Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 9, The Problem of Evil

This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 9, The Problem of Evil.

Okay, we've talked about a number of evidences and arguments for theistic belief.

Now, let's talk about the most significant objection or criticism of theistic belief, which is the problem of evil. What has come to be known as the classical problem of evil, as a philosophical objection, was first articulated by the ancient philosopher Epicurus back in the 3rd or 4th century BC. The problem or the objection really can be posed in the form of a question, and that is, how can the existence of a good, all-powerful, all-knowing God be reconciled with the reality of evil in the world?

So, let's begin just by noting a standard definition of evil. It goes back to Augustine, and that is, evil is a privation of goodness or privation of being. It's a lack of goodness. And this is, to this day, I think the prevailing definition of evil, at least among those in the theistic traditions.

And other definitions that I've heard end up being variations of this definition. I'm a friend of the Christian philosopher Doug Geivett. We were talking about the problem of evil at one point, and he expressed some dissatisfaction with the Augustinian definition of evil.

I said, well, how would you define evil? He said I define it as a departure from the way things ought to be. As I reflected on that, I realized that's kind of a variation on the Augustinian theme there, defining evil in terms of a lack of goodness. In this case, I understand it as a failure to conform to how things ought to be.

But with that general definition of evil in hand, then we can distinguish between two major categories of evil or two different major ways in which we experience privations of goodness or a lack of goodness. One of those is natural evil, and that is evil that results from natural events like hurricanes, famines, cancers, all sorts of infectious diseases, and birth defects. These would all be examples of natural evil.

And then you have moral evil, which is evil that results from the choices of free beings, right? Rape, and murder, and lying, and theft. Those are all moral evils. So, whether it's natural evil or moral evil, we're talking about departures from the way things ought to be.

We're talking about privations of goodness, but they come in different forms. So you have natural evil and moral evil. A major theologian of the last 30-40 years is a philosopher named William Rowe.

He taught at Purdue University for many years, and he wrote an article several decades ago that has become widely anthologized, where he argues that atheism is rationally justified because, or one of the main reasons for atheism being rationally justifiable is because of this problem of evil, which he presents in a formal argument that goes as follows. That there exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Notice he's here focusing on natural evil.

Secondly, an omniscient, holy, good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Therefore, an omnipotent, omniscient, holy, good being does not exist. So that's Rowe's argument against theism based on evil.

He notes that the second premise is one that both theists and atheists will affirm, right? Whether you're an atheist or a theist, you should believe that an omniscient, holy, good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could unless it could not do so without losing some greater good or permitting some evil that's equally bad or worse. So, he believes that both theists and atheists would affirm that first premise, that there exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. Is that true? Why believe that? Rowe says that human experience justifies our belief that there are some instances of such suffering.

Let's call that gratuitous evil. Gratuitous evils are those that are completely unnecessary and don't contribute to the greater good. And he gives an illustration of this by referring to, say, an innocent animal in the woods.

A young fawn gets caught in a forest fire and dies a miserable, painful death. And we know this has happened because we've discovered the carcasses of animals after fires. What good could that possibly serve for such an animal to suffer so horribly? Couldn't God have prevented that? So that seems like a gratuitous evil.

Other philosophers have identified cases of gratuitous evil in human events where people are tortured and suffer all sorts of horrible fates in such a way that it just seems impossible to account for this in terms of the power and goodness of God. So, there are two ways to attack or try to critique Rowe's argument that he identifies. One is what he calls a direct attack, which would be to reject that first premise and to

do so by showing that, look, there are certain goods that could accrue as a result of some horrific event, whether it's the burning of a fawn or the suffering of an innocent child.

Rowe's reply here is that the theistic tradition supposedly grants that life is such that we can't know all of God's purposes in the world. So, if the theist is trying to provide an explanation for each and every evil, that seems to go against the grain of the theistic tradition and his judgment, which should allow for mystery. But it would be illegitimate of him to handcuff the theist in his or her response to the problem of evil on that basis.

Just because we admit mystery doesn't mean that it's inappropriate to try to identify potential goods that could result from evil or painful situations. Another way to critique his argument, he notes, is what he calls the indirect attack, and that would be to affirm the second premise and deny the conclusion that there is no God, and so, therefore, to conclude, no, there is a God who's almighty, who's all good, who's omniscient. What would follow from that, since it's a valid argument, is that that first premise must be false.

And that would be an approach, I think, that most theists I know, most Christians I know, would take the approach of saying, well, I can't explain why that fawn would be burned to death, why God would allow that or the suffering of little children, but I know God is real. And I know that he doesn't allow just gratuitous evils; he doesn't allow suffering and horrific events to happen without some sort of good reason, even if I can't identify what that is. But that first premise just can't be true.

Rowe's reply is that the theist can reason that way, and it seems to be the theist's best route, but there have to be independent grounds for believing in God. And what could those reasons be? He's certainly not someone who's confident that there is independent evidence for God that is conclusive enough to be confident that such a being exists. So maybe it ultimately comes down to that.

What independent reasons do we have to believe that there is a God in Rowe's view? And I'm sure he was not sympathetic with the idea that belief in God is properly basic, either. So, what position should the atheist take regarding the rationality of the theist's position? Rowe distinguishes three different options. One of them is what he calls unfriendly theism, unfriendly atheism.

And that's the view that no one is rationally justified in believing the theistic God exists. That certainly would characterize the view of the new atheists that we've talked about. I think Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens would all be unfriendly atheists.

Again, by that meaning, it's, you know, the view that no one would ever be rationally justified in believing in God. But you could be an indifferent atheist and maintain that it may or may not be rationally justifiable to be a theist, basically not to take a position on that issue. Or one could be a friendly atheist, and that's the view that the theist could be rationally justified in their belief in the existence of God, notwithstanding, you know, the fact they consider it a fact that there is no God.

The idea here is that a person can justifiably believe something that's false. It is possible to rationally hold a belief that's false just because the evidence or the world can be construed in a way, you know, coherently with some justification that, you know, is false. So he gives the example of a guy who's on a commercial jet that crashes in the ocean.

And when word about that spreads, they don't find any survivors. It's reported in the news, and, you know, everyone is presumed dead. But this one individual survived the crash, and he's bobbing up and down in the water in the middle of the Pacific, and his thoughts go to his family members and friends, who he knows believe that he is dead.

And they're rationally justified in believing that he's dead. How many people would survive such an airline crash in the middle of the ocean? So that would be a false but rational belief that he, as well as everybody else, was dead, even though there was at least one survivor. We can think of other examples of false rational beliefs.

We look at beliefs in the past regarding everything from the nature of the Earth, or how many planets there were believed to be in the past before the technology we have enabled us to peer into the outer reaches of our solar system and discover planets like Neptune and Uranus and Pluto. I still believe Pluto is a planet, even though it's been disqualified. But there was no technological capability in those days to discover such planets.

So, people then were rational in their belief that there were only five or six or seven planets in our solar system, even though that belief was false. So that's Rowe's idea here, and that's why he would consider himself a friendly atheist in that regard, maintaining that, yeah, you theists are wrong. There is no God, but you can still hold your belief rationally, depending on a number of factors.

This raises an interesting question, and that is: if you were a theist, would you be a friendly or an unfriendly theist? Do you believe that someone can hold an atheistic perspective in a rational way? If so, then you would be a friendly theist if you don't think it can ever be a rational belief that makes you an unfriendly theist by this terminology. So anyway, that's Rowe's conclusion. We have good reason to believe there is no God because of the problem of evil, but those who are theists could still

potentially hold their view rationally, even though he's convinced that there is no God.

William Alston, the late great Christian epistemologist, responded to Rowe's argument and defended the thesis that Rowe's argument is flawed because the first premise is questionable and, in fact, indefensible because of the limits of human understanding. Alston dealt with a number of issues like this, kind of highlighting our epistemic limits as a way of, ironically, reinforcing confidence in our religious beliefs as Christians. But Alston critiques Rowe's first premise, which is, remember, that there exist instances of suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil that's equally bad or worse.

Alston says we are not justified in accepting this premise. Well, why not? He says, and this is quoting him, that the magnitude or complexity of the question is such that our powers, access to data, and so on, are radically insufficient to provide sufficient warrant for accepting this premise. So we don't have the capacity to investigate the situation so thoroughly, not just physically but metaphysically and morally, that we just cannot be confident that there are such cases of suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without losing some greater good or permitting some evil that's just as bad or worse.

And he notes that the case for the premise, or the notion that there are these truly gratuitous evils, depends on a basic inference. It's a very simple inference that he identifies here, and it's basically this: so far as I can tell, P is the case. Therefore, P is the case.

Now, that's something that we all do, theist, atheist, and agnostic alike, that if we were more careful epistemically, we wouldn't do as much. In many cases, it's relatively harmless. You know, people get into debates about, you know, sports teams, right, or players.

It seems to me that, you know, Tom Brady is the greatest quarterback that ever played. It seems to another person that, you know, Peyton Manning or Drew Brees or John Elway is the greatest quarterback ever. So far as I can tell, this is the case.

And then the other person says, well, so far as I can tell, then each is confident that their view is correct. But just because it seems that way to you, or so far as you can tell, and your limited exposure to the evidence as an armchair football historian, you know, it certainly doesn't follow that your view is correct. So, we all need more epistemic humility.

But in those cases, it's relatively harmless. But when you're talking about an issue as big and important as the existence or non-existence of God, we need to be very careful here. There's a lot riding on our conclusion.

He says the reason this is often a tenuous inference is that, as he puts it, to be justified in such a claim, one must be justified in excluding all the live possibilities for what the claim denies to exist. So, what potential accounts might there be for why God might permit such intense suffering that seems gratuitous? That's the question. When trying to account for the existence of evil in the world, whether it's intense suffering or immorality, when one theorizes that, hmm, maybe this is the reason that God permits this, one is offering what's called a theodicy.

A theodicy is an attempt to identify God's reasons for permitting evil. What might be God's reasons for permitting evil? When you come up with a theory that, you know, attempts to explain that, you're doing theodicy. So, Alston reviews a number of the major theodicies, not all of them, but some of the most significant ones, to show that, for all we know, maybe, you know, a particular theodicy provides an explanation here, even if it doesn't seem so at first blush.

One of these is the punishment theodicy, which states that God allows certain forms of suffering as punishment for sin, perhaps at times to reform the person who suffers. Now, this might not apply to little Bambi in the forest, right? There's nothing that little fawn had to repent of, but it could apply to all sorts of painful situations that human beings find themselves in. And it's often difficult, if not impossible, to tell, in a given case, whether a person might be suffering precisely because God wants to reform that person or just suffering the discipline of God because they've been so immoral in some context or other that, you know, they're kind of paying for it.

Certainly, there are forms of conduct that have what we call natural consequences that are painful and difficult, that God has kind of woven into the fabric of the universe, or at least into our biology. For example, if you are serial, say, if you're sexually promiscuous and you engage in sexual activities with lots of different partners over a long period of time, eventually it's likely you're going to get some sort of venereal disease, sexually transmitted disease. So you're suffering because of your promiscuity, which, even if it wasn't God's specific decree in that case that you would get that venereal disease, he has constructed the world, and our systems are biologically such that this would tend to be the result.

One could say, yeah, you're kind of being punished or disciplined for your sin, and so on. People who are pathological liars eventually pay for it. People who, you know, get into the habit of stealing or whatever it is, eventually they pay for it.

No one gets away with anything, really, according to a theistic perspective. But in this world, when people suffer, the idea is that at least sometimes they're being punished or disciplined for their moral crimes. But we are, as Alston notes, often in a poor position to assess the extent of a given person's sinfulness or the extent to which suffering via punishment may have a reformative effect.

We just don't have enough information to make qualified judgments in most cases. A lot of times, even in our own case, you know, we wonder, am I suffering now because of a divine discipline, or is it just, you know, I'm experiencing a stroke of bad luck, or maybe I'm being persecuted precisely because I was righteous in a situation. There is such a thing as righteous suffering, and that can be very difficult to sort out.

Alston's point applies there, too, that we are in a very compromised, epistemic position. We only have so many facts, and we could be construing those, you know, incorrectly at times. So, it really is a kind of dose of humble pie, right, that we need to recognize that.

And in this context, when making judgments about, you know, the existence or non-existence of God because of the reality of evil in this world, that is, Alston would say, that is to be far too confident in the deliverances of human reason and knowledge than we should be. Another theodicy is the so-called soul-making theodicy, which says that God permits suffering in order to develop good character traits in us and ultimately to build a loving relationship with us for eternity. We are able to identify all sorts of cases where a given individual grows significantly through suffering and difficulty in our own lives.

We can point out cases where we grew significantly morally. Maybe we became more serious in our faith, more serious about our relationships with people and how we treat them because of things that we suffered. So, you know, the Nike slogan, you see it on bumper stickers: no pain, no gain, right? I mean, it's fundamental to athletics, right? You work out at the gym to the point where it's painful.

Why? So that you can benefit significantly. And so, it goes for so much of human life. That's a basic idea in the soul-making theodicy.

And to say that, well, in this particular case of gratuitous evil, there were no benefits for the person who suffered. Well, you just, we can't tell that. We just don't know for sure if that's the case.

We are not, as he notes, reliable judges as to other people's inner attitudes or character, how much they might have grown through it or might grow in the future. And we lack a lot of information about the afterlife. That's an understatement.

We have very little information about the afterlife and how our souls might continue to grow even there through the suffering we experience in this world. We just don't know. But that might be the case.

If you extrapolate from the growth that we see in people in this world beyond this life into the next world, maybe that's a reasonable thing to expect. A third theodicy, or what philosophers these days prefer to call a defense, is the free will defense, which says that the occurrence of evil in this world is a consequence of God's arranging for the existence of human free will, which is necessary for genuine relationships. God wanted human beings to be able to relate freely to one another and freely to him and to be morally significant creatures such that we could be culpable and morally responsible for our behavior.

And the only way to do that, according to this view, is that God grants us a certain freedom of will. So maybe that explains a lot of evil, certainly moral evils, that people are guilty of, that it simply was their ill-advised choice that gave rise to a particular painful experience. And there's no one to blame but the person who did it.

And that God didn't prevent them because he didn't want to interfere with people's free will. So, does that work in a given case? Well, maybe. Maybe not.

But we can't, as Alston says, reliably ascertain how much divine interference might defeat human freedom in a particular case. We just don't know. We don't know what the limits are if this free will defense is on the right track.

We don't know what the limits are to God's redirecting an individual away from some evil that he or she is planning. And then, finally, there's the natural law theodicy, which says that God had to make the world in a law-like fashion in order to make life circumstances reasonably predictable. Natural evil is a consequence of this.

So here again, we're talking about natural disasters and genetic mutations, cancers, birth defects, and so on, heart disease, that is not the consequence of someone, say, taking poor care of themselves. Some people have heart disease congenitally. So why would God permit that? Why would God permit that, you know, hurricane? Why would God permit the mudslide that killed all those people and so on? Why wouldn't he make the world differently so that these things don't happen? Why wouldn't he make, say, the inverse square law differently and make it not even the inverse square law but a very different kind of law of nature such that bodies like ours fall much more slowly so that if you fell off a 10-story building, you would just get a concussion, or maybe break a few bones, it wouldn't kill you? Why couldn't God have set our bodies up differently such that a third-degree burn would not result in gross disfigurement for a lifetime but just disfigurement for a few months or the loss of a limb? Why didn't God make humans like he made the urodela reptiles so that they could grow back limbs? Wouldn't it be great, you know, if a friend of yours lost a leg

and instead of saying you're going to get a prosthetic limb to deal with that, instead of you said, that's going to be tough for three months, you know, you have to wait for the leg to regrow and it'll be kind of awkward, but then, you know, after several months you'll have your leg back and, you know, you'll have to work out the musculature to get it to match your other leg.

Wouldn't it be great if that was the problem, rather than permanent loss of limbs? Couldn't God have made the human body and the laws that, you know, concern these sorts of things differently so that we wouldn't have such permanent injuries? Alston notes, though, that for all we know, there are many desirable features of this world that would be lost if God made the world very different in terms of law-like regularities. Since we think about these sorts of things in isolation, it's easy to miss, and we probably are missing, the ramifications of a universe that had, you know, very different laws in that regard. And even if he just made the human body such that it recovered from certain severe traumas more easily, maybe there'd be something lost there that ultimately is good.

We just don't know. Again, it's the limits of our epistemic situation. Just because something seems to be the case, it doesn't follow that it definitely is the case.

So, I think Alston's observations here are very helpful in terms of reinforcing epistemic humility when it comes to these issues as well as many others. Alston concludes by noting that there are also perhaps yet stronger undreamt of theodicies that could provide even more reasons to doubt there are truly gratuitous evils. You know, down through the course of human history, these other theodicies were devised, and there was a time when they were not discussed or even dreamed of, and good thinkers, philosophers, and theologians came up with them.

Who knows what theodicy might be devised in the coming years that is far more effective in dealing with the problem of evil than any of these theodicies that we've discussed. So why should we believe that all of the good theodicies have been explored? You know, in the history of technology, there's always a kind of sense that, well, all of the great inventions have been invented, all of the great technological achievements have been achieved, and then time goes on, and you have more great inventions, and the thought that we had reached the limit there of human technology looks foolish. I think something like that is the same in the history of philosophy, where, yeah, it looks like we've exhausted all the possible theories, and maybe in a general sense, we have, but new theories get devised, new variations of old theories that are strikingly innovative, that solve all sorts of problems.

In that sense, philosophy, as well as theology and other fields that are more, say, conceptual or in the humanities, do advance, even if you don't have uniform agreement among the scholars at the time that you find in some of the other fields that are more empirical, like the hard sciences. So, who knows what may come in

terms of new theodicies that could potentially put to rest the problem of evil, and that's, well, also recognizing that some of these theodicies are already very powerful. I think the free will defense, as well as the soul-making theology especially, go a long way in defusing the problem of evil, even if they don't solve it entirely.

I think they give us a lot of good reason to believe that this is not a devastating problem for the theist. So that's the problem of evil.

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