

The Problem of Evil: A Critique of Swinburne

D. Z. PHILLIPS

Introduction: False Journeys

[1] Before we begin our travels, let us note Swinburne's terms of reference for the journey. Since various ills and misfortunes can be found in the streets where we live, religious believers are faced with difficulties which are often referred to as the problem of evil: how are evils compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good God? A theodist is someone who seeks to answer this question by justifying God's ways to men, by showing us why things are as they are and, in particular, why that which appears to be evil to us has been sent or created by God for the general good of mankind: a little evil does no one any harm and even the greatest evil, on closer examination, turns out to be worth the price. With this context in mind, let us follow Swinburne on his travels.

Pseudo-responsibility

[2] I want now to consider his defense of God based on specific evils which he has observed. This corresponds to the first two moral principles of the antitheodist which Swinburne wants to attack. He intends to consider the modified second principle, namely, "that a creator able to do so ought always to ensure that any creature whom he creates does not cause passive evils, or at any rate passive evils which hurt creatures other than himself." Swinburne's general theodist strategy within which he attempts to show the implausibility of this principle is "that it is not morally wrong for God to create or permit the various evils, normally on the grounds that doing so is providing the logically necessary conditions of greater goods." What is the greater good which justifies the harm that we do to others? Swinburne replies,

A world in which no one except the agent was affected by his evil actions might be a world in which men had freedom but it would not be a world in which men had responsibility ... So then the theodist objects ... on the grounds that the price of possible passive evils for other creatures is a price worth paying for agents to have great responsibilities for each other. It is a price which (logically) must be paid if they are to have those responsibilities.

[3] Swinburne's analysis is not an analysis of moral responsibility, but of pseudo-responsibility; it involves a vulgarization of the concept. From the truth that we could not feel responsible unless we were responsible to someone or for something, it does not follow that someone or something should be regarded as opportunities for us to feel responsible. If we remind someone of his responsibilities, we are directing his attention to concerns other than himself. Swinburne's analysis makes these concerns the servants of that self. Compare: "He recognizes the importance of his job" with "His job makes him feel important". Similarly, instead of sometimes feeling responsible for or a responsibility toward the afflictions of others, we would, in terms of Swinburne's analysis, look on those afflictions as opportunities for feeling responsible. It is as if the Parable of the Good Samaritan were thought to show that unlike the priest and the levite, the Samaritan did not pass by an opportunity of feeling responsible.

[4] Furthermore, even if the feeling of responsibility had not been vulgarized in Swinburne's analysis, it would not follow that a responsible reaction justifies the evil or suffering which occasions it. This has been well expressed by W. Somerset Maugham:

It may be that courage and sympathy are excellent and that they could not come into existence without danger and suffering. It is hard to see how the Victoria Cross that rewards the soldier who has risked his life to save a blinded man is going to solace him for the loss of his sight. To give alms shows charity, and charity is a virtue, but does that good compensate for the evil of the cripple whose poverty has called it forth?

The Problem of the Quantity of Evil

[5] Let us go further down Swinburne's road. He has noticed already that men intentionally bring evil to others, but now he also notices that there is quite a lot of evil around. Therefore he feels that a third moral principle advanced by the antitheodist needs answering, namely, "that a creator able to do so ought to ensure that any creature whom he creates does not cause passive evils as many and as evil as those in our world." God may have laid out a moral obstacle race for mankind, but are the obstacles too difficult? A defender of the third moral principle "says that in our world freedom and responsibility have gone too far – produced too much physical and mental hurt. God might well tolerate a boy hitting his younger brother, but not Belsen." Swinburne admits that this would be a telling criticism if true, but as he looks around him he does not believe it is true. On the contrary, Swinburne believes that God has created a world where the men are sorted out from the boys. It means "that the creator must create them immature, and allow them gradually to make decisions which affect the sort of beings they will be." This is why Swinburne calls our world "a half-finished universe". The words are well chosen, since the picture is of a finishing school with God as the benevolent headmaster setting the tests. But does Swinburne's God pass the test of benevolence? It is hard to see that he does when we hear Swinburne's argument to show that in allowing evil God has not gone too far:

There are limits to the amount and degree of evil which is possible in our world. Thus there are limits to the amount of pain which a person can suffer — persons only live in our world so many years and the amount which they can suffer at any given time (if mental goings-on are in any way correlated with bodily ones) is limited by their physiology ... So the theodist can certainly claim that a good God stops too much suffering — it is just that he and his opponent draw the line in different places.

[6] Can the theodist make such a claim on the basis of Swinburne's argument? I think not. There is an unwarrantable transition in the argument from talk of the world to talk about human beings, and, more important, from conceivable limits to actual limits. Of course, for any evils in the world we mention, more can be conceived of, but this is neither here nor there as far as the question of whether human beings are visited with greater afflictions than they can bear is concerned. Swinburne argues that since any human being can stand only so much suffering and we can conceive of more, it follows that God has not produced unlimited suffering and therefore has not gone too far. But, clearly, he has produced too much suffering for that human being and has gone too far for him. Such questions cannot be answered in an abstract or global way. What constitutes a limit or going too far for one person may not do so for another. In order to judge whether a human being has suffered more than he can bear, we need to refer to actual limits, not conceivable limits. By judging

actual limits as if they were conceivable limits, Swinburne could deny that even a person's death could count as going too far in his case. "After all," he might say, "he could have died a worse death." I find this whole defense rather perverse. God's finishing school is one where everyone is finished in one sense or another. Either they are well finished, educated to maturity by their experience in the moral obstacle race, or they are finished off completely by it. If the finishing off were done by someone who was solely the bringer of death, then, in certain circumstances, he could be described as the bringer of welcome release. But this is not true of Swinburne's God. Since the bringer of death is also the bringer of afflictions, he who devised the whole fiendish obstacle race, one cannot even attribute to him the compassion with which a dog may be put out of his misery.

[7] As he goes further down his road, Swinburne thinks that the possibility of evil can be justified in terms of the opportunities for noble actions it provides:

given a creator, then, without an immoral act on his part, for acts of courage, compassion, etc., to be acts open to men to perform, there have to be various evils. Evils give men the opportunity to perform those acts which show men at their best. A world without evils would be a world in which men could show no forgiveness, no compassion, no self-sacrifice. And men without that opportunity are deprived of the opportunity to show themselves at their noblest. For this reason God might well allow some of his creatures to perform evil acts with passive evils as consequences, since these provide the opportunity for especially noble acts.

[8] This argument ignores a great deal, its main defect being its one-sided optimism. Why should evil beget good? One cannot feel remorse without having done wrong, but evil may give one an appetite for more. One cannot show forgiveness without something to forgive, but that something may destroy or prompt savage reactions. In a man's own life natural evils such as illness or social evils such as poverty may debase and destroy him. Swinburne says,

Pain normally occurs when something goes wrong with the working of our body which is going to lead to further limitation on the purposes which we can achieve; and the pain ends when the body is repaired. The existence of the pain spurs the sufferer, and others through the sympathetic suffering which arises when they learn of the sufferer's pain, to do something about the bodily malfunctioning. Yet giving men such feelings which they are inclined to end involves the imposition of no character.

[9] Swinburne is faced with formidable contrary testimony often expressed in art or from recollection of experience. Here are W. Somerset Maugham's recollections of what he saw in hospital wards as he trained for the medical profession:

At that time (a time to most people of sufficient ease, when peace seemed certain and prosperity secure) there was a school of writers who enlarged upon the moral value of suffering. They claimed that it was salutary. They claimed that it increased sympathy and enhanced the sensibilities. They claimed that it opened to the spirit new avenues of beauty and enables it to get into touch with the mystical kingdom of God. They claimed that it strengthened the character, purified it from its human grossness, and brought to him who did not avoid but sought it a more perfect happiness ... I set down in my note-books, not once or twice, but in a dozen places, the facts that I had seen. I knew that suffering did not ennoble; it degraded. It made men selfish, mean, petty, and suspicious. It absorbed them in small things. It did not

make them more than men; it made them less than men; and I wrote ferociously that we learn resignation not by our own suffering, but by the suffering of others.

[10] Not only need evil not occasion goodness, but goodness itself may occasion evils. Swinburne does not consider these possibilities. The depth of a man's love may lead him to kill his wife's lover or to be destroyed when the object of his love is lost to him. A man whose love was mediocre would not have done either of these things. Love has as much to do with the terrible as with the wonderful. The presence of goodness in some may be the cause of hatred in others. Budd's goodness is more than Claggart can bear and it is the very possibility that deep love may be a reality which Iago cannot admit into his dark soul.

[11] On his travels Swinburne has seen how human beings intervene from time to time to help each other in their troubles. Sometimes, when fortunate, they can prevent those troubles occurring, and they often try to prevent things getting worse. He realizes then that he has to answer the question why his God does not intervene in circumstances where mere mortals would not hesitate. His answers are not encouraging. Roughly, they amount to saying that just as parents know more than their children and are often right not to act when their offspring beg them to do so, so God, the Father of us all, knowing more than we know, refrains from acting despite the cries of the afflicted. Here is a sample:

Hence a God who sees far more clearly than we do the consequences of quarrels may have duties very different from ours with respect to particular such quarrels. He may know that the suffering that A will cause B is not nearly as great as B's screams may suggest to us and will provide (unknown to us) an opportunity to C to help B recover and will thus give C a deep responsibility which he would not otherwise have.

[12] I have already commented on the character of such a sense of responsibility, and that is not my purpose now. It is true that sometimes considering a matter further is a sign of reasonableness and maturity. But this cannot be stated absolutely, since at other times readiness to be open-minded about matters is a sign of a corrupt mind. There are screams and screams, and to ask of what use are the screams of the innocent, as Swinburne's defense would have us do, is to embark on a speculation we should not even contemplate. We have our reasons, final human reasons, for putting a moral full stop at many places. If God has other reasons, they are his reasons, not ours, and they do not overrule them. That is why, should he ask us to consider them, we, along with Ivan Karamazov, respectfully, or not so respectfully, return him the ticket. So when Swinburne says, "The argument must go on with regard to particular cases ... The exhibition of consequences is a long process, and it takes time to convince an opponent even if he is prepared to be rational, more time than is available in this paper," one must not be misled by apparent reasonableness. Being prepared to consider the consequences of doing something is not the hallmark of moral reasonableness. Often, when the invitation to consider consequences is made, the appropriate reply is "Get thee behind me, Satan!" And if there is a "higher" form of reasoning among God and his angels, where such matters are open for compromise and calculation, then so much the worse for God and his angels. If they reason in this way in the heavenly places, we can say with Wallace Stevens, "Alas that they should wear our colors there ..."

The Moral Insensitivity of Theodicies

[13] Having traveled with Swinburne to the end of the road he has chosen to go down, noting various ills and misfortunes to which human beings are subject, we are now in a position to summarize the answer to the problem of evil which he brings before us: There are doubts as to whether it makes sense to imagine men who are naturally good without actual evils in the world. It is equally doubtful to say that God ought to have seen to it that men freely reach the right decisions. Even if the notion of the best of all logically possible worlds made sense, God would have no obligation to create such a world, for whom would he harm if he did not? There are good reasons for saying that the various evils in the world are compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, all-good God. Such evils as we bring on others give us the opportunity of feeling responsible, and that is a good thing. After all, such evils are not unlimited, since there is a limit to what anyone can stand. Evils give us an opportunity to be seen at our best in reacting to them. God does not intervene to prevent evil when any decent human being would, because he has a wider knowledge of the situations in which evils occur. In order to prompt us in the right direction without imposing characters on us, God has seen to it that physical and mental evils are linked to things going wrong.

[14] Looking back at the details of his case, Swinburne says that "a morally sensitive antitheodist might well in principle accept some of the above arguments." This conclusion is a somewhat embarrassing one since it is evident from my comments that one of the strongest criticisms available to the antitheodist would be the moral insensitivity of the theodist's case. There is an example in Billie Holiday's autobiography which combines many of the circumstances to which Swinburne calls our attention but which also sums up the fragility of his optimistic analyses. She tells of a well-known jazz personality who was a drug addict:

I can tell you about a big-name performer who had a habit and a bad one. There were times when he had it licked. And other times it licked him. It went around that way for years. He was well known, like me, which makes it worse. He had bookings to make contracts to fulfill. In the middle of one engagement he was about to crack up and go crazy because he had run out of stuff. There was no way in God's world that he could kick cold turkey and make three shows a day. There wasn't a doctor in town who would be seen looking at him. His wife got so scared he'd kill himself that she tried to help him the only way she knew — by risking her own neck and trying to get him what he needed. She went out in the street like a pigeon, begging everyone she knew for help. Finally she found someone who sold her some stuff for an arm and a leg. It was just her luck to be carrying it back to her old man when she was arrested.

She was as innocent and clean as the day she was born. But she knew that if she tried to tell that to the cops it would only make her a "pusher" under the law, liable for a good long time in jail. She thought if she told them she was a user, and took some of the stuff in her pocket to prove it, they might believe her, feel sorry for her, go easy on her. And she could protect her man. So that's what she did. She used junk for the first time to prove to the law she wasn't a pusher. And that's the way she got hooked. She's rotting in jail right now. Yes siree bob, life is just a bowl of cherries.

[15] In replying to Swinburne's arguments I have chosen in the main to comment on his reading of the fortunes and misfortunes of human life, a reading which is to serve in the construction of a theodicy. Theodicies, such as Swinburne's, are marked by their order, optimism and progress. If we want to appreciate why Swinburne should not have turned down the road on which he chooses to travel in the first place, this, above all, is what has to be put aside. Throughout Swinburne's paper, the main emphasis, with only an occasional hint of difficulties, is on the world as a God-given setting in which human beings can exercise rational choices which determine the kind of people they are to become. This is neither the world I know, nor the world in which Swinburne lives. Ours is a world where disasters of natural and moral kinds can strike without rhyme or reason. Where, if much can be done to influence character, much can also bring about such influence over which we have no control. Character has as much, and probably more, to do with reacting to the unavoidable, as with choosing between available alternatives.

[16] Swinburne admits that his God does ask a lot of his creatures, but says,

A theodocist is in a better position to defend a theodicy such as I have outlined if he is prepared also to make the further additional claim that God knowing the worthwhileness of the conquest of evil and the perfecting of the universe by men, shared with them this task by subjecting himself as man to the evil in the world. A creator is more justified in creating or permitting evils to be overcome by his creatures if he is prepared to share with them the burden of the suffering and effort.

[17] Not so, for if the visit to our world were by a God such as Swinburne describes, those who said that there was no room at the inn would be right. We should not be at home to such callers. And if perchance we were asked to choose between this visitor and another, we should unhesitatingly demand, "Give us Prometheus!"