Philosophy of Religion

4. The Problem of Evil

Does the evil in the world make the existence of God impossible or improbable? What is the strongest form of the "problem"? What is the theist's best response, and how far does it succeed?

This list gives a combination of original and secondary sources – you can pick up some of the well-known approaches (e.g. Plantinga, Hick, Swinburne, Mackie 1955) without necessarily reading the originals in full.

For an overview, C. Taliferro's chapter in his *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 1998) is helpful. The Oxford Readings collection, *The Problem of Evil* (ed. M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams, OUP, 1990) contains other good items. The Introduction summarises them, and is worth reading. Try to glean an understanding of Plantinga and Hick from this (rather than reading either of those papers in their entirety).

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Parts X and XI, is *the* classic statement of the problem (but read the earlier parts too if you have the time). Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 9, takes a very Humean approach, and should be read. Mackie's earlier article "Evil and Omnipotence" (*Mind* 64 1955: 200-12) is well known, but the main points are summarised in the book chapter.

Pike's "Hume on Evil" in the Adams collection responds to Hume, balancing out Mackie. Penelhum's paper is also worth considering if you have the time and want to see a response.

Plantinga's response to the Problem – appealing to free evil spirits to reconcile the perfection of God with "physical" evils – is famous (some would say "notorious"). You should know about this, and I advise reading sections 1-3 and 10 of his paper in the Adams collection, but the gist of the more technical parts might be better gleaned from Adams and Mackie (if you get the overall idea, the technical development really doesn't add much in my view).

The book *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (OUP, 2003), by William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, has a robust and very to-the-point debate over evil. The atheist point of view is presented effectively by Sinnott-Armstrong (pp. 83-98 and 138-49). I'm less impressed by Craig's response (pp. 112-27), which is rather evangelical in style and lacks the sophistication of the other readings here.

Richard Swinburne has written lots on the topic, mostly at length, so I recommend your reading his relatively short chapter 6 "Why God Allows Evil" in his book *Is There a God?* (OUP, 1996), which summarises his discussions of Evil and Providence in his major work *The Existence of God* (OUP, second edition 2004).

For a brief overview of the different versions of the "problem" and their logical force, see pp. 93-4 of my "Logic: Atheism", available from http://www.millican.org/papers/2019LogicAtheism.pdf. If you are looking for something lighter on the topic, long ago I wrote a slightly mischievous (but seriously intended) piece called "The Devil's Advocate", available from http://www.millican.org/papers/1989DevAdv.pdf.

Sceptical Theism

If you have time, it would be good to consider the approach of "sceptical theism". For an overview, see Trent Dougherty's article at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skeptical-theism/ (in the *Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy*). The debate between Rowe and Wykstra (three papers in the Adams collection) is quite well known; Rowe also debates the issue with Howard-Snyder and Bergmann in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Peterson and VanArragon, Blackwell, 2004), focusing on the issue of pervasive and horrendous evils in the world: Howard-Snyder and Bergmann claim that even these do nothing to tell against the existence of God, because we cannot expect to understand what God's reasons might be (note that the end of H-S & B's first reply is a bit confusing, as their §4 addresses a "New Bayesian Argument" which Rowe gave elsewhere – you might be best just ignoring that section).

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