

May 2012

The Problem of Evil and the Existence of God

Timothy Ryan
St. John Fisher College

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ryan, Timothy (2012) "The Problem of Evil and the Existence of God," *Verbum*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 16.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol9/iss2/16>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol9/iss2/16> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

The Problem of Evil and the Existence of God

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Throughout the history of mankind countless theologians, scholars, and philosophers have grappled with the concept of evil, the existence of God, and if God exists, whether He is omnipotent and representative of infinite goodness. Ever since the first human being gazed up to the heavens and contemplated the origins of natural phenomenon or the reasons dreadful things happen to good people, humanity has engaged in a continuous debate over evil and its relationship to God's existence and whether He embodies boundless righteousness or tempered vengeance. Numerous scholars and philosophers such as J.S. Mill have argued that the presence of evil within the natural world offers a rational basis to conclude that it isn't necessary to infer that a being of infinite goodness is at the root of their cause. Others such as St. Thomas Aquinas contend that the existence of evil within our world doesn't present a dilemma or contradict the idea or concept of an omnibenevolent being or God as its source."



Timothy Ryan

The Problem of Evil and the Existence of God

Throughout the history of mankind countless theologians, scholars, and philosophers have grappled with the concept of evil, the existence of God, and if God exists, whether He is omnipotent and representative of infinite goodness. Ever since the first human being gazed up to the heavens and contemplated the origins of natural phenomenon or the reasons dreadful things happen to good people, humanity has engaged in a continuous debate over evil and its relationship to God's existence and whether He embodies boundless righteousness or tempered vengeance. Numerous scholars and philosophers such as J.S. Mill have argued that the presence of evil within the natural world offers a rational basis to conclude that it isn't necessary to infer that a being of infinite goodness is at the root of their cause. Others such as St. Thomas Aquinas contend that the existence of evil within our world doesn't present a dilemma or contradict the idea or concept of an omnibenevolent being or God as its source.

Epicurus is often credited as being one of the first to analyze the problem of evil in connection to a belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient being and the definitive contradiction that results between the two concepts. According to the problem of evil developed and attributed to Epicurus, since evil exists within our world then a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good cannot exist. If God existed and was omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient then He would want to prevent all evils, would know every way that evil could manifest itself, and would have the power in order to prevent the existence of evil. However, if an individual concedes that evil does indeed exist and also believes that God exists, then God cannot be all-powerful, all-knowing, and embody infinite goodness according to Epicurus.

St. Thomas Aquinas addresses the problem of evil in his Third Article from *The Summa Theologica* in his first objection to whether God exists where he states how the existence of evil disproves the existence of God. Aquinas' first objection is similar in construction to that of Epicurus and Aquinas begins his objection by stating that God cannot be real because two infinities cannot exist simultaneously. In other words, Aquinas asserts that if God is indeed representative of infinite goodness, then evil would not exist within our world because good would occupy all temporal and spatial points of reality. Aquinas continues the objection by defining the term God as being infinite goodness and if God truly did exist then evil would not be able to subsist in His domain. Therefore since evil does exist on Earth God cannot be real. Even though Aquinas' first objection and Epicurus' response to the problem of evil both state that God cannot be omnibenevolent in a world where evil exists, Aquinas counters this opposition in his reply to the first objection of his Third Article. Aquinas states in his reply to the reality of evil and the problem it creates for the existence of infinite goodness exemplified by God that the beauty and perfection of God's Omnibenevolence is that He does allow evil to exist in His presence so that He can create good from this evil. In other words, God is omnipotent and represents the highest order of goodness and because of these qualities evil exists so that God can bring good out of such evil.

Although at first glance Aquinas seems to have refuted the objection to God's existence and infinite goodness in his reply to the problem of evil. J.S. Mill contends like Epicurus, that the evil found everyday within the natural world is evidence that an omniscient being cannot be at the root of its existence. Mill concludes in his work the *Nature and Utility of Religion* in respect to the problem of evil that "Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good whichever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism can the government of nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent". Mill fundamentally asserts that infinite goodness cannot exist simultaneously in a world where evil exists, and if both good and evil do exist then God cannot be omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient. Mill states in his argument that God cannot represent infinite goodness because of all the evil that exists within the natural world that contradicts the laws of humanity that condemn murder and that nature practices on a daily basis. Mill believes and contends that nature kills with indifference to good and bad and with disregard for mercy and justice.

Mill continues his argument by conceding that good does indeed come out of evil, but he also states that the converse is true and that evil is produced from good. Mill takes this a step further by stating that the effects of the

natural world and human experience are so intensely complicated that in a majority of cases both good and evil are representative effects of a given cause. Mill also asserts that more often than not evil leads to further evil and good produces more good in nature. This is a solid objection to Aquinas' proposition that God allows evil to exist so that He can produce good from it, and Mill is able to cite specific examples that occur in nature of how both good and evil have a "predominant tendency" of producing further good and evil respectively. Mill then continues his argument by granting some concessions to any objectors to his argument. Mill first argued on the basis that God being either biblical or philosophical by nature designed the natural world on a foundation of infinite goodness for which he put forth a valid objection, but he goes on to concede that perhaps the law of creation was justice instead of infinite goodness. In this case Mill argues effectively in much the same way he objected to the existence of a God who displayed Omni benevolence. Using the workings of the natural world Mill illustrates how creation based on justice is not possible because rewards and punishments would be proportionate to an individual's good or evil deeds. Mill believes that since the natural world is representative of injustice and embodies both good and evil, that mankind created the idea of life after death in order to establish justice and offset nature's unfairness.

Although one should bestow credit to St. Thomas Aquinas and other theologians and scholars for trying to answer the problem of evil, I don't find their explanations as an adequate response to evil or the arguments presented by J.S. Mill and Epicurus. Aquinas' justification that an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God allows evil to exist simply so He can bring good from it is far from satisfactory. By the same measure J. S. Mill and Epicurus haven't been able to adequately demonstrate beyond any doubts that the existence of evil in our world implies and proves that a God of infinite goodness cannot exist. Therefore, I would like to present another alternative and perspective to the problem of evil and the existence of God and the question regarding His infinite qualities. My perspective and argument is highly determinist in nature and I feel it does present another insight to the problem of evil if viewed in the proper context.

The tendency of mankind is to think of itself as the pinnacle of existence and as such we tend to view everything in existence in terms that directly relate to humanity as the premier being of creation. I contend that humanity has little to no understanding of the concept of time and space or even the ability to understand the reasons behind our creation and that of the universe. However, this hasn't halted humanity from falsely believing in their own omnipotence and omniscience which is exactly what Mill, Aquinas, and Epicurus have done. Each of these

men has assumed that they can deduce through the utilization of reason that they understand more or at the very least, share equal understanding with God and the motivation behind creation and the existence of evil. I would also contend that evil does not exist at all and that since the tendency of mankind is to view ourselves as the apex of creation, that we developed the concept of evil in order to explain natural phenomenon when in reality every cause and every effect carries only a value of “good” according to our human terms when viewed properly. Since human beings are just another life form no better or worse than any other in my perspective, and since we have only existed for a brief time when compared to the creation of existence itself, then you also must concede that the law of creation is simply the continuation of existence itself. Only when these concessions are granted and accepted by an individual as being possible, then it becomes feasible in my opinion to state that evil does not exist and is simply a human construction and an assigned value to certain causes and effects that we observe in the natural world through our perspective as human beings who are entirely dependent upon our imperfect senses for knowledge. If evil does not exist and one also concedes that whatever happens in reality is compulsory and good as long as it perpetuates existence infinitely, then I believe you can also have a God, Creator, or Necessary Being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. In other words, a philosophical God can exist as a perfect entity, but proving the existence of the Christian, Islamic, or Judaic God is unattainable and can only be achieved through faith alone.



Sagrada Familia, Barcelona (Spain)
Detail of the Passion façade
(Photo taken by MC)