

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2006, XIV + 183 pp.

Providence and chance

Peter van Inwagen's most recent book (2006) is devoted to the problem of evil. There are practical and theoretical aspects of this problem. The latter can be apologetic or doctrinal, the former can be personal or pastoral. The personal problem of evil concerns the way people reconcile their belief in a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil happening to them or to their loved ones. The pastoral problem of evil, which is particularly relevant for priests, comes down to the question what advice or explanation might be given to people affected by evil and suffering. The doctrinal aspect of the problem of evil concerns the question how historical religions explain the origin, nature and role of evil in the world. The apologetic problem of evil consists in determining a possible refutation of the argument from evil: since there is evil in the world, there is no God. The classic term for such considerations is „theodicy”, but in the analytic literature on the problem of evil the term „defense” is also used. Peter van Inwagen uses the latter, pointing out that „defense” aims at undermining the premises of the argument from evil, whereas theodicy should provide reasons why God allows evil to occur in the world. In fact, theodicy and defense can have the same content, but they differ as to the intentions of the authors. A defender doesn't assume that he knows the reasons God really has for permitting evil, and a theodocist claims to know them. An effective rebuttal of the argument from evil is not tantamount to the proof of God's existence: it may be possible that the argument from evil is not sound and that there is no God.

Van Inwagen presents the logical (in his terminology: „global”) and the evidential („local”) argument from evil. The logical argument from evil depends on the claim that it is not possible to assert the two propositions: „Evil exists” and „God exists”, or, in a more extended form: if there is evil in the world, then there is no God; there is evil in the world, hence there is no God. The evidential argument from evil consists in the view that the existence of a particular evil makes the existence of God improbable. The main thesis of the book is that the two arguments are a failure.

What it means for a philosophical argument to be a failure is the subject matter of the third chapter. The view emerging from van Inwagen's considerations might

be called 'moderate meta-philosophical skepticism'. It appears that all philosophical arguments formulated so far are inconclusive, by contrast to scientific reasoning, which is often conclusive. Philosophical arguments are inconclusive not because they are formally invalid; if that was the case, it would be possible to make them formally valid. The critical point is the truth-value of the premises; there is no philosophical reasoning or argument whose premises could not be undermined. Thus, the argument from evil (in both its versions) must be inconclusive (*dictum de omni*). However, van Inwagen attempts to demonstrate why *this* argument (the argument from evil) is inconclusive, that is, which of the premises are false or incredible. Meta-philosophical skepticism is moderate in the sense that it is possible to be successful in philosophy as it is possible to be successful in a court of law. The defender can persuade the jury that the person accused is not guilty. In philosophy, if the defender manages to persuade the agnostic, but competent (unbiased, intelligent, patient), audience that the opponent's argument is not conclusive, then such an argument is a failure. If an atheist claims that the proposition „God exists” is false because the conclusion of the argument from evil is the proposition „God does not exist”, then the role of the defender of theism is to demonstrate to the agnostic audience that the atheistic argument is inconclusive. The key point is that in that forensic model of a philosophical debate a given argument is inconclusive when the audience decides that the argument in question is inconclusive. Thus, it is not essential for a philosophical debate that, for example, a nominalist persuade a realist to convert to nominalism, but it is essential that our nominalist should persuade members of neutral audience, who know all possible reasons and arguments in the debate, to become nominalists. Van Inwagen finds it to be practically impossible that a highly competent nominalist might manage to persuade a highly competent realist to abandon his views, and conversely. Such a change could take place only if the participants rejected their assumptions, which seems rather improbable. The debate over the problem of evil should follow the same path as the debate between a nominalist and a realist sketched above. In his book, van Inwagen tries to present such a fictional debate. He himself represents theism, but also speaks on behalf of a fictional atheist. His aim is to convince a fictional audience, which is agnostic and neutral, that the argument from evil is not sound; its premises are false or improbable.

The meta-philosophical view defended by van Inwagen might be the subject matter of a separate debate. It is controversial whether the forensic procedure could be applied without any objection to a philosophical debate, and it might be interesting to ask whether the moderate meta-philosophical skepticism itself would pass van Inwagen's test. This skepticism seems to be based on the scheme: „ p iff p is accepted by A ” (' p ' stands for a philosophical proposition and ' A ' for an agnostic audience). Is the last scheme free from any objections? If we are convinced that what matters in philosophy is truth and not mere acceptance, then we are bound to be disappointed. A meta-philosophical skeptic could answer that one should strive

for what is attainable and not for what is most valuable (if this is not attainable).

Coming back to the problem of evil and the debate between a theist and an atheist, it seems that one of the most interesting and important points in the debate concerns the divine attributes, omniscience in particular. Peter van Inwagen rejects the classic Augustinian and Thomist approach to the divine omniscience. This step is closely related to his understanding of other divine attributes, like impassibility. According to the classic view, God is omniscient in the sense that He knows all truths including truths about free human actions which will take place in the future. However, he does not know these truths as a cognitive subject existing in time but as a timeless being. Van Inwagen rejects that conception of God's omniscience as impossible or, at best, implausible: a timeless being cannot know temporal events. Therefore, God exists in time and the future is given to Him in the same way as it is given to any being existing in time: the future shall come. If God (a temporal being) knew future events, human free actions included, then He would have foreknowledge (knowledge which precedes that which will happen). Van Inwagen insists that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible: if God has foreknowledge, then human freedom is not possible. The non-existence of human freedom makes impossible the free-will defense, which is the most popular theistic response to the argument from evil. According to the free-will defense, some evils in the world (in fact, many of them, if not all) are consequences of free human actions. But, if there is no free will, then there is no possibility of explaining evil by means of free will. However, if free will exists, then God doesn't have foreknowledge, and hence God is not omniscient. The negation of the divine omniscience changes, in turn, the concept of the divine impassibility. If God is not omniscient, then God did not know in the year 1900 that Hitler would attack Poland in 1939, but He knew it on September 1, 1939. Thus, God's knowledge is changeable and God changes. Van Inwagen himself does not claim that God changes but only that some of the divine attributes are accidental and some are essential, and the latter do not change. Accidental attributes include God's being the creator of the world, His talking to Abraham, His knowing human history. Van Inwagen also rejects the middle knowledge explanation of the divine omniscience, i.e., the knowledge expressed in the form of counterfactual conditionals: if there had been p , then there would have been q " („If there had been a peal of thunder at the moment Eve was trying to decide whether to eat the apple, she would freely have decided not to eat it"). He regards such propositions as not true (similarly to Adams and Hasker). The refutation of middle knowledge entails consequences as to the way a theist can respond to the argument from evil. An atheist can construct the following argument: if the divine middle knowledge existed, then evil would not have occurred. Since God knows, an atheist may argue, that had there been a peal of thunder at the moment Eve was trying to decide whether to eat the apple, she would freely have decided not to eat it, then God could have caused the antecedent of this conditional to be true and by doing it he could have brought about the nonexistence of Eve's sin (and

all consequent evils). Such a step is not possible for an atheist if there is no middle knowledge. However, one should keep in mind Alvin Plantinga's response to the atheist's argument, namely his hypothesis of a trans-world depravation: it is possible that there exist creatures which would freely choose evil independent of what God does.

Van Inwagen's view is then that in each possible world in which free actions occur, and our world is of that kind, God is not omniscient in the classic sense. God's omniscience is only tenable in the sense that He knows all states of affairs and all truths about them which it is possible for Him to know. This concept of the divine omniscience is compatible with human freedom, and freedom in general. In this situation it is easier to answer the question why evil exists in a world created by an omnipotent, good and omniscient being: evil is just a consequence of free will. However, an atheist can still raise other objections to the free-will defense. He can argue that the amount and distribution of evil in the world make it impossible (or improbable) to believe that freedom always balances out the evil coming from the free will of a wrongdoer, and, secondly, there exist natural evils such as earthquakes, tornadoes, debilitating diseases, etc. which do not result from any free (or non-free) will. Our theist (van Inwagen himself) admits here that numerous evils happen for no reason at all (van Inwagen 2006, p. 89), but he points out that such purposeless evils are in a way necessary. These evils are not balanced off by any positive values and do not serve anything, but they are consequences of freedom and contribute to the state of the world which is desirable to God for certain reasons. Van Inwagen writes that the amount, distribution and nature of evil in the world are not rationed by God. Much evil has resulted from the fact that people separated themselves from God. At the very beginning of human existence people lived together in the harmony of perfect love; they enjoyed the Beatific Vision, a mystical union with God, and possessed paranormal abilities: they never suffered from diseases, they did not die (Eden), no natural catastrophes happened to them. However, for completely unknown reasons they decided to break the union with God and to abandon Eden. Van Inwagen says that: „The result was horrific: they no longer enjoyed the Beatific Vision. Now they faced destruction by random forces of nature and became subject to old age and natural death. Despite that, they were too proud to end their rebellion” (van Inwagen 2006, p. 86).

These events changed human nature so deeply that humans became unable to return to the primary state of union with God. Thus, all natural evil which happened and happens to people is a result of free decisions made by the first human beings. Many bad things happen in this state of separation from God; meaningless and horrific evil included. Humans are subject to playful chance and fall victims of completely uncontrolled, chaotic events. However, God did not want to leave rebellious humankind lost in the chaos of life and He showed mercy and love. Admittedly, He could have left them to their own fate, or He could have destroyed humans, and in this way He would have alleviated their sufferings. God, however,

wanted to help them return freely to union with Him. To that effect He decided to use the evil of our world. Of course, God could prevent all evils by a series of miraculous interventions, but then there would be no evils and people would live in a state of hedonistic utopia. The main point here is that humans leading lives without any trouble and suffering would not miss the return to union with God. This is why God does not prevent evil. The horrors which happen to people enable them to come back to God and make them see the misery of life without God in a chaotic and hostile world. Thus, a new reconciliation of humankind with God needs evil, which at its roots is a result of the mysterious human rebellion against God. Therefore, the chaotic, irrational and unjust distribution of evil in the world, which is taken by atheists as evidence against the existence of God, is, according to van Inwagen, wished by God as the main part of His rescue plan for humankind. The fundamental premise of such divine pedagogy is not only that its main purpose is the human being's return to God, but that this return is possible in a free and un-compelled way. This is the reason why God avoids interfering with the affairs of the world and does not manifest in public the divine existence (God is hidden).

Van Inwagen admits that such a response is not complete and satisfactory, since it is well known that before the first human beings emerged from inferior animals, there had been many (in fact very many) forms of life on the Earth, and there had been species sensitive to pain and suffering, and there had occurred evils. It is not possible to explain the existence of animal suffering by human free will and corruption resulting from the rebellion against God since animals had existed and suffered before the human rebellion. Therefore, there is an acute need to find an explanation for „prelapsarian evil”, and such an explanation cannot refer to the free-will defense. To summarize van Inwagen's response briefly, the explanation is provided by modal and moral skepticism. Modal skepticism says that our cognitive abilities are too limited and weak to know whether it would have been possible for God to create a world with intelligent creatures but free from all animal evils. We must allow for the possibility that God could not create such a world and that the emergence of organic forms and the processes of evolution had to involve a great deal of natural evil, the pain and suffering of living creatures; the only way to avoid natural evils would have been permanent divine intervention in the natural world. The laws of nature would have had to be constantly suspended by God and the world would have been massively irregular. Moral skepticism says that we are not able to evaluate and decide whether the world without permanent divine intervention, with „prelapsarian” evils, is less valuable than the world which is massively irregular. Thus, it is possible that God could not create a world without prelapsarian evils and it is possible that a world containing prelapsarian and (generally) natural evil is more valuable than a hedonistic utopia which is massively irregular. The free-will defense completed by the argument of modal and moral skepticism can explain all evils in the world, and makes the global argument from evil inconclusive.

However, an atheist might formulate the following response (the evidential argument from evil): a theist can explain why there are different kinds of evil in the world, but this does not suffice to grasp the reasons why a particular evil happened to a particular being. It is very difficult (if not impossible) to evaluate what greater good can emerge from a particular evil and what greater evil can be prevented by the occurrence of a given evil. An omnipotent, omniscient and good God can prevent the occurrence of a particular evil without destruction of human free will and without His resignation from the plan of the restoration of humankind. In other words, an atheist can argue: if God had not allowed the Holocaust to happen, the divine plan would not have been disturbed because the world still would have contained a lot of horrific evils. Furthermore, for all we know, the world without the Holocaust would have been better, much better in fact, than it is after the Holocaust occurred. Then, why did God not prevent many occurrences of pointless evil and why does He not determine a *minimum* of evils which are really required for the realization of His plan? An atheist's answer to the last question is clear and simple: because there is no God. In response van Inwagen writes that it is not possible for an omnipotent, omniscient and good God to set a minimum number of horrors without a collapse of His rescue plan for humankind. If God removed all horrors, the world would become a hedonistic utopia, in which humans would not freely return to God. Thus, if the plan is to be realized, some horrors must happen. It is not possible for God to draw a line between the real horrors which have to occur and those evils which can be prevented in such a manner that the rescue plan still remains effective. But, there must be a borderline between the real and the possible evils. The only way for God to make the border in question is to choose in a quite arbitrary way which evils become real and which remain unrealized possibilities. The Holocaust, the civil war in Rwanda and other tragedies that happened are real evils. In other words, the occurrence of particular real horrors is a matter of chance (chance is a tool of divine providence). This is how van Inwagen understands the statement that evil is a matter of chance, but is necessary.

There is one chapter in the book dedicated solely to the „doxastic argument“, i.e., the argument that there is no God because there is no sufficient evidence of the existence of God. If God existed, each cognitive subject would know that God exists. But, of course, if it is not the case that each cognitive subject knows that God exists, then God does not exist. Van Inwagen claims that God provides as much evidence of his existence as He can; as much as is allowed by the divine plan of the restoration of humankind to its previous union with God. If each human knew that God exists or was able to gain such knowledge, then the reunion of humans with God following from their free decisions would not be possible. Such decisions would be determined by evidence; hence, would not be free. Van Inwagen's considerations about the hidden nature of God end his book.

In my view, van Inwagen's proposal is interesting because he argues (although not quite coherently, see below) that there is an irrational evil in the world, which

does not serve any greater good and which does not prevent any greater evil. In other words, he admits that there is an evil in the world such that even God cannot make use of it and transform it to a greater good (contrary to the belief of many). In one passage of his book, van Inwagen says that our world is a terrible place. The classic theodicy since Augustine has claimed the opposite: God is able to make a greater good out of the greatest evil. In this way van Inwagen avoids speculations on the possible reasons God had for permitting a particular evil to occur. (Cf. Swinburne, who defends the view that the value of freedom is higher than evils committed by free agents; the Holocaust is perceived from this point of view as a consequence of many free choices made by people through hundreds of years, but the value of the freedom of these acts balances out the resulting evil.) Van Inwagen puts forward an idea which is not very common or popular among theists, namely that there is *no reason* for many particular evils, and hence God has *no reason* to permit the occurrence of a given evil. A moderate view on the problem of reasons for evil has been presented by William Alston, who claims that God always has some reasons for evil but our cognitive abilities are too weak to discern them. It is possible that there is a truly great good, which we are unable to imagine now, and which will appear in hundreds of years, and which will overcome the horror of contemporary evil. I think, however, that for all people living now it must be an abstract good in the sense that it is beyond their axiological imagination and sensitivity. Therefore, it is not easy to say whether that great but abstract, unimaginable and still nonexistent good can balance out the actual evils.

Van Inwagen's view is that there are some evils in the world which have no reason, and the fact that the world contains pointless evils is very important since the existence of such evils makes our world a „terrible place”. If humans become aware of the reason why the world is a terrible place, they will freely want to come back to God. A by-product of van Inwagen's conception is that pointless and meaningless evil is, in fact, not pointless since it is supposed to make people conscious of the real reason of their earthly misery. If horrors are to be the indirect tools of salvation, they contribute to a greater good. Is this not a return of the old Augustinian belief in the unlimited divine power over evil? In other words, if humans are to be saved, they must know the truth that they are the playthings of chance, and therefore: „Anyone who does not want to live in such a world, a world in which we are the playthings of chance, had better accept God's offer of a way out of that world” (van Inwagen 2006, p. 89).

Van Inwagen's proposal comes down to joining divine providence and the uncontrolled, unpredictable chance responsible for the blind distribution of evil, which makes our existence in a chaotic and chance-ruled world meaningless. This proposal is not quite an original idea in the debate over the problem of evil. An attempt to combine chance and providence has already been made in the analytic philosophy of religion by Peter Geach (*Providence and Evil*, Cambridge: CUP 1977, p. 115). That approach has also some practical and pastoral merits. Van Inwagen

quotes part of a letter sent to him by a pastor (Stephen Bilynskij). The latter wrote: „As a pastor, I believe that some sort of view of providence which allows for genuine chance is essential in counseling those facing what I often call the „practical problem of evil”. A grieving person needs to be able to trust in God’s direction in her life and the world, without having to make God directly responsible for every event that occurs. The message of the Gospel is not, I believe, that everything that occurs has some purpose. Rather, it is that God’s power is able to use and transform any event through the grace of Jesus Christ. Thus a person may cease a fruitless search for reasons for what happens, and seek the strength that God offers to live with what happens. Such an approach is very different from simply assuming, fideistically, that there must be reasons for every event, but we are incapable of knowing them” (van Inwagen 2006, p. 11).

I do not believe that an agnostic audience would be convinced that the argument from evil (in both its forms) is a failure if they were given the reasons presented above. This audience would probably not accept the free-will defense presented in van Inwagen’s debate between a theist and an atheist. In my view, there is at least one reason why the audience should remain sceptical. Van Inwagen himself says that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom cannot be true, and they are not; hence God doesn’t have any middle knowledge. It follows that God does not know the truth value of the proposition: „If God had removed all horrors, then the world would have been such a hedonistic utopia that humans would never have freely accepted God’s offer of salvation.” And he does not know the truth value of the proposition: „If God had not removed all horrors, then humans would have agreed to accept God’s offer of salvation and they would have wished to return to the paradisaical union with God”.

The divine rescue plan does not guarantee a final success. It is possible that the horrific events occurring in the world are a completely ineffective pedagogical means. Therefore, it is still possible that the world is a terrible place, God’s rescue plan is a failure and people will never choose the path to God. In fact, for all we know about the history of the world and its horrors, people did not always react in the face of these horrors in a way manifesting their will to return to God. It is not the case that the world *after* the Holocaust and communism, to mention only the most paradigmatic horrific events of recent history, became a bit better than it had been *before* these horrors took place. Thus, we may conclude that God’s rescue plan is a matter of fact ineffective. True, it is possible that we are not able to evaluate where we really are in relation to God and we know nothing about the future which will come. Hence, we are not in a position to consider the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of divine providence. But, given van Inwagen’s own assumptions, one should conclude that God himself is not able to know what results his providence can bring about in the world and in human reactions to horrors.

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