

QUIZ ONE

Write a short discussion (say 2 to 4 pages) on the following.

What is the problem of evil? How does Philo's argument in Part X of the *Dialogues* work? Does he succeed in showing the God of western theism does not exist? Why, or why not?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL & PHILO'S ARGUMENT

The problem of evil is a theological puzzle or challenge for believers in the God of western theism. Theists believe that God is omnipotent, able to do anything (or at least, anything that is logically possible), and that God is morally perfect. Yet it is an undeniable fact about this world that there is a lot of evil. How could this be? Hume's character, Philo, asks us to think back to an ancient formulation of the problem.

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered.

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?¹

Philo begins his argument in Part X by reminding us that there is indeed evil in the world, a lot of evil. There is "1st order evil" – pain, suffering, misery, etc. This first order evil come in three varieties. There is "moral evil," the pain and suffering that results from human actions and choices. War, genocide, and hurting someone's feelings are examples of moral evil. There is "natural evil," the pain and suffering that result from natural occurrences like disease and natural disasters. In addition, there is all of the pain and suffering that is

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part X, on-line:
<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/dnr.htm#A11>

experienced, and has been experienced for hundreds of thousands of years, by non-human animals. Finally, there are a host of "2nd order evils," cowardice, cruelty, and sin, to name just a few of the character failures of human actors.

Philo seems to be arguing that there is something logically flawed in believing in the theistic God, and at the same time acknowledging the existence of evil. Johnson suggested in lectures that Philo might believe that theists believe in an "inconsistent triad." Consider the following three sentences:

1. The number is a prime number.
2. The number is an even number.
3. The number is greater than two.

Any two of these sentences can be true at the same time, but taken together they are inconsistent with one another. Philo suggests that theism has the same sort of logical problem:

4. God is omnipotent.
5. God is morally perfect.
6. Evil exists.

Since all three of Hume's characters believe that (6) is true, it seems the theist must abandon either (4) or (5). One interpretation of Hume's discussion focuses on what we mean by God's omnipotence and moral perfection. Perhaps if these terms are interpreted in some non-anthropomorphic way, the problem of evil only establishes that we must interpret omnipotence and/or moral perfection in very different ways than we do the limited notions of human power and goodness.

The more radical version of the problem of evil, though, assumes an anthropomorphic understanding of the divine attributes. On this interpretation,

Philo's argument is a purported *proof* that the God of theism does not exist. If we accept the existence of evil [I don't see how we could not accept it], and if we accept that God is (by definition) both omnipotent and morally perfect, a genuine inconsistent triad would commit us, logically, to God's non-existence.

I think Philo's argument in Part X fails, because I believe that 4-6 do not constitute a genuine inconsistent triad. Examples we talked about at the end of the first week and throughout the second week show us that allowing, even causing, pain and suffering do not always count against the goodness (or moral perfection) of an agent. Parents give awful tasting medicine to their children; they allow them to go to birthday parties knowing they will come home with tummy aches; and good surgeons allow their patients to suffer arthritis, even though a simple amputation would completely eliminate the pain. The triad in 4-6 is perfectly compatible with God having, what Pike called a "morally sufficient reason" for evil.²

Although Philo's logical argument from evil in Part X fails, I think he may be on to something important after his "retirement" from the charge that theism is inconsistent. Evil may still constitute a serious problem for theism, if it is seen as evidence against the existence of God.

² See, Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963). Reprinted in M. Adams and R. Adams, editors, *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford, 1990).