

OMNISCIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Can the problem of evil be avoided by modifying the definition of 'God'? P. J. McGrath argues in a recent article, 'Evil and the Existence of a Finite God' (*Analysis* 46.1, January 1986), that a theist cannot avoid the problem of evil by revising the concept of God (so that God has either limited power or goodness). McGrath points out that if God is conceived as less than all-powerful in order to avoid the problem of evil, then that would amount to saying that evil occurs because God cannot prevent it. However, some evils, such as smallpox, are such that human beings can eliminate them. If such a God cannot do what human beings can accomplish, then God is a weakling that is not a proper object of worship. On the other hand, if God is conceived as less than all-good in order to avoid the problem of evil, then that amounts to saying that evil occurs because God tolerates it. But such an entity would be a 'moral monster.' McGrath makes his point by citing analogues to human behaviour. We would condemn a surgeon who knowingly performs operations without anaesthetic when it is available. An omnipotent being 'would be open to much greater moral condemnation' (McGrath, p. 64). Roger Crisp, in 'The Avoidance of the Problem of Evil: A Reply to McGrath' (*Analysis* 46.3, June 1986), argues that both options remain open to theists. Crisp points out that one option open to theists is to postulate the existence of an infinitely evil and powerful spirit who sometimes prevents a less than omnipotent, but still very powerful God from achieving good or at least preventing evil. Likewise, Crisp argues that because an agent is less responsible for his omissions than for his acts, theists could say that God does not bring about any evil, although God allows

some evil to occur. Such a God could still be worthy of worship, although not as worthy of worship as a God who prevented evil. But at any rate McGrath is wrong to say that such a God would be a 'moral monster.' On the other hand, Michael B. Burke (*Analysis* 47.1, January 1987) thinks that McGrath proves that conceiving of God as lacking in goodness would not solve the problem of evil. But Burke believes that McGrath has not shown that conceiving of God as limited in power would contribute little to a solution to the problem. According to Burke, God may not have eliminated smallpox, not because doing so is beyond God's power, but

because God's vast but finite power was required for the elimination or prevention of *greater* evils. It could be suggested, to give just one example, that our galaxy is but one of hundreds of millions with intelligent life, that God can attend to 'only' a dozen galaxies at a time, and that ours is not among those most urgently in need of his attention (Burke, p. 58).

For his part, McGrath replies ('Children of a Lesser God? A Reply to Burke and Crisp') that Burke and Crisp have misunderstood his point, which was to show that even if theists conceive of God as limited in power or goodness, they have not thereby *avoided* the problem of evil. Theists still face problems of explanation. According to McGrath, the sheer fact that Burke and Crisp try to show how a finite God could be squared with evil only helps to make his point. McGrath does not try to prove that the manoeuvre of changing the definition of 'God' renders the problem of evil insoluble. McGrath tries to prove that changing the definition of 'God' does not eliminate the problem of evil. It is one thing to try to *eliminate* or *avoid* a philosophical problem, and quite another to try to solve it.

What is surprising is that all of the participants in this exchange have overlooked the fact that one option open to theists is to conceive of God as having limited knowledge. Here I shall argue that conceiving of God as less than omniscient cannot dissolve the problem of evil, either.

If a theist were to say that God is not omniscient in order to dissolve the problem of evil, that would amount to saying that God does not prevent evil because God does not know that it occurs. This hypothesis does not strictly entail that God is ignorant of all evil, for God *could* be aware of those evils that serve a greater good. But the hypothesis does not imply that God knows about any evil, either. The hypothesis does imply that God is ignorant of evils that do not lead to a greater good.

However, if an alleged greater good is invoked, then the change of the definition would serve as only a partial dissolution of the problem, eliminating those troublesome cases that cannot otherwise be explained. This change of the concept of God would be a convenient *ad hoc* hypothesis in conjunction with a (partial) solution—not a dissolution—of the problem of evil (the partial solution being in terms of the alleged greater good). Moreover, theists who tried this manoeuvre would still face the task of explaining why God is ignorant of only those evils that theists cannot otherwise explain. Thus, they would not have avoided even that part of the problem of evil. Hence we need not consider partial dissolutions of the problem further. Let us, therefore, consider the conception of God as less than all-knowing as an attempted dissolution of the entire problem of evil. This means that God would be ignorant of all evils.

This shows a flaw with the way some philosophers formulate the problem of evil. McGrath opens

'Evil and the Existence of a Finite God' with these words:

The problem of evil is almost invariably presented as an objection to the claim that a divine being exists who is both omnipotent and infinitely good. The implication is that to escape the problem one need only alter one's conception of God by limiting his power or his goodness. (p. 63)

But the problem of evil should be presented as an objection to the proposition that there exists a divine being that is omnipotent, infinitely good, and all-knowing. Why? The two options McGrath mentions are not the only two ways a theist might try to avoid the problem.

Here is one possibility. Suppose a theist conceives of God as both all-powerful and all-good, but simply lacking knowledge of the evils that would otherwise establish the non-existence of such a being. McGrath argues for the conclusion that if a God that is less than all-good tolerated the evil that occurs because it did not care, then God would be a moral monster. (p. 64) McGrath's argument presupposes that God knows or justifiably believes that the evils in question occur.

Consider this second possibility. A theist postulates the existence of a God that is only slightly less than perfectly good, but who does not know about evils that would otherwise militate against the existence of such a God. Although God's belief that evil occurs or will occur would seem to suffice to provoke interference from an all-good being, such belief could be lacking. Of course, a theist is free to postulate that God believes every true proposition. However, the postulate that God believes every true proposition is not part of the traditional concept of God (save its implication by omniscience). Thus conceiving of God as less than omniscient would appear to offer theists another way to escape the problem of evil.

But that impression is an illusion, for a difficulty remains for the varieties of theism I have sketched. Basically, the problem is that this proposal leaves open possibilities that theists want closed. Consider the question 'Does God hear a person's prayers?' If God is less than omniscient, then God might not hear a person's prayers. If the prayer pertained to an evil, then by hypothesis God would not hear that prayer. Believers do not want that possibility left open. Consider the question 'Does God know that believers exist?' If God is less than omniscient, then God might be ignorant of the existence of human beings. This would make it impossible to have the sort of personal relationship with God that believers value. How could a believer have a personal relationship with a God who does not know that he exists? Belief in God would lose its significance if that possibility were left open. Only an omniscient God rules out that possibility.

Suppose it is objected that God could believe that humans exist and that this belief would underpin the personal relationship that believers find so valuable. In the first place, that is only a possibility that could just as well be false. Just as God might believe that there are human beings, God might not, for that matter. Second, this is comparable to someone writing letters to someone in whose existence he believes but does not know, much as children address letters to Santa Claus. Children might enjoy the fun of believing in Santa, but they do not have a personal relationship with him. Just so, God would not have a personal relationship with us if God merely believed that we exist.

Suppose theists specify the way in which God is not all-knowing. Consider this third possibility. Suppose some theists claim that God does not know the future any more than we do. This means that evil occurs because God does not know that it will happen before the fact, after which it is too late. It should be noted that this hypothesis is consistent with God's knowledge that we exist.

This proposal does not dissolve or avoid the problem of evil, either, for difficulties remain. First, justified belief about impending evil would suffice to prompt interference from an all-good and all-powerful being. After all, justified belief is sometimes sufficient to prompt people to intervene. Thus for this proposal to work, God would have to lack both knowledge and justified belief about the future. But if God lacks justified belief about the future, then God would have to be ignorant of many things in the present and past, for knowledge of only comparatively few things is sufficient for each of us to have justified beliefs about the future. The only alternative to this would be that God cannot reason inductively. Thus either God would be woefully ignorant of practically everything in the present and past (in order to prevent God from knowing enough to justify any beliefs about the future) or incapable of learning from experience (and hence more stupid than any animal). Both of these consequences are unacceptable to believers, and thus this proposal is not a way to avoid the problem of evil.

Strictly speaking, of course, only lack of justified belief about impending evils is implied. But then theists would face the difficulty of explaining how God lacked justified belief about only that particular topic. In other words, if that particular manoeuvre is made, the proposal is *ad hoc*. Besides, consequences similar to those just explained can be deduced from this proposal. God would have to be ignorant of quite a bit (although not as much as in the previous scenario) in order to lack justified belief about any impending evil. Insofar as persons are wrongdoers, God would have to be ignorant of all those facts that would justify belief that any wrongdoing is forthcoming. Thus God would be ignorant of such things as people's character traits and situations that lead to wrongdoing. This would wreak havoc with the idea of God's personal relationship with people. If God is by hypothesis ignorant of the 'bad side' of one's character and some situations in which one is, then one is not in a position to be loved for who one is, warts and all. God's 'knowledge' of persons would be of only those facts from which no impending wrongdoing or evil could be inferred, which is somewhat comparable to a young lover who idealises his loved one. Again, since believers find this consequence unacceptable, this is not a way to try to avoid the problem of evil.

If theists try to avoid part of the problem of evil by proposing that God is not all-knowing, then they must answer the objection that the proposal is a convenient *ad hoc* hypothesis. In short, that part of the problem has not been avoided. And if theists try to eliminate the entire problem of evil with the proposal that God is not all-knowing, then they face the objections I have presented here. Thus, the proposal that God is not all-knowing does not avoid (or dissolve) the problem of evil.

I think that McGrath is right in claiming that changing one's concept of God does not avoid the problem of evil. However, since he does not consider the proposal that God is not all-knowing, McGrath has not proven that conclusion. By considering the other option open to theists, I think I have added what is necessary to draw that conclusion.