

## The Goodness of God in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition

(Please note: These are rough notes for a lecture, mostly taken from the relevant sections of *Philosophy and Ethics* and other publications and should not be reproduced or otherwise used verbatim.)

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God is regarded as the **creator, the lawgiver and the judge**, fundamentally and absolutely good. Since the Judaeo-Christian tradition is monotheistic, there is no separate force or authority to balance against God, to limit his activity, or to detract from his responsibility for what happens.

- If there were an equal and opposite force of evil, or if matter itself existed separately from God, then there would be an excuse for the evil that we find in the world.
- God would be limited by the material he used for creation, or by opposing forces. But in this tradition, God has no such limitations.

The ‘goodness’ of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is the direct consequence of his position as the absolute creator of everything, omnipotent and omniscient.

- In tackling the problem of how a good God is compatible with the fact of evil in the world, theologians have seen evil as sin, punishment for sin, or a growth opportunity – in other words, it has been related directly to humankind.
- A sense of God’s goodness can come from a direct religious experience (of something that is ‘holy’), or as an interpretation of what happens (God providing for one’s needs).
- It is challenged by the existence of evil, by the failure of God to respond in situations of need and by the ambiguous nature of our experience of life as a whole (i.e. it does not appear to be a paradise ordered by a loving creator).

The issue of what sort of evidence should count for believing that there is a good God who intervenes to benefit those who worship him is certainly not new, and it is found beyond the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Let me give you one example, from the writing of Cicero (106-43BCE) who expounded Epicurean philosophy in Latin, in the book *De Natura Deorum* (of the nature of the Gods), Part III, chapter 36, he says that Diogoras was asked while at Samothrace ‘You who think that the gods disregard men’s affairs, do you not remark all the votive pictures that prove how many persons have escaped the violence of the storm, and come safe to port, by dint of vows to the gods?’ to which Diogoras was said to reply ‘It is because there are nowhere any pictures of those who have been shipwrecked and drowned at sea.’

The same argument can be made concerning Darwin and evolution – the reason why everything appears well adapted, is because, were it not well adapted, it would not be here to appear at all. The world is as it is, given an infinite number of attempts, a world that worked had to happen eventually. It doesn’t necessarily imply that it was specially designed.

So the issue of the ambiguity of the world is one that counts against the existence of God, as well as against the inherent 'goodness' of God. If you attempt to show the 'goodness' of God from the evidence of nature, you will have an uphill battle, because for every bit of evidence produced in favour of the proposition, there will be another against. And that has been the case since the debates of the early Greek philosophers, or even earlier in the books of the Jewish Scriptures, e.g. the book of Job. (He is silenced by seeing a whale – the great leviathan.) Or, indeed, Exodus 20, which we shall refer to in a moment – the goodness of God is often a 'given' based on faith, not the result of adding up and evaluating the evidence.

### **A biblical image of God...**

In **Exodus 20**, God is said to have revealed the 10 Commandments to Moses, but the Children of Israel have just been warned that if they approach him directly, he may break out against them and kill them.

- The presence of God is a mortal danger and threat.
- Moses tells the people that God has come to test them, and that the fear of God will keep them from sinning.
- God is shrouded with mystery and power; the goodness of God is not a cosy idea.

Notice that God in Exodus 20 is above the common meaning of good and evil. He gives Moses the Commandments to give to the people – he is dangerous, and 'above' good and evil.

In Philosophy of Religion we use human reason to examine beliefs to see if they are logical and coherent, and to relate them to other ideas that we hold. In looking at the goodness of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we need to compare that belief with other ideas about goodness. It is not an either/or between what Plato/Aristotle said and the Bible. Rather, philosophy encourages people to submit their beliefs to careful scrutiny, using the tools of logic and clarity of thought.

### **Fundamental problem: the Euthyphro Dilemma**

In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*... Socrates asks 'Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?'

- If you take of the first option, you simply accept that whatever God commands must be considered 'good': you have no independent way of deciding right from wrong. So what if God commands something that your reason tells you is wrong (e.g. genocide)? You appear to be at the mercy of particular scriptures and their interpretation.
- If you take the second of Socrates' options, it implies that human reason provides us with an independent standard by which we can judge what is good. But this sets the authority of human reason over that of God. This is something that religious people reject.

### **Another way of putting the same issue...**

Statements take two forms – analytic or synthetic. If they are analytic, their meaning is given in the definition of their terms; they give no new information. If synthetic, they

depend on and give us information. **Is 'God is good' analytic or synthetic?** If analytic, then it simply tells us what we mean when we use the term 'God'; if synthetic, then – for it to make any sense – we have to have some idea of what the word 'good' means, before we can apply it to God.

### **So what are the secular alternatives?**

Plato: the 'Form of the Good'. In Plato, particular things are mere shadows of the abstract and universal realities in which they participate. We call particular things 'good' or 'beautiful' because we have an idea of an abstract perfection of goodness or beauty. We have these ideas because, before our birth into this world, we were in a realm in which we had direct contact with these universal 'Forms'. We seem to know what 'good' means by intuition, but in fact it is through remembering our pre-life. The philosopher looks beyond the individual things and is able to contemplate the Forms, highest of which is the Form of the Good.

Aristotle: goodness as fulfillment. We all have a potential and our 'good' is living it out to the full. (A good knife is one that cuts well.) Human reason, looking at the nature of the world, can therefore understand the 'good' for each thing. From a religious point of view, one might say that – if God is the creator of the world – the goodness of God is shown in his creation.

### **The problem of evil:**

Aristotle's position leads those who hold theistic beliefs to ask whether it makes sense to call God 'good' in a world that involves suffering. Hence the 'Problem of Evil' which forms a key part of your study of the Philosophy of Religion.

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### **The problem of Evil and Suffering**

The fact of evil and suffering in the world creates a problem for those who believe in God. In its simplest form, it may be set out like this:

- God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving and the creator of everything
- Suffering exists in the world

Therefore

- God knows that there is evil (if he is all-knowing)
- God could prevent evil (if he is all-loving and all-powerful)

But

- He allows it to continue

Therefore

- Either he wishes evil to continue (in which case he cannot be all-loving)
- Or he cannot eliminate evil (in which case he is not all-powerful)

**If 'God is good' is to mean anything, there needs to be some explanation of why there is suffering and evil, an explanation compatible with a loving, omnipotent God.**

There are two traditional ways out of the dilemma.

- One (from Augustine) starts with the idea of God as judge, and sees evil as sin or punishment for sin. It's our fault, not God's'; therefore God remains good, even in a world that contains suffering.

[[Augustine came to the problem from two different perspectives, one philosophical, the other based on the Bible.

He argued that evil was not a separate force over and above goodness. Rather, to call something evil was simply a way of saying that it lacked goodness (evil as a 'privation of good' is the usual way of expressing this). The world was full of finite, limited things. Their limitations prevented them from the perfect expression of their own natures. Therefore they 'fall short' of what they were designed to be, and hence participate in evil.

His second approach was to put the blame for evil on humankind, rather than on God. Augustine pointed to the 'fall' of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Evil, and to the idea that all subsequent members of humanity are descended from them and therefore share in their sin and fall (through what is termed 'original sin'). Thus, moral evil (evil done through human choice) could be blamed on humankind, rather than God.

But what of natural suffering, unrelated to moral evil?

Augustine followed the traditional story that some of the angels, led by Satan, rebelled against God. They too 'fell' and took all the created order with them. Therefore creation itself became a place of suffering.

According to Augustine, God will finally come to judge people, and will administer justice in accordance with how they have behaved, sending some to hell and others to heaven. Meanwhile, natural suffering is either sin or a punishment for sin (in the sense that it comes about in a world that is fallen, and therefore full of suffering).

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- The other (from Irenaeus) says that the sufferings of this life enable us to grow into God's likeness – so all will be well in the end.

[[Bishop Irenaeus held that God had created humankind in his own image (according to the Bible) but in order to develop more fully into the likeness of God, it was necessary for humans to face and overcome the challenges presented by life. Hence, suffering and evil are seen as opportunities to learn and to grow.

A more modern development of this argument is known as the free-will defence. This argues that, in order for humans to grow spiritually they need to have free will. But freedom implies that it is possible to choose to do evil rather than good. Hence, on balance, it is better to have a world in which evil is a real possibility, than to have one in which there is no real freedom to do anything other than choose the good.

For either argument, it is accepted that God is aware of and permits evil, in order to achieve a greater end – namely the development of free human beings who are able to grow into his likeness.]]

**Neither of these is entirely satisfactory, because each involves a compromise. It could be argued that a human being, behaving as God behaves, would not be called 'good.'**

Couple of more modern approaches – Hick – the ‘Free Will Defense’ Better to have freedom at the price of evil than have no freedom.

Swinburne’s approach - which may be seen as a development of Irenaeus

Richard Swinburne uses the fact that the world is such that humans can develop within it as an illustration of what he sees as the nature of God:

‘Like a good parent, a generous God has reason for not foisting on us a certain fixed measure of knowledge and control, but rather of giving us a choice of whether to grow in knowledge and control.’

‘It is because it provides these opportunities for humans that God has a reason to create a world governed by natural laws of the kind we find. Of course God has reason to make many other things, and I would hesitate to say that one could be certain that he would make such a world. But clearly it is the sort of thing that there is some significant probability that he will make.’

He goes on to say that the orderliness of the world, as a theatre for humans, is not the only reason why God would have wished to create it that way. He points to the fact that an orderly world is a beautiful world.

In other words, Swinburne’s approach is to assume that God is a loving and caring parent, and then points out how appropriate the present designed world is for achieving his purpose.

He summarises his argument thus:

‘The argument to God from the world and its regularity is, I believe, a codification by philosophers of a natural and rational reaction to an orderly world deeply embedded in the human consciousness. Humans see the comprehensibility of the world as evidence of a comprehending creator.’

[from *Is there a God?* OUP, 1996]

In effect, by arguing that it would be appropriate for God to create a world like this, Swinburne is enhancing the **probability** that God exists. This builds on his earlier work, where he argues that the design of the world does not suggest that it is the product of mere chance, but that it must be a matter of weighing the probabilities involved.

[[The Problem of Evil influences the ideas people have of God. So, for example, within the Christian tradition, Jesus on the cross is seen as an expression of God’s willingness to suffer alongside his people.

This leads some theologians to point to a God who deliberately sets aside the attribute of omnipotence, and prefers to share in human life, with all its limits and suffering. But can a suffering God still be God? This has always been an important question for Christian theology. How is it possible that an omnipotent God could take on human form in the person of Jesus? How can God suffer? Why should he choose to suffer? One way out of this problem is to think of God as being in a process of change, as evolving towards the future, and engaged with the whole of the creation in that process. Notice that this places God within the world of space and time, engages as an agent in

the process of change. Looking at the qualities of God, choices need to be made, for a God who is engaged in the world cannot also be timeless or eternal.

**And so we are back to questions about the nature of God – where we started...**

### **Getting the balance right in thinking about God**

Three important words describing the God of classical theism:

- Omnipotent – all-powerful
- Omniscient – all-knowing
- Omnipresent – existing everywhere

The idea that God is omnipotent and omnipresent is related to the concept of him as a creator. It implies that there is nothing external to him, and no separate creation in which he is not involved, or over which he has no control.

The idea that God is omnipotent and omniscient is related to the problem of evil and suffering. If God can do anything and knows everything, why does he not act to prevent evil?

Thinking about the transcendence of God, one might say:

1. He is timeless.
2. He creates from nothing.
3. He cannot 'do' anything (because things only get done within space and time).
4. He cannot be a moral agent (for the same reason).
5. He can know everything past, present and future.

Thinking about the immanence of God, one might say:

1. He is within time.
2. He shapes and sustains the physical world.
3. He can act within the world.
4. He can be a moral agent, shaping events.
5. He can know the past and the present, but he cannot know the future (except if it is the inevitable outcome of things that exist in the present).

But traditional theism argues that God is **both** transcendent **and** immanent. Do you see the problem with this?

The God who is described in the Biblical narrative is an active, involved God. He is certainly not the same as Aristotle's 'uncaused cause'; not a principle, or an ultimate explanation, but a personal spiritual force to be encountered. That's fine, when God appears to be on your side – miracles, for example. More problematic when things are going badly and God does not bring the prayed-for help.

The more transcendent your idea of God is, the more remote he becomes from the everyday world, and therefore the more difficult it is to ascribe goodness to him – after all, you call people good on the basis of what they do. If God is beyond 'doing' anything, how can he be good?

The more immanent your idea of God, the more realistic it becomes to call him 'good' – but only if the actions that you see him performing are such that any reasonable person would say that the person doing them should be called 'good'. And here we end up with the problem of evil again.

**Key questions: How do you relate what is 'holy' to what is 'good'? How do you relate particular good things, to an overall sense of the world's goodness?**

**In other words, which comes first – our intuitive sense of 'goodness', or belief in God. Do you understand what holiness is because you encounter 'the holy' – or do you have a natural sense of the ultimate, the holy, and recognise it when you see it.**

**It is in fact a broader version of the Euthyphro dilemma.**

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