

Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil

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Leibniz once wrote, “You will insist that you can complain, why didn’t God give you more strength [to resist temptation]. I answer: if He had done that, you would not be you, for He would not have produced you but another creature” ([4]: 327). This can be understood in terms of Leibniz’s opinion that every possible individual exists in only one possible world. Since the least difference in events makes a different possible world, it follows that none of us actual individuals could have existed if any actual evil failed to occur. On this view it seems that we are benefited by each and every evil that happens, if our existence is a good to us, and that God is good to us in permitting them, since we could not exist without them.

If all evils that happen are good for the individuals to whom they happen, that is reason enough for a perfectly good being to cause or permit them. Indeed it provides a complete theodicy. Leibniz would not think so, since he thought that a perfectly good God must create only the best of all possible worlds. I have argued elsewhere ([1]) that Leibniz was wrong about that, but I am no more able than he to accept this complete theodicy. For I think his thesis that each individual exists in only one possible world is quite implausible.

But it is true (as I shall argue) that we would not be ourselves without many and great evils. I will try to show that although it does not yield a complete theodicy, this fact has three contributions to make to a response to the problem of evil.

I. WE OWE OUR EXISTENCE TO PRIOR EVILS

The first contribution is a proof that if our lives will have been worth living on the whole, we cannot have been injured by

most of the evils that preceded our coming to be, and God has not been unfair to us in causing or permitting them, although (or indeed because) they have shaped our lives. Leibniz makes this point too, without presupposing anything implausible about trans-world identity. To those who are angry at God for not replacing Adam and Eve, after their fall, with better creatures, “so that the stain should not be transmitted to their posterity,” he replies that

if God had thus removed sin, a very different series of things, very different combinations of circumstances and people and marriages, and very different people would have emerged, and hence if sin had been taken away or extinguished they themselves would not be in the world. And therefore they have no reason to be angry at Adam or Eve for sinning, much less at God for permitting the sin, since they ought rather to set their own existence to the credit of this very toleration of sins. ([3]: 128)

Leibniz goes on to compare the complainers with someone of half-noble birth who is “angry with his father for marrying a lower-born wife, not thinking that another person would be in the world instead of him if his father had married a different wife.”

Leibniz is right about this. Even if I could have existed without some of the evils of the actual world (for example, those that will occur tomorrow), I could not have existed without past evils that have profoundly affected the course of human history, and especially the “combinations of . . . people and marriages.” We do not have to go all the way back to Adam and Eve to find evils that were necessary for our existence. If it had not been for the First World War, for example, my parents would probably never have met and married, and I would not have been born. A multiplicity of interacting chances, including evils great and small, affect which people mate, which gametes find each other, and which children come into being. The farther back we go in history, the larger the proportion of evils to which we owe our being; for the causal nexus relevant to our individual genesis widens as we go back in time. We almost certainly would never have existed had there not been just about the same evils as actually occurred in a large part of human history.

I think it follows that God has not wronged *us* in causing or permitting those evils, if He is going to see to it that we will have lives that are worth living on the whole. What right could

I have against satisfying the necessary conditions of my coming to be, and how could I be injured by satisfying them, if my life will be worth living? It seems also to follow, as Leibniz notes, that we have not been injured by humans, such as Adam and Eve, who perpetrated evils that were necessary for our existence.

Of course it is not we but our ancestors whom one is most tempted to regard as wronged by evil *events* that preceded our coming to be. But those events have consequences in our own time that appear harmful to us. And more broadly, we may be tempted to complain, on our own account, of evil *conditions*, or features of the natural and historical order, that are far older than we are. By nature and historical situation human beings are subject to disease and death, exposed to earthquake and hurricane, and surrounded by potential enemies. Had it not been so, we would never have existed. We may ask why God does not intervene in the natural and historical process in our lifetime to protect us from the consequences of these facts. But it is important for theodicy to realize that that is what is being asked. If we have lives that are worth living on the whole, we cannot have been wronged by the creation of a natural and historical order that has these features; for we could not have existed without them.

It will be objected that even if evils were *causally* necessary for our existence, an *omnipotent* deity could have created us without them, and may have wronged us by not doing so. But I think that is wrong, for three reasons. (1) God's reasons for creating us individually are presumably bound up with His other plans for the world, which would have been different if He had prevented the evils in question. I see no reason why He would or should have created us in particular if He had prevented them—and hence no reason why He has wronged us by not doing so.

(2) I do not think it would have been possible, in the metaphysical or broadly logical sense that is relevant here, for me to exist in a world that differed much from the actual world in the evils occurring in the parts of history that contain my roots. We are sure that once begun, my life could have continued in many different ways that it actually did not, and would still have been mine. But I think that case is at least close to being the only one in which it is intuitively clear that I could have existed in circumstances very different from those that

actually obtain. My identity is established by my beginning. It has been suggested that no one who was not produced from the same individual egg and sperm cells as I was could have been me (cf. Kripke, [2]: 312-4). If so, the identity of those gametes presumably depends in turn on their beginnings and on the identity of my parents, which depends on the identity of the gametes from which they came, and so on. It seems to me implausible to suppose that the required identities could have been maintained through generations in which the historical context differed radically from the actual world by the omission of many, or important, evils. Even if the identity of the parents be presupposed, could it be the same individual sperm cell, and not just one like it, originating in such a different context?

(3) Even if I could, metaphysically or logically, have exited without most past evils and their consequences in my experience, I doubt that that existence could have been mine in such a way as to matter much from the point of view of my self-interest, because it would not bear what I shall call in section III “the self-interest relation” to my actual life.

If this argument is to establish that God has not wronged any created person by allowing evils that were necessary for that person’s existence, it obviously must be assumed that every created person will have, in the end and on the whole, a life-history that is good for him, or at least worth living (unless perhaps he has brought something worse on himself through some free and commensurate fault of his own). This assumption is normally a part of theistic faith. Indeed it is one of the principal things that such faith has to say about the problem of evil. Given the apparent unhappiness of some people’s lives between birth and death, the assumption seems unlikely to be true unless there is life after death, at least for some of us. But that too is commonly a part of theistic faith. We should not expect theodicy to be unaffected by the addition or subtraction of such eschatological beliefs. Without them, indeed, the traditional belief in divine omnipotence that forms part of most formulations of the problem of evil loses much of its motivation. For the possibility of miracle is probably the biggest stake that religion has in the belief that God’s power is not subject to the laws of nature. And resurrection and final salvation from natural evil are the chief miracle, of which any others believed in are foretastes.

II. THE ETHICS OF CREATION

What goals should we have for the future of the world, and how should we pursue them? These questions provide us with interesting analogies to moral issues about God's decisions in creating. In evaluating actions that shape the future we can consider (1) the interests of future individuals, (2) the interests of individuals that now exist, and (3) the kind of society to which the actions will lead. These considerations will illuminate (1) a possible objection to the argument of section I, (2) the second contribution made to theodicy by the fact that we owe our existence to evils, and (3) the structure of a theodicy to which that fact contributes.

(1) The argument of section I has the consequence that considerations of what would be advantageous, or just, to members of future generations give less guidance for action than is commonly thought. For almost every action or social decision that has any effect at all on individuals who will be born several years later affects their identity. An energy policy, for example, would affect people's lives pervasively—where they go, when they go, how far they go, how they earn their living, how they spend their time. And these things in turn would affect their reproductive history—whom they marry, when they conceive, and therefore what children they have. After at most a few decades, virtually no individual would be born who would have been born without the policy. Suppose that we continue to squander the earth's resources, leaving no oil or coal at all for those who will live in the year 2140. Our descendants then may be tempted to think we have been unfair to them in using more than our share. But if their lives are worth living it would not have been better for them if we had followed a policy of fuel conservation. For they would not have existed in that case. It is hard to see how they can have been injured or treated unjustly by our not acting in a way that would have prevented their existence.

If it followed further that there is nothing wrong with squandering the earth's resources, that consequence would discredit my argument. But it does not follow. Squandering may even be unfair to future individuals if it increases the probability of their having lives so miserable that one would wish for their sake that they had not existed. Theists may believe that God will not permit such a result in the long run, but we probably have no right to presume on His goodness in

this context. We should try not to have descendants who will have reason to be sorry they ever existed. But this principle alone will hardly provide adequate guidance for decisions that shape the future. The chief reason why we ought to conserve is to be found in the concern we ought to have about the kind of society to which our actions will lead in the future.

(2) We can see here that it would be a mistake to suppose that we ought to do *whatever* is best for those persons who could be individually disadvantaged by our decision, who will be chiefly or exclusively persons that now exist.¹ For it is sometimes right to impose net costs on existing individuals for the sake of a fairly distant future, even though no future individual would be disadvantaged by our not paying the costs. It might be, for example, that we ought to conserve coal as well as other fuels, for the sake of the 22nd century, to the net disadvantage of persons now living, even if (for reasons indicated above) no 22nd century individual would be disadvantaged by our using more coal.

Similarly I think a society (or the whole human race) might well be justified in following a policy designed to perpetuate itself by maintaining an appropriate population size even though it was correctly believed that it would be advantageous, on average, to existing members of the society to let it die out gradually, over several generations, by reducing the birth rate and the attendant economic burdens. Perhaps only a minority want to be parents, and they are willing to have enough children to maintain the population, but only if the whole community takes responsibility for the children's education and economic support. Naturally the costs will be felt more keenly by some existing individuals than by others, even if the tax policies are as fair as possible. But if the policies have been in effect for several generations, any charge that it is unfair to impose such a burden on present individuals at all can be answered, not only by the necessity of the burden for a desirable goal of the society, but also by the following argument.

None of the present members of the society would have existed without the actual population policy (for reasons that the reader should by now be able to supply). Even those who bear the heaviest net disutility from its continuation will therefore have benefited by the policy on the whole, provided their lives are worth living. They owe their existence to similar burdens borne earlier by others. This is a reason for thinking

that continuing the policy is not unfair to them. Not that discontinuing the policy would be unfair to the children who would not be born; for only those who at some time exist can be wronged, harmed, or badly treated. But perhaps we can say that it would be unfair to the community, and its communal interest in perpetuating itself, for one of its members to demand that this practice, to which he owes his existence, should be stopped when it is advantageous to him to stop it.

This argument serves to introduce, by analogy, the second contribution made to theodicy by the fact that we owe our existence to evils. Suppose, as I think the theist should believe, that our existence will be a great good to us on the whole (except perhaps by our own fault). We have no reason to think that any evils that happen to us are unprecedented; others have suffered evils of similar magnitude before us. If one of us bears an unequal burden of evil, so did many of our ancestors. We have reason to be glad, for our own sakes, that God has not generally followed a policy of not permitting such evils, for we would never have existed if He had. So it hardly seems unfair to us that He has not followed that policy in general. But neither does it seem to be a demand of fairness that God should end the policy that has benefited us, and cease pursuing whatever goals He has been pursuing in the way He has been pursuing them, once it becomes convenient for our generation that He should change. This is a reason for thinking, not only that we are not wronged by prior evils that were necessary for our coming to be, but also that God is not unfair to us in letting evils befall us in our own lifetime.

I would not claim that this argument provides a reply to all possible accusations against God's justice, but only against those whose burden is that He causes or permits people to suffer, in unequal measure, evils that are not individually advantageous on balance to them or to other creatures that already exist at the time of the evil. If God is accused, for example, of breaking a promise, or of judging unjustly, those charges must be dealt with in some other way.

It is also important to the argument that the evils be necessary for an end that is good and of which the benefits already received by those who suffer the evils are in some way instances. If the end were not good, or if the benefits already received were accidental consequences or mere means in relation to it, the argument would lose much or all of its force.

For instance, if your life was accidentally saved by the workings of a policy that prevented you from traveling on a flight that crashed, that has no tendency to rebut charges that continuing the policy is unfair to you. But the creation of persons such as we are is presumably among the ends for whose sake God lets evils happen. And since a perfectly good being would not cause or permit evils for no point at all, theists should surely believe that the reason why God causes or permits them is that his permitting them is necessary (in a broadly logical sense) for goods that are sufficiently great.

Would it have been reasonable for Helen Keller, as an adult, to wish, for her own sake, that she had never been blind or deaf? I think not. Let us suppose that she would have had an even better and happier life if her sight and hearing had been spared (though that is not obviously true). But whatever its excellences, that life would not have had one day in it that would have been very like any day of her actual life after the age of 19 months. Her actual life—in its emotional as well as its sensory qualities, in its skills and projects, and doubtless in much of her personality and character—was built around the fact of her blindness and deafness. That other, happier life would have contained few of the particular joys and sorrows, trials and triumphs—in short very little of the concrete content—that she cared about in her actual life. Her never having been blind or deaf would have been very like her never having existed. Why should she wish for that, given that she had reason to be glad she existed?

What we are attached to in ourselves, in a reasonable self-concern, is not just our bare metaphysical identity, but also projects, friendships, and at least some of the most important features of our personal history and character. If our lives are good, we have the same sort of reason to be glad we have had them rather than lives that would have been even better but too thoroughly different, as we have to be glad that we exist and not better and happier people instead of us.

If a possible life contains so little of the concrete content that I care about in my actual life that it should not matter to me that it could, metaphysically, have been mine, let us say that it bears no *self-interest relation* to my actual life. This relation varies with time in two ways. (1) The earlier a possible life branches off from one's actual life, up to some point in adulthood, the weaker the self-interest relation between

them. Possible lives that diverge sharply from Helen Keller's actual life at the age of 19 months bear no self-interest relation at all to her actual life, with which they share only a period that she hardly remembered. But possible lives that branch off in adolescence or adulthood have enough in common with one's actual life that they are bound to bear some self-interest relation to it.

(2) The strength of the self-interest relation between one's actual life and another life one could have lived is apt to diminish with time. Indeed it would be more accurate to speak of possible lives bearing a strong or weak or no self-interest relation, not to one's actual life without qualification, but to *one's actual life up to a certain time*. You may still think, for example, that the life you had planned or hoped for before an evil befell you ten years ago would have been better than your actual life. Yet you may be so attached to actual projects, friendships, and experiences that would not have been part of that other life that you would *not* now wish to have had it instead of your actual life. There is some self-interest relation between the other life and your actual life up to the present, but it may not be strong enough to give you sufficient reason now to prefer the one you judge to be better. Ten years ago, however, the life you hoped for bore the strongest possible self-interest relation to your actual life up to then, and you had no reason not to prefer it to the life you have now actually had.

This complicates the question whether it is better for *you* that this or that evil happened. It may be preferable for your sake from your present point of view, but not from the point of view you had before it happened. I think the retrospective point of view is not irrelevant to God's goodness. Knowing more about the future than we do, perhaps He can rightly love in advance things that we can love only in retrospect. And provided your actual life is worth living, I do not think He can have wronged you by not giving you an even better life, if the latter bears no self-interest relation at all to your actual life up to any time at which you would be capable of considering the question. Still, it is in general what is preferable before the action that is most relevant to the moral perfection of an agent.

There is another aspect of the problem of evil, however, to which the retrospective point of view is particularly relevant. In theistic religion we are supposed to be grateful to God

for our lives. But even if we believe He has acted with perfect goodness, our gratitude may be eclipsed by bitterness as we wish that we had not suffered various evils. This is commonly regarded as a merely psychological or pastoral version of the problem of evil, but there is a problem for rationality here. What reason have we not to wish bitterly that we had been given better lives? No doubt the bitterness is undesirable, but is it also inappropriate or groundless? It is, if our actual lives are good and bear a weak enough self-interest relation to the lives we might wish we'd had. For in that case we have reason to prefer our actual lives. Bitter resentment might be answered by vindicating God's moral perfection, but reasons against bitter wishes must bear on the preferability of the alternatives.

(3) We may get some light on what theodicy should say about those goods by returning to the question of the kind of society to which we should hope our actions will lead in the further future. Many will say, of course, that it ought to be *the best* society, as measured by the total or average of happiness or by some other criterion. But it seems to me that this is not in general obligatory, and that we would not necessarily manifest any moral deficiency in striving for a kind of future society that is good but not the best we could achieve. I would quite strongly prefer the preservation of the human race, for example, to its ultimate replacement by a more excellent species, and think none the worse of myself for the preference. Similarly I think it may be a good thing, and no sign of imperfection, for someone to favor the preservation and internal development of a particular civilization (e.g., Chinese or Western) or national culture (e.g., Welsh) though he knows that such a continuation will occupy space and resources from which something even more excellent could grow instead. A good person accepts significant costs—and sometimes, where he has a right to, imposes them on others—for the sake of what he loves, and not only for the sake of what is best.

Another example is the love of political or civil liberties, in defense of which one may rightly be willing to die, and to cause some hardships to other people—perhaps even to kill an unjust aggressor. (Even non-violent resistance normally imposes costs on the foe.) In this one need not accept the extremely questionable assumption that people will be happier in a free than in a totalitarian society. And one also need not

believe that the liberties one defends are objectively better than the ends (perhaps ecological and communitarian ends) that might be more adequately served in a less free society. It is enough that the type of society for which one strives is good, and worth loving.

The application to God is obvious, and provides occasion for a thumbnail sketch of a general approach to theodicy in which our owing our existence to evils takes its place. I have argued elsewhere (in [1]) that God could be perfectly good and still have created a world less excellent than the best that was possible for Him. Here it can be added that He could be perfectly good and cause or permit *evils* that are necessary for good ends that He loves, even if those goods are not the best states of affairs obtainable by Him.

That there are such goods for which God's causing or permitting the evils that happen was necessary, I think the theist must believe. But if he is wise, he will not claim to know in detail what they are, or to see enough of the history of the world, and of each individual life, to see the point of everything God does or allows. It is part of the task of theodicy, nonetheless, to say something about the sort of goods for which God's causing or permitting evils might be necessary. Among the familiar examples that may have some part to play are moral responsibility before God; the exercise of fortitude, compassion, and forgiveness; and occasions for self-sacrifice and triumph over temptation. I am suggesting, in effect, that the existence of creatures such as we are, with the characteristic, subtle, and sometimes bittersweet values and beauties of human life, may also be a good of the relevant sort that is loved by God.

It is not enough, however, in vindicating the goodness of an action, even assuming good motives, to show that it was necessary for a good end. As a non-consequentialist in ethics, I would add that it is not enough even if the good end is the best total state of affairs that can be obtained. It may still be morally objectionable on grounds of injustice or unkindness to one or more individual persons. Accordingly, it is an additional part of theodicy's task to vindicate God's goodness *to* individuals; and it is chiefly to this part that contributions are made by the fact that we would not be ourselves without many and great evils.

III. SELF-IDENTITY AND GRATITUDE

A third contribution was promised. It has to do with whether God has been not merely fair, but good to us, in letting evils befall us after we began to exist. Because our identities are established by our beginnings, it cannot plausibly be claimed that any such evils were metaphysically necessary for our existence. But something similar is true. There are evils that happen to people, without which they could, strictly speaking, have existed, but which shape their lives so profoundly that wishing the evils had not occurred would be morally very close to wishing that somebody else had existed instead of those particular people.

The story of Helen Keller (1880-1968) is familiar. Rendered blind and deaf by a fever at the age of 19 months, she endured great misery until she was taught sign language by touch when she was almost seven. From then on she surmounted the formidable obstacles in her path with remarkable success. She learned to speak several languages, graduated from a distinguished college, and became (deservedly) a celebrity. Though certainly not untouched by pain and sorrow, she seems to have lived a happy and satisfying life.

The retrospective preferability of our actual lives to even better ones is based, as we have seen, on our attachment to actual projects, friendships, experiences, and other features of our actual lives. Alas, not everyone is able now to love his life in this way. But it is clear that love for projects, experiences, and friendships that one is engaged in is highly correlated with happiness. So to the extent the theist believes we shall all be happy in the end, he may well believe we shall all have reason to prefer our actual lives to others we could have had.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL FOR ATHEISTS

The fact that we owe our existence to evils gives rise to a problem of evil, not only for theists, but for anyone who loves an actual human individual—himself or anyone else. How is our love for actual human selves to be reconciled with moral repudiation of the evils that crowd the pages of history? Are we to wish that neither we nor the evils had existed?

On the one hand, it would be wrong, and terribly callous, for gratitude at the fact of our own existence to blot out entirely from our lives the sentiments of sorrow, outrage, and

remorse. I have not meant to be defending such a result. Indeed theodicy should probably see our emotional as well as practical opposition to evils as an important element in the good for whose sake God lets evils happen.

On the other hand, the destruction of gladness about the existence of human individuals would also be disastrous. Love would be destroyed with it, or at least degraded. If I am not glad at all that you exist, I may feel sorry for you, or be kind to you, or desire you, but my attitude toward you can be at best only a borderline case of love.

Ambivalence is called for, then. But how shall the balance be struck? Shall gladness predominate, or sadness? Theists aspire to a stance in which particular regrets find a place within a more encompassing, and prevailing, gratitude for human lives. And I imagine that all who love would prefer not to wish on the whole that the individuals they love had never existed. We must face, however, the question whether too great a price has been paid for the existence of those human individuals that have come into being. I do not believe we are in a position to answer this question conclusively by research into human history. At any rate the answer that it is worth it all can only be given by faith—and I think it must probably be an eschatological faith.²

REFERENCES

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- [4] ———, *Textes inédits*, ed. by Gaston Grua (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

NOTES

¹For much of my understanding of this point I am indebted to unpublished ideas of Derek Parfit.

²Only a little remains in this paper from "Self-Identity, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," which I read at the Western Division of the A.P.A. in 1974 but never published. Marilyn McCord Adams, Robert Audi, Derek Parfit, Alvin Plantinga, and Keith Yandell read that paper and gave me extensive comments which helped greatly in preparing this one. I am also indebted to William Hasker and Peter McAllen for comments on some of the points in the earlier paper. Much of the work for the present paper was supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is gratefully acknowledged.