



## INTRODUCTION

# Evil and suffering in the world

Bakinaz Abdalla 

Department of Philosophy, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK  
Email: [Bakinaz.khalifa@gmail.com](mailto:Bakinaz.khalifa@gmail.com)

(Received 21 June 2023; revised 23 June 2023; accepted 30 June 2023)

Evil and suffering pose arduous puzzles. That evil and suffering prevail in the world is undeniable, but the reason for their ubiquity, the pattern, if any, of their distribution across the world and among the great diversity of people, their impact on individual and societal well-being, and the means to confront them are by no means easily explicable. Calling a deity (or deities) into view, rather than providing a reassuring explanation, engenders a host of perplexing and mind-blowing matters. The vast and apparently planless presence of evil and suffering in the world opens belief in any form of a caring deity to all sorts of inquiries, let alone ridicule. Why would a sufferer hold a belief that there exists a deity, one that is barely responsive? More baffling is the attitude of some believers when distress and pain turn them to supplication, devotion, tranquil acceptance, and even expression of gratitude, instead of doubt, disbelief, or atheism. The belief that there is a deity never vanished, despite the enormity and outrageousness of evil and suffering, and just as this belief continues, its problematic dimensions perpetuate and grow more daunting. For some, such a belief seems to be delusional. Theists hold onto groundless, if not false, beliefs and a devotional attitude to a fictional deity. Yet perhaps theists are not self-deluded; they may have rational, not solely psychological or religious, reasons to retain theistic beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Far from being solely a challenge to theism, the omnipresence of evil and suffering in the world constitutes an obstinate problem to intellectuals of all stripes – atheists are no exception as some versions of the problem raise difficulties to theists and atheists alike (Nagasawa (2018)) – and religious orientations. It is a problem of multiple existential, epistemological, and ethical faces. In philosophy and theology, these surface mostly in debates about the very existence and nature of evil, its causes (whether natural, supernatural, or self-inflicted), the ability of human reason to fathom factors involved in appalling evil occurrences, and the compatibility of such occurrences with fundamental propositions about the divine.

In the case of theism, the problem of evil and suffering poses so formidable a challenge that it became widely described as ‘the rock of atheism’ (Küng (1976), 431). Theists espouse multiple interpretations of the conception of the deity, but thinking of God in metaphysical terms (e.g. as the ultimate uncaused cause and the ground of being) is the most shared characteristic. In classical Perfect Being Theism, conceivably the most dominant form of theism, God is perceived to be the being ‘than which a greater cannot be thought’. This conception entails the ‘great-making properties’, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence (Rogers (2000), 12). Yet these very properties that

express God's greatness and render Him the only being worthy of worship are the very ground for the theist's predicament. The properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, which would encourage a theist to hold that God is aware of all worldly existents and events and possesses the needed power and good will to correct any flaws, become dubious in the face of the persevering occurrence of evil and suffering. Not only that, but the very existence of God lends itself to objections. One can only appeal to Hume's iteration of *Epicurus's* questions to shed light on the immensity of the challenges faced by theists: 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing, then he is malevolent. Is he both willing and able? Whence then evil?' (Hume (2007), X, 74). These questions sum up some of the main terrains of the problem of evil and suffering in philosophy and theology.

In contemporary discourse, the indicated predicament is typically, but not exclusively, addressed in terms of two theoretical considerations: the 'logical problem of evil', also labelled as the deductive problem of evil, and 'the evidential problem of evil', also labelled as the inductive problem of evil. A widely cited formulation of the former, advanced by Mackie (1995), highlights an inconsistency in adhering to the fundamental propositions that God is omnipotent and wholly good in conjunction with the proposition that evil exists, arguing, thereupon, against the rationality of theism. The purported logical inconsistency is, however, insufficient to refute theism. It has been argued that God's attributes of perfection retain internal consistency, despite the acknowledgement of the existence of evil (Plantinga (1974b), ch. 9). Reassuringly, Plantinga states that there 'is nothing like straightforward contradiction or necessary falsehood in the joint affirmation of God and evil; the existence of evil is not logically incompatible (even in the broadly logical sense) with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God' (Plantinga (2000), 461).

As interest in the logical problem of evil diminished, the evidential problem of evil came to occupy the focal point in many philosophical discussions.<sup>2</sup> Articulations of that problem by contemporary philosophers, most notably by William Rowe (1979 and 1991), significantly contributed to shifting the focus to gratuitous evil (evil that is not necessary for removing equally bad or worse instances of evil or for the accomplishment of a greater good) to serve as a 'rational support for atheism'. The main purport of the evidential argument is that 'the variety and scale of human and animal suffering' make the idea that suffering 'could not have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad' extraordinarily absurd (Rowe (1979), 338). On this ground, the conclusion follows that 'There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.' That is, 'the theistic God does not exist' (Rowe (1979), 338).

Arguments from the evidential problem of evil, challenging as they appear to the truth-value of theism, have elicited valuable theistic responses. One trajectory offers defences merely aiming to establish that anti-theistic arguments are unsuccessful (e.g. Hasker (1992)). Defences as such ensure that theism endures against attacks, but do not necessarily prove its truth value. A leading line of defence is advanced by sceptical theists. Versions of this defence appeal to the epistemic limitation of human reason to demonstrate the failure of the evidentialist objection that evil and suffering have no valid justification in the context of the omnipotent God of theism (e.g. Wykstra (1984) and Alston (1991)). Theodicy is another response. Various forms of theodicy purport to deny the supposed gratuitousness of some evil occurrences, contending that evil occurrences are linked, either singularly or holistically, with greater goods. Theodicy-based responses further propose plausible reasons for God's permission of evil, or preference to create a world involving sin and evil than a flawless world.

Abrahamic religions are not alone in the struggle with the problem in consideration. Evil and suffering pose challenges to conceptions of the divine in other traditions. This, in turn, opens platforms for debates as well as solutions which either share features with fundamental elements in classical theism or vary altogether. Conceptions of the deity central to Hindu traditions, for example, bring up shared and distinct concerns which some philosophers tackle through critical engagements with the literature on classical theism (see Medhananda; and Gupta and Barua in this issue). Other conceptions of God that go beyond the confines of the orthodoxy of classical theism are proposed in philosophical discourse to provide responses to traditional challenges of evil and suffering. Yet with alternative conceptions of the divine, other problems of evil arise (see Lancaster in this issue).

The foregoing elements are the basic, not exhaustive, pivots around which discussions of the problem of evil and suffering revolve, and which furnish a frame of reference for studies in this special issue. The problem is never closed, and further innovative contributions are awaited. Trakakis (2018) has drawn attention to the state of stagnation that discussions of the problem of evil and suffering have reached and to nascent attempts to motivate novel approaches and themes. This special issue aspires to fill a desideratum that is occasioned by the comparatively poor representation of non-Christian and non-Western traditions in the Philosophy of Religion. Studies introduced in this issue bring together philosophers from Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and secular backgrounds to tackle variable common aspects of the problem of evil and suffering as well as others peculiar to their respective traditions and/or the domains of their intellectual interests.

The Judaeo-Christian scriptures furnish a rich literary ground for tackling the problem of evil and suffering. In the Jewish scripture, the presence of evil and suffering in the world is made clear throughout many narratives, but it is in the book of Job that the most concentrated depiction of human suffering and its perplexing dimensions manifest. The significance of the book of Job to discussions of the problem of evil and suffering cannot be overstated, and the text has proved to be inspirational for numerous thinkers across history and traditions. In the first article of this issue, 'Questions on the Book of Job', Harvey offers new insights into the book of Job. Thoroughly inspecting its structure and content, Harvey argues that the framework story sets a basis for philosophical discourse on the problem of evil and suffering, which, nonetheless, is unimposing of a dogmatic solution. Against this framework, Harvey engages in a philosophical explanation of the colloquy between God and Job and extracts a theology of hopelessness from the irrevocable distance between God and humans indicated by Job. This distance seems to remove any shared moral grounds that could qualify humans to contest God's judgments. Correspondingly, it raises a question over the feasibility of an objective understanding and fair judgement of the frail human being by the almighty deity.

Theodicy is a major response to the problem of evil and suffering in the medieval tradition, especially with reference to innocent and righteous people. The prominent Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (twelfth century), departing from common theodicies that specify purposes for suffering, indicates that suffering is deserved. Furthermore, Maimonides links suffering to lack of knowledge and proposes intellectual development as a strategy for building immunity from suffering. In the second article of this issue, 'Psychic immunity and uncomprehended pain: what Maimonides can tell us about the problem of suffering', Conroy offers a critical examination of Maimonides's 'psychic immunity theodicy', exploring its potential contributions and shortcomings against the criterion of 'first-person adequacy'. This criterion requires that a theodicy provides an explanation of the suffering that the individual person undergoes, rather than merely providing a third-person explanation that justifies the suffering of others or the existence of suffering. Conroy argues that psychic immunity faces the 'inculpably incomprehensible

suffering' objection, since the first-person adequacy criterion is not fulfilled with reference to persons who are unable to achieve enlightenment, such as infants and cognitively impaired people. Drawing insights from contemporary theories on moral status, Conroy suggests modifications that could make the first-person adequacy criterion relevant in the context of Maimonides. As an alternative solution, Conroy appeals to a tradition of sceptical interpretations of Maimonides to exhibit the 'modest role' of the psychic immunity theodicy.

In the Islamic tradition, the problem of evil and suffering is treated with a close eye to the nature of God. In the medieval period, Muslim philosophers held fast to the Neo-Platonized Aristotelian criteria of divine perfection and formulated theories of the relation of God to the world accordingly. Ascribing evil to God conflicts with His supposed absolute benevolence. Yet adherence to God's oneness precludes the dualist tendency to ascribe evil to another force. The Privation Theory of Evil (PTE), in view of which evil has a negative nature, appeared to some Muslim philosophers, most importantly Avicenna, to be a viable solution. In the third article in this issue, 'Muslim philosophers on the privation theory of evil', Saeedimehr offers a critical examination of PTE in the Avicennian and post-Avicennian literature. After contesting the epistemological ground for PTE and illustrating the inability of adherents of PTE to handle the 'the problem of indetermination', specifying the criteria for determining the opposite and lacking good in every instance of evil, Saeedimehr considers possible critiques of PTE based on counterexamples that suggest that some instances of evil are existential.

Believers in a morally perfect deity appeal to eschatological assumptions about other-worldly compensations to mitigate the problem of evil and suffering. But can God be perfectly just in allocating reward, punishment, and compensations? Promises of eternal hell seem to defy hopes for a perfectly measured eschaton and bring about an 'aporetic problem of evil', one that invokes the conflict between God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, on the one hand, and lack of interest, or perhaps inability, to avoid eternal hell, on the other. In 'Is God's prescription of eternal hell for *kāfirūn* (infidels) in the Quran evil? Contesting Aijaz's understanding of *kufr* (infidelity) and an analysis of eternal punishment in the Quran', Tabur tackles this problem of evil. Tabur examines Aijaz's philosophical critique of Islamic theism, which relies on a suggested incompatibility between Islam's emphasis on God's merciful nature with its salvific exclusivism in view of which all disbelievers are consigned to eternal punishment. Aijaz's definition of *al-kāfir* (the disbeliever) renders all human beings, to the exclusion of those who accept the message of Islam, culpable of rejecting the belief in God out of 'perverse reasons' and thus liable to eternal punishment. Tabur argues that Aijaz's understanding of *al-kāfir* and culpability are erroneous and unfounded. Furthermore, Tabur demonstrates that, from an Islamic perspective, only a limited fraction of people deserves the indictment of disbelief. In this connection, Tabur argues that this reveals an aspect of salvific *inclusivism* that serves to reply to 'the eternal hell as an aporetic problem of evil'.

As noted, theodicy presents a conventional response to the problem of evil and suffering. This is true within and outside the context of Abrahamic religions. Turning to the Indian tradition, the fifth article in this issue by Medhananda, 'An Integral Advaitic theodicy of spiritual evolution: *karma*, rebirth, universal salvation, and mystical panentheism', introduces a defence of the Integral Advaitic theodicy (IAT) of three modern mystic Indians. Medhananda argues that the interrelated doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation central to IAT harmoniously furnish conceptual components for constructing a spiritual-evolution theodicy. The merit of this theodicy, besides providing a full-blown explanation for the reason for evil, is that it removes the responsibility of evil occurrences from God, which, in this framework, are deemed karmic consequences of human past deeds, and explains that the awaited infinite and universal salvation

outweighs the finite evil and suffering in the world. Additionally, IAT underlies a panentheistic dimension that further serves to soften the taxing question accompanying any version of soul-making theodicy: Why, in the first place, does God create this world as 'a moral-spiritual gymnastic'? By eliminating the God-world distinction, God is rendered a participant in, rather than a cruel imposer of, suffering.

Human suffering is not the only impetus for questioning theism. Animal suffering has likewise laid the ground for anti-theistic arguments and, in turn, counter-theistic justifications. In 'The alchemy of suffering in the laboratory of the world: Vedāntic Hindu engagements with the affliction of animals', Gupta and Barua reconstruct a theodicy from central motifs in Vedāntic Hindu perfect being theism. Following the structure of Rowe's evidential argument from evil, the authors formulate an evidential argument from animal suffering (EAAS) to the effect that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient being is unlikely, given the existence of intense instances of animal suffering that the omni-God could have prevented without thereby 'losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse'. Contrary to the latter assumption, Gupta and Barua argue that God could not have done so without 'losing some greater good', and proceed to defend Hindu perfect being theism based on metaphysical claims central to the doctrines of reincarnation and *karma*.

As seen, evil poses multi-dimensional challenges to theistic beliefs. The irregular distribution of evil in the world is one dimension that Lancaster-Thomas explores in her 'Fluctuating maximal God, the problem of inconsistent evil, and spacetime changes'. Lancaster-Thomas starts by addressing the problem of inconsistent evil against the static maximal God (SMG) thesis which suggests that God does not necessarily possess properties like knowledge, power, and benevolence in their 'intrinsic maxima'. In this god-concept, the indeterminate combination of God's properties is warranted to answer the logical and evidential problems of evil. Yet Lancaster argues that the inconsistency of evil presents a challenge to SMG. For it remains questionable why, if God has 'a single fixed combination' of the great-making properties, evil does not form a regular pattern. This question expands to form a version of the evidential problem of evil for SMG. The FMG thesis avoids this problem, since it frees God from the restrictions of immutability, thereby allowing variance in the degrees of the great-making properties across time and place, and in relation to different individuals and situations.

The issue is closed by an article on the probative value of evil. In 'Evil is not evidence', Almeida proceeds from S5, the logic of metaphysical necessity, to assess arguments from evil against the traditional God. First, Almeida addresses epistemological consequences generated in S5 for traditional theism and atheism. There are states of affairs that are evidently irrelevant to the existence of the traditional God. It follows in S5 that the existence of the traditional God is impossible. At the same time, there are states of affairs that do not entail that the traditional God does not exist, and from this it follows that the traditional God is necessary. Thus, we end up with a contradiction, which is not permissible. As a possible response, Almeida introduces 'the triviality solution', which suggests that no state of affairs provides independent non-trivial evidence for or against the existence of God.

With the limited space of this issue, it is, of course, impossible to be inclusive of the versatile approaches and richness of the engaged traditions. However, it is hoped that this issue has demonstrated the value of drawing these traditions, let alone the rest of world's traditions, into the dynamics of the Philosophy of Religion, which, as a field, has integrated meagre contributions from non-Christian and non-Western circles. Diversifying the field has been the objective of the Global Philosophy of Religion Project (GPRP), and this special issue is but a small fraction of numerous academic, as well as popular, activities that have taken place at the University of Birmingham where the project is held. I am honoured to be a member of this significant,

and truly inspiring, project. All thanks go to the John Templeton Foundation for the generous funding, and to Professor Yujin Nagasawa for being such a supportive and insightful director. It has been a splendid experience to work with my colleagues, Martin Pickup, Saleh Zarepour, Jonathan Duquette, Abbas Ahsan, Marie-Helen Gorisse, Nataliia Reva, and Mohsen Moghri. The GPRP could not have been successful without the strenuous work of our administrative team to whom I am deeply grateful.

## Notes

1. This special issue deals with evil and suffering as a theoretical problem, one that falls within the scope of philosophical analyses. This aspect of the problem of evil is to be distinguished from the religious and practical aspects, which fall within the scope of pastoral and professional health care. For this distinction see Trakakis (2018, 2) and Plantinga (1974a, 63).
2. However, a 'reformed' version of the logical argument has been advanced; see O'Connor (1996).

## References

- Alston W (1991) The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition. *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, 29–67.
- Hasker W (1992) The necessity of gratuitous evil. *Faith and Philosophy* 9, 23–44.
- Hume D (2007) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Coleman D (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Küng H (1976) *On Being a Christian*. Quinn E (trans.). Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Mackie JL (1995) Evil and omnipotence. *Mind* 64, 200–212.
- Nagasawa Y (2018) The problem of evil for atheists. In Tarakis NN (ed.), *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 151–175.
- O'Connor D (1996) A reformed problem of evil and the free will defence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 39, 33–63.
- Plantinga A (1974a) *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Plantinga A (1974b) *The Nature of Necessity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga A (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogers AK (2000) *Perfect Being Theology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Rowe W (1979) The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, 335–334.
- Rowe W (1991) Ruminations about evil. *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, 69–88.
- Trakakis NN (ed.) (2018) *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wykstra JS (1984) The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of appearance. *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, 73–93.