil. Van Inwagen distinguishes this theoretical question from what he calls the practical problem of evil, namely, how one's beliefs, attitudes and actions will be affected in relation to God in the face of, say, one's own experience of evil. Having made this distinction, van Inwagen disclaims any direct contribution to the practical problem. Yet there may be more connection between the theoretical argument from evil and the practical problem than at first appears. For example, social and psychological factors may mitigate or exacerbate the experience, hence the significance, of evils.

In principle, minor evils are logically available to the argument from evil. Woody Allen joked that he could not believe in the existence of a beneficent Creator who would let him get his tongue caught in the typewriter. Were we to utilize such evils to argue against God's goodness, however, the general consensus of what should count as misery would ordinarily disqualify them. A certain experiential threshold is necessary to really motivate the problem of evil and especially the argument from evil. What is that appropriately motivating threshold? Here the social context can be significant. If, for example, members of a Christian congregation, friends and family, rally round the cancer victim, his or her experience of suffering, all things being equal, will not play in the same register as that of the one who suffers alone. It will be harder for the person who experiences human love to give way to doubts and begin to believe the inner, personal argument that given such suffering, a good God cannot exist. The same might be said where there is a direct inner experience of divine love. Our personal standard of what is rational for us to believe or continue believing seems to contain an affective component, at least in relation to certain kinds of beliefs.

Consider Mabel: "One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to one side, dropped one

eye, and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly . . . I also learned later that this woman was eighty-nine years old and that she had been bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone, for twenty-five years."[23] It is probably impossible for those outside such affliction to genuinely appreciate it. And what can the would-be comforter say? Her life seems to be paradigmatic evidence for the argument from evil. Yet to a visitor who asks her what she thinks about while lying in her bed, she replies, "I think about my Jesus. I think about how good He's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know . . . I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied . . . Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus. He's all the world to me."[24] And with her experience of Christ, Mabel not only pre-empts a personal argument from evil, but also makes her suffering unavailable to the outsider for an argument from evil.

Bibliography

Craig, William Lane. *Hard Questions, Real Answers*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003.

Davies, Brian. *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*. London: Continuum, 2006.

Helm, Paul. *The Providence of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

van Inwagen, Peter. *The Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

23. Craig, *Hard Questions*, 110.
24. Craig, *Hard Questions*, 111–12.