Chapter Three

The Problem of Evil

This chapter serves as an introduction to Swinburne's *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (hereafter, *PPE*), which is a comprehensive examination of the challenge posed by the existence of evil to belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God. Swinburne aims to demonstrate that the existence of evil is not logically incompatible with theism. He argues that God permits certain evils because they are necessary for achieving greater goods, such as free will, moral growth and the development of virtues. The chapter introduces readers to the central aim and structure of Swinburne's arguments, situating them within the broader context of contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion. It outlines the major sections of the work, including an analysis of the necessity of theodicy, the philosophical and theological underpinnings of evil, and the construction of a coherent theodicy that reconciles the existence of evil with divine providence. By providing this overview, the chapter prepares readers to engage deeply with Swinburne's systematic and rigorous examination of the problem of evil, demonstrating that its existence is not logically incompatible with theism.

Providence and the Problem of Evil: Background

Central Aim

The central aim of *PPE* is to address the challenge posed by the existence of evil to the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God. Swinburne seeks to demonstrate that the existence of evil is

not logically incompatible with theism. He argues that God permits certain evils because they are necessary for achieving greater goods, such as free will, moral growth and the development of virtues. *PPE* is structured to tackle both philosophical and theological issues related to the problem of evil. It involves a detailed analysis of the nature of evil and the reasons why a benevolent God might allow it to exist.

Historical Significance

PPE was published in 1998 as the fourth book in Swinburne's tetralogy on Christian doctrine. It is important to note that, even though *PPE* is part of the tetralogy on Christian doctrine (and thus includes certain teachings found within Christianity), the overall focus of the work is on rebutting the problem of evil, which is traditionally an issue against a general theistic conception of God, and thus this work fits better with the project of bare theism, rather than that of ramified theism. The immediate historical context of *PPE* involves broader debates about the nature of evil and its relation to the existence of God. Philosophers such as J.L. Mackie, in *The Miracle of Theism*, William Rowe, in 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism',[1] and Paul Draper, in 'Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists',[2] had famously challenged the compatibility of the existence of evil with the belief in a benevolent God. Moreover, Alvin Plantinga had also famously responded to these challenges (specifically that of Mackie in his paper 'Evil and Omnipotence'),[3] in the form of the free will defence, most notably in his work *God, Freedom, and Evil*.[4] *PPE* thus seeks directly to address the challenges raised by these philosophers and to provide an alternative to Plantinga's approach, by proposing a structured framework for understanding how a good God could justifiably permit evil. This robust approach to this perennial issue has thus significantly influenced subsequent philosophical discussions about the problem of evil and the existence of God.

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1. Rowe, William L. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979): pp. 335-341.
2. Draper, Paul. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." *Noûs* 23, no. 3 (1989): pp. 331-350.
3. Mackie, J.L. (1955). "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind*, 64(254), pp. 200-212.
4. Plantinga, 'Freedom'.

Literary Structure

PPE is divided into four main parts: 'The Problem of Evil', 'The Good Goals of Creation', 'The Necessary Evils' and 'Completing the Theodicy'. However, for continuity with the previous chapters in this book, we shall retain the terminology and dual structure as follows::

1. *Philosophical Framework – The Need for Theodicy*: The first part of *PPE* focusses on establishing the philosophical framework for theodicy. Swinburne discusses the necessity of theodicy, defining it as an account of reasons why God might allow evil to occur. Without a theodicy, the existence of evil counts as evidence against the existence of God. Swinburne explores various strands of theodicy within the Christian tradition, emphasising that an adequate theodicy must demonstrate that the existence of evil is compatible with the greater good that God aims to bring about. Swinburne identifies key criteria for a successful theodicy such that God is justified in permitting the existence of evil if: (i) it serves a greater good and the evil is a necessary condition for the realisation of this greater good; (ii) God has the right to allow the evil to occur; (iii) God does everything possible to bring about the good without the evil; and (iv) the expected value of allowing the evil is positive. These criteria form the backbone of Swinburne's philosophical framework, guiding his analysis throughout. In further elucidating this framework, Swinburne also investigates the goods that God aims to achieve, such as beauty, moral and intellectual development, and the capacity for worship, arguing that many of these goods cannot be realised without the existence of certain evils.

2. *Theological Application – Construction of Theodicy*: The second part of *PPE* applies the established philosophical framework to specific theological claims about the nature of God's providence and the necessity of evil. Swinburne argues that many theological claims about God's providence can be better understood when viewed through the lens of

the goods that God aims to achieve and the necessity of certain evils in realising those goods and, thus, provides reasons within this perspective for why God would bring about certain evils within the world. Swinburne thus focusses on addressing the role of free will in God's plan for creation. He contends that significant moral freedom, which allows humans to choose between good and evil, is a necessary condition for genuine love and moral growth. This freedom, however, inevitably leads to the possibility of moral evil. Swinburne argues that the potential for such evil is a necessary cost over a wide range of greater goods that justify God's permittance of evil – and even if they do not, there will be adequate compensation provided in the afterlife.

We shall now unpack in greater detail the various areas covered in both parts of *PPE*.

Themes

Philosophical Framework: The Need for Theodicy

In this section, Swinburne introduces the philosophical framework that is necessary to address the problem of evil, which centres on the need for one to provide a theodicy – a justification of God's existence in the face of evil. Swinburne explains the complexities of moral and natural evil, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of why a perfectly good and omnipotent God might allow bad states to occur. He critiques and refines traditional arguments against God's existence based on the presence of evil and presents a sophisticated defence that considers greater goods and the limitations of divine action. Swinburne then contextualises his theodicy within the Christian tradition, exploring historical and theological perspectives on evil and suffering, and extends his analysis to the intrinsic goodness of creation, mental states, actions and worship.

Problem of Evil
There is a necessity for one to formulate a theodicy – a justification for God permitting the existence of evil. This arises from the challenges posed by the existence of morally bad states, which seem incompatible

with the concept of an omnipotent and perfectly good God. The existence of such states necessitates a defence that can reconcile the reality of suffering and evil with the traditional attributes ascribed to God. Hence, a theodicy aims to provide possible reasons why God, despite his omnipotence and perfect goodness, might permit the existence of evil. These reasons must show that allowing certain bad states to occur could lead to a greater good that outweighs the bad. Additionally, there is a distinction between a theodicy and a defence. While a theodicy attempts to provide possible reasons for God allowing evil, showing that it is logically compatible with his goodness and omnipotence, a defence only needs to show that the existence of evil does not contradict the existence of God. A defence aims to demonstrate that the atheist's argument fails conclusively to prove God's non-existence by highlighting that the premises used may not necessarily lead to the conclusion that God does not exist. A successful defence refutes the atheistic argument by showing that the coexistence of God and evil is possible, even if we do not know the specific reasons God might have for permitting evil. The term 'theodicy' and 'defence' are thus interchangeable and can thus encompass any justification that addresses the problem of evil, whether it provides specific reasons or merely shows compatibility between God and the existence of evil. Thus, in formulating a theodicy, it is crucial to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' rather than 'evil' when discussing actions and states of affairs. 'States of affairs' includes both the events that happen to people and their intentional actions. Pain and suffering are bad states of affairs but are not necessarily evil unless caused or allowed by an agent with malevolent intent. Thus, again, the real issue at hand is the existence of bad states of affairs that seem inconsistent with the actions of a perfectly good and omnipotent being.

Now, it is important to distinguish between moral and natural evil. Moral evil encompasses all bad states deliberately caused by humans doing what they believe to be wrong or by negligently failing to do what they believe to be good. This includes direct actions like inflicting pain or failing to prevent harm, as well as actions such as lying or breaking promises where no suffering results. Natural evil, on the other hand, includes bad states not directly caused by humans, such as diseases and natural disasters, as well as bad desires and temptations that lead to actions like greed and deceit. In addition, in a broader sense, 'moral' is understood as including the sense of

'overall' or 'overriding', where morally good acts are those that are good overall. Obligations, such as keeping promises or not harming others, fall under morally good acts but, as noted previously, there are also supererogatory acts that go beyond obligation, such as giving to charity at one's own expense. Morally bad acts, conversely, are those that are bad overall and include wrong acts that wrong God, termed as sins. Given this, the argument against the existence of God based on the presence of morally bad states can then be presented as follows:

1. If God exists, he is omnipotent and perfectly good.
2. A perfectly good being would not allow any morally bad state to occur if he could prevent it.
3. An omnipotent being can prevent all morally bad states.
4. There exists at least one morally bad state.
5. Therefore, there is no God.

This argument is a valid deductive argument, meaning that if the premises are true, the conclusion follows logically. However, premise two can be challenged, as a perfectly good being might allow bad states to occur for the sake of greater goods. As it is not always wrong to bring about or allow a bad state if it leads to a greater good. For example, a parent might allow a child to suffer the temporary pain of a visit to the dentist for the greater good of dental health. Similarly, God might allow suffering to achieve greater goods that humans cannot fully comprehend.

Hence, to further refine the argument, premise two can be developed into a more sophisticated version that takes into account the possibility of greater goods resulting from bad states. The revised premise two thus states:

2. A perfectly good being will never allow a morally bad state to occur if (i) he can prevent it – unless it is the only way to achieve a greater good (i.e. it is the necessary condition for the realisation of the greater good), (ii) he has the right to allow it, (iii) he does everything else possible to achieve the good, and (iv) the expected value of allowing the bad state is positive.

Now, the theist's defence is that God allows bad states to occur only if they meet the four-fold criteria featured in the above premise. Thus, this defence requires it to be shown that each bad state allowed

by God meets the conditions of having a morally justifiable reason. Moreover, while this defence may not always be evident to humans, it is reasonable to believe that God has justifiable reasons for allowing bad states to occur. Thus, addressing the problem of evil requires a theodicy that explains how bad states of affairs can coexist with the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God. This involves recognising the potential for greater goods that might justify the presence of bad states and understanding the limitations and self-imposed constraints on God's actions.

Theodicy in Christian Tradition

The problem of evil is particularly pressing within theistic thought due to the dual commitments to God's omnipotence and perfect goodness. Denying either attribute, as some such as the Manichaeans did, can bypass the problem of evil. Manichaeism posited that God was not strong enough to prevent evil because Good (God) and Evil were two equally powerful forces. In a similar vein, modern process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb have claimed that God is not omnipotent and that evil exists because God cannot eliminate it. However, traditional Christian theodicy maintains that God is omnipotent and perfectly good, and the existence of evil must be reconciled within this framework.

Now, within traditional Christian thinking concerning the problem of evil, evil has been conceived of as *privation boni*, or the absence of good. This idea, which was influenced by Neoplatonism, suggests that evil is not a real, positive entity but rather a lack of some good that ought to be present. Pseudo-Dionysius described evil as 'purposeless, ugly, lifeless, mindless, unreasonable, imperfect'; and Aquinas, in his work *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 4, Art.1,[5] also supported this view, stating that nothing is called bad in so far as it is an entity, but rather in so far as it lacks some being, such as a man being called bad if he lacks virtue. Despite the appeal of this view, it is indeed implausible, as pain and suffering, bad desires and wicked acts are more than mere absences of good; they are positive states that cannot be fully explained by *privatio boni*. Most Christian thinkers have argued that God allows evil to occur for the sake of greater goods that

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5. Aquinas, *Summa*. First Part, Question 4, Article 1.

could not be achieved otherwise. Augustine, in his work *Enchiridion*,[6] likened the universe to a beautiful picture that is enhanced by well-managed shadows, suggesting that the presence of sinners can, in a broader view, contribute to the overall beauty of creation. Thus, this greater good defence posits that some evils make possible greater goods, although specifying these goods in every instance remains challenging.

However, what is central to many theodicies is the free will defence, which asserts that moral evil results from the misuse of human free will, and free will, of the libertarian kind, is a great good because it allows humans to make meaningful choices and develop moral virtues. Additionally, the concept of the Fall is another crucial element in many theodicies. Augustine, in his work *The City of God*,[7] and later theologians saw Adam's sin as causing not only human mortality and suffering but also a proneness to sin transmitted through generations. This view, while prominent in Western Christianity, is not universally accepted. For example, Eastern Orthodox theology tends to emphasise the immature nature of humanity at creation and sees the Fall more as a stage in human development rather than a catastrophic event. Moreover, Augustine's idea of original guilt, which makes all humans guilty for Adam's sin, has been rejected by many modern theologians as morally untenable. Other strands of theodicy have also emerged within the Christian tradition. The Book of Job, for example, grapples with the question of suffering without providing a systematic explanation, instead highlighting the inscrutability of God's ways; and the New Testament, while not offering a comprehensive theodicy, suggests that suffering can serve a purpose, such as revealing God's works or testing faith. Additionally, the value of suffering in moral and spiritual development is also a theme that is especially prominent in Eastern Orthodox thought. Thus, a comprehensive theodicy integrates various elements from the Christian tradition to show that God has good reasons for allowing both moral and natural evil; and, despite various reasons that have been put forward in Church history, this will include emphasising

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6. Augustine of Hippo. *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*. Edited by Henry Paolucci. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1961.

7. Augustine. *The City of God Against the Pagans*. Edited and translated by R. W. Dyson. Cambridge University Press, 1998, Book XIII, Chapter 14, pp. 569-570.