

Handout on Derk Pereboom's "The Problem of Evil"

I. The Problem

At the heart of Pereboom's chapter is the *problem of evil*—a challenge to traditional theistic belief, especially as it appears in *classical monotheism*, which posits a deity who is:

- **Omniscient** (all-knowing)
- **Omnipotent** (all-powerful)
- **Omnibenevolent** (all-good)

The problem of evil arises from the apparent contradiction between these divine attributes and the existence of evil in the world.

Two Forms of the Problem:

- **The Logical (Modal) Problem of Evil:** Claims that it is logically or metaphysically *impossible* for both God and evil to exist.
 - **The Evidential Problem of Evil:** Argues that, while not logically impossible, the existence of evil renders the existence of God *improbable* or less likely.
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II. Response Strategies

Pereboom surveys and evaluates several major responses to the problem of evil:

A. Theodicy vs. Defense

- **Theodicy:** Attempts to justify God's permitting evil by proposing actual reasons (meant to be probable or true).

- **Defense:** More modest; only aims to show that God's existence is *possibly* consistent with evil (not necessarily probably so).

Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense

- Tackles the *abstract* logical problem of evil.
- Core claim: It's *possible* that every possible person suffers from **transworld depravity**—they would commit some moral evil in any possible world in which they are significantly free.
- If this is true, God could not actualize a world with significant freedom and no evil.

Critiques:

- **David Lewis:** Suggests God could allow freedom only in cases where He foresees good choices.
 - **Keith DeRose:** Questions the legitimacy of inferring possibility from lack of disproof.
 - **Marilyn Adams:** Stresses that the *concrete* version of the problem—actual horrendous evils—remains unsolved by abstract defenses.
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III. Theodicies: Traditional and Non-Traditional

A. Traditional Theodicies

1. Free Will Theodicy

- God permits moral evil to preserve the value of human *libertarian* free will.
- Challenges:
 - Natural evils (e.g., earthquakes) aren't easily explained.
 - Horrendous evils raise concerns about God's selective intervention (e.g., genocide).

- Swinburne's argument: even freely *executed* evil actions have intrinsic value—but this clashes with intuitive moral judgments.

2. Soul-Building Theodicy (John Hick, Eleonore Stump)

- Evil fosters moral and spiritual development.
- Issues:
 - Some evils (e.g., children dying of meningitis) seem only destructive, not developmental.
 - Hick claims these appear pointless but help stimulate compassionate responses.
 - Objection: such extreme suffering is not necessary for soul-building—lesser evils could suffice.

3. Punishment Theodicy

- Evil is divine punishment for sin.
 - Rebuttal:
 - Most actual sufferings (e.g., child abuse) cannot plausibly be justified as punishment.
 - Modern judicial and moral intuitions reject such disproportionality.
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B. Non-Traditional Theodicies

1. Process Theology (Hartshorne, Whitehead)

- Rejects divine omnipotence; God can only *persuade*, not coerce.
- Strength: coherently explains the existence of evil.

- Weakness: undermines traditional concepts of divine providence and worship-worthiness.

2. Spinoza's View

- Retains omnipotence but denies divine *moral goodness*.
 - God does not will or desire; thus, talk of divine goodness is incoherent.
 - Radical departure from theistic tradition; avoids the problem of evil altogether, but also eschews personal relationship and providence.
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IV. Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theists argue we should not expect to understand God's reasons due to our cognitive limitations.

Key Points:

- **Stephen Wykstra's Epistemic Condition:** One is entitled to say "it appears that p" only if it is *likely* that one would *discern* a difference if p were false.
- Since God's knowledge is vastly superior, we are *not in a position* to say "it appears there is no reason for God to allow evil".

Criticisms:

- **William Rowe:** Such skepticism leads to the unreasonable implication that *no amount or kind of evil* would lower the probability of God's existence.
- **Moral Practice Problem** (Bruce Russell):
 - If God might allow evil for inscrutable goods, then we might have moral reason to allow suffering too.
 - This undermines our moral intuitions and practices.

- **Swinburne's Symmetry Argument:**
 - Why assume cognitive bias only in underestimating goods?
 - Perhaps we also overestimate the value of *apparent* goods that mask deeper evils.
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V. Conclusion

Pereboom's assessment is ultimately *critical* of all theistic responses to the problem of evil:

- **Free will and soul-building theodicies** fall short especially with horrendous evils.
 - **Skeptical theism**, while more modest, leads to problematic implications about knowledge, morality, and rational belief.
 - Nevertheless, even if the evidential problem reduces the probability of God's existence, *other forms of evidence (e.g., religious experience, sensus divinitatis)* may outweigh it in some cases (Plantinga's analogy: Feike and swimming).
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