

# THEODICIES, UTILITARIANISM, AND RESPECT FOR PERSONS

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## I. Introduction

Responses to the problem of evil are attempts to show that the existence of evil is consistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. Theodicy responses are attempts to justify the ways of God before humankind; the main claim behind most theodicies is that God has an overriding reason to allow certain types and/or certain amounts of evil, and that this reason, if properly understood, shows that it is not morally wrong for God to allow evil. I wish to claim that theodicies of a particular class (what I shall call 'greater good' theodicies, hereafter referred to as 'FTGG' theodicies), if made in the Christian tradition to establish that the existence of evil is consistent with the existence of a '3-O' God must fail. If FTGG theodicies have it right, then God allows some people to suffer in order to bring some other good about (the popular choices are moral sympathy, moral empathy, courage, and the like); if this is the case, then it also seems as though at least some of the people who suffer are allowed to suffer to produce goods for others. If this is the case, I shall argue that the people God allows to suffer to produce goods for others are not being treated as ends in themselves, but rather as means to an end. Thus, FTGG theodicians are in the position of claiming that God does not respect individual persons.

Two things to note before I proceed: 1) I wish to make no claims regarding the existence of God. My only purpose is to show that FTGG theodicies are inconsistent with Christian tradition and with respect for persons, and thus fail even from a theistic perspective on those grounds. 2) I will limit my discussion only to a certain class of theodicies; namely, those which

claim that God allows suffering such that greater good results, and that this fact shows that the existence of evil is consistent with the existence of an omnibenevolent God.

To these ends, I will first briefly specify what I take the problem of evil to be. I will then briefly explain FTGG-type theodicies. Finally, I will present my argument as to why such theodicies must fail, and consider some possible responses to my argument.

## **II. The Problem of Evil.**

There are at least two ways to understand the problem of evil. The so-called ‘logical’ problem of evil arises when we consider the consistency of the following claims, which I will call set **A**:

- A:**
- 1) God is omniscient.
  - 2) God is omnipotent.
  - 3) God is omnibenevolent.
  - 4) Evil exists.

Some explanation is, perhaps, needed here. **A1)** above is often (although not always) taken to mean that God knows all true propositions past, present and future; **A2)** above is often taken to mean that God can do anything that is logically (or metaphysically<sup>1</sup>) possible; **A3)** above is normally taken to mean that God never does anything that is morally wrong.

**A4)** above is also possibly in need of elucidation. I will take ‘evil’ for the remainder of this paper to include (although possibly not be limited to) suffering, either emotional or physical, either as the result of the activities of moral agents (‘moral’ evil) or of natural phenomena (‘natural’ evil). It is **A4)** above that generates a possible contradiction. That is, of the four propositions in set **A**, on the logical statement of the problem of evil, only three of them can be

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<sup>1</sup> This view is held by Peter Van Inwagen.

true at the same time. If God is omniscient, then God would presumably know how to prevent evil. If God is omnipotent, then God would be able to prevent evil; if God is omnibenevolent, then God would have reason to prevent evil. Yet evil exists. So, God must not be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (i.e., is either not omniscient, not omnipotent, or not omnibenevolent).

A second way to characterize the problem of evil is sometimes known as the ‘evidential’ problem of evil. Once one has granted that it is plausible to claim that God allows evil in order to promote some greater good or to prevent a greater evil, the question may arise: what if the evil people suffer under is disproportionate to the amount of good produced? If there is too much evil (or more evil than is necessary), then God still permits (some) evil to no good end, and we are arguably back to the ‘logical’ problem of evil.

I must confess that the question about the existence of gratuitous evil holds no interest for me<sup>23</sup>; neither is the amount of evil God allows germane to the argument I wish to give in my critique of FTGG theodicies. If I am right, then FTGG theodicies contain a fundamental flaw to which the amount of evil occurring is simply not relevant.

### **III. FTGG Theodicies.**

Theodicy responses to the problem of evil can take a number of different forms. One type of theodicy is the attempt to show that evil is the result of the free will granted by God to humans and other beings (e.g., angels, demons, etc.). The claim here is that the possession of free will is of great value, and so God has a morally sufficient reason for not preventing evils that are the result of the exercise of free will on the part of created creatures. Another type of theodicy is

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<sup>3</sup> I think that the question of gratuitous evil is fundamentally unanswerable for humans; I am quite content to claim that we are not in an epistemic position (and may not be able to get there) that is appropriate to judge the question of the existence of gratuitous evil.

less friendly to the major theistic religions; some have argued that God must necessarily be limited (i.e., God either has limited knowledge, limited power, or is not entirely good); others have argued that all evil is the result of (not necessarily human) free will<sup>4</sup>. However, for the purposes of this paper, the type of response in which I am most interested is the ‘for the greater good’-type response. Theodacists of this type wish to claim, roughly, that God has some overriding reason to allow the existence of evil, showing that the propositions in set **A** are not inconsistent; this takes the form of claiming that God allows at least some evil in order to either produce some greater good or to prevent a greater evil. The resulting principle would be something like

**G<sup>2</sup>: God legitimately allows some evil E iff either a) the occurrence of E is necessary for the production of some good G, and the advantages of G are greater than the disadvantages of E, or b) the occurrence of E is necessary for the prevention of some evil E’, and the disadvantages of E are not as great as the disadvantages of E’.**

One of the more influential examples of what I take to be an FTGG theodicy is offered by John Hick.<sup>5</sup> Hick starts from a view of humans in the Irenaean tradition:

Instead of regarding man as having been created by God in a finished state, as a finitely perfect being fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence, and then falling disastrously away from this, the minority report [i.e., the Irenaean tradition] sees man as still in process of creation.... (Brackets added.)

His view was that man as a personal and moral being already exists in the image, but has not yet been formed into the finite likeness of God. By this “likeness” Irenaeus means something more than personal existence as such; he means a certain valuable quality of personal life which reflects finitely divine life. This represents the perfecting of man, the fulfillment of God’s purpose for humanity,

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<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga seems to support this view.

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion is taken from Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love*, Harper & Rowe, 1977, pp. 253-261, reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Louis Pojman, ed. Wadsworth 1998.

the “bringing of many sons to glory”, the creating of “children of God” who are “fellow heirs with Christ” of his glory.

And so man, created as a personal being in the image of God, is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God’s creative work. This is the leading of men as relatively free and autonomous persons, through their own dealings with life in the world in which He has placed them, towards that quality of personal existence that is the finite likeness of God.

...[O]ne who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue. In the former case, which is that of the actual moral achievements of mankind, the individual’s goodness has within it the strength of temptation overcome, a stability based upon an accumulation of right choices, and a positive and responsible character that comes from the investment of costly personal effort.

The crucial quality of the world for this end is not the amount of pleasure the world affords us, but ‘its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making’. The main idea seems to be that evil does not serve any hedonistic end, the end being aimed at is the proper development of moral personality. However, this seems to me a clear (although subtle and sophisticated) instantiation of  $G^2$  above. God allows evil (or suffering) in order to promote some (admittedly non-hedonistic) end such that the end (the moral development of humans) outweighs the suffering that is necessary for it, and we as humans are thus all the better for the suffering we undergo in the ‘vale of soul-making’.

#### **IV. The Christian Tradition and Respect for Persons.**

The principle  $G^2$  above is a fairly obvious example of a consequentialist-type justification. Consequentialism is the view that what makes actions morally right are the

consequences of the action; roughly, an action is morally acceptable iff it produces on the whole at least as much good (or less evil) as any alternative action available to the agent at that time. Of course, how one defines ‘good’ (and ‘evil’) will determine what kind of consequentialist one is, and FTGG theodiscists do not provide (across the board) a unified account of the good. I think the most plausible way to take theodiscists like Hick would be as a sort of welfare utilitarian (at least regarding the justification of evil *vis-à-vis* God’s omnibenevolence). The principle here would be something like ‘an action is morally acceptable iff it produces at least as much welfare for the persons affected by the action (or the least anti-welfare) as any action available to the agent at the time’. So, the resulting picture would be: God legitimately allows certain types of evil in certain amounts because allowing those types and amounts of evil produces at least as much welfare (or the least anti-welfare) for all persons affected by the action as any other action available to God at the time.

If the above account is true to the spirit of FTGG theodiscies, then it seems as though FTGG theodiscists open themselves to a common objection to consequentialist thinking. Consequentialism by its nature enjoins moral agents to maximize<sup>6</sup> some good that is external to the moral action itself; in the case of FTGG theodiscies, the existence of evil is taken to be necessary for the production of some good (the development of moral sympathy, empathy, the moral progress of the individual, the moral progress of humankind, etc.). However, it has often been noted that consequentialism is insensitive to considerations of individual rights and justice. That is, as long as no moral agent finds out, individual rights and justice considerations could be violated (in some cases, it might be morally required to violate such considerations) as long as an appropriate amount of the good in question is produced by such actions. Consequentialism in its

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<sup>6</sup> Some forms only require us to satisfy some threshold amount of whatever good it is (e.g., pleasure, preference satisfaction, welfare, etc.) at which we are supposed to be aimed. This type of consequentialism is usually referred to as a ‘satisficing’ consequentialist theory. I think my objection to FTGG theodiscies will tell against either ‘maximizing’ or ‘satisficing’ versions.

pure form does not scruple regarding *how* the good is produced, as long as the good is produced in the appropriate amount and outweighs the evil produced.

In the case of FTGG-type theodicies, if the greater good to be produced is produced for someone other than the one who (must) suffer to produce the good, then one who suffers is being treated as a means to the production of the good. For example (and this is a claim that, I think, many FTGG theodacists would endorse), if an earthquake in Indonesia resulting in the deaths of ten thousand people raises the moral and practical consciousness of the rest of the world (great outpourings of support and aid, perhaps improvements in earthquake detection heretofore largely ignored, and an overall net worldwide increase in sympathy and empathy), then arguably the good produced outweighs the evil suffered by the victims of the earthquake, and thus on FTGG theodicy terms, the suffering was justified. However, one must ask: are not the people who died in the quake being used as a means to the production of such goods? Using people as a means to some end is to violate respect for the persons being used; that is, to use someone as a means is to treat that person not as an autonomous being, but as a thing to be used. This consideration generates, I think, the following argument:

**B:** P1) If one accepts an FTGG theodicy as justificatory for the existence of evil, then one accepts that God allows some evil to exist in order to produce a greater good or to prevent a worse evil.

P2) If one accepts that God allows some evil to exist in order to produce a greater good or to prevent a worse evil, then one is committed to the view that, inevitably, some people will be used (i.e., undergo suffering) by God to produce goods for others.

P3) If one is committed to the view that, inevitably, some people will be used (i.e., undergo suffering) by God to produce goods for others, then one is committed to the view that God does not respect (some) persons.

P4) From a religious point of view, one should not be committed to the view that God does not respect (some) persons.

∴ C) From a religious point of view, one should not accept an FTGG theodicy as justificatory for the existence of evil.

In other words, an FTGG theodicy is designed to show that the existence of evil is consistent with the existence of an omnibenevolent God. However, a bedrock of many Christian views of morality is the notion of the intrinsic value of the autonomous person. FTGG theodicies undermine this notion by appearing to sanction the using of such persons as mere means to some end, and thus should not be acceptable to theists.

One twist in argument **B** above is that God would use someone as a means (and thus not respect their personhood) if they were used to produce goods *for others*. On the line of thinking I am developing, if God allows A to suffer to produce some good for B (or for people in general), then A is being used as a means and thus is not being respected (this is what I tried to capture in P2). However, if God allows A to suffer to produce some good for A herself, then arguably God has not used A as a means, but as an end (e.g., God allows A to suffer to teach A something). The latter case does not clearly show that A is being used as a means; the former case, I think, does. If, in the course of evils that we have empirically observed, there have been some cases in which a person suffers (say, a sudden and painful death) in a way that does not redound to their benefit at all, even if it does produce goods for others, then I would want to say that the sufferer has been used as a means only, and thus not respected. Note that there is no need in the context of an FTGG theodicy to wrangle about the amount of evil allowed compared to the amount of good produced. Any amount of evil allowed in such cases would undermine the justification for evil offered by FTGG theodicies. If such cases have happened, then FTGG theodicies seem to offer no comfort to the theist.

## **V. Possible Replies.**

1) One possible reply to argument **B** is that even on FTGG theodicies, God never simply uses someone to promote some good for others, because even those who suffer and die and thus



get no benefit themselves in this life will be rewarded in the next life. So God does respect them after all by rewarding their sacrifice, and thus P2 in argument **B** above is false.

However, being rewarded in the afterlife does not seem to make it the case that the person was not initially still used as a means. Suppose that A lies to B so that C benefits. After the fact, A recompenses B for her time and trouble. While A may have made amends, it still remains a fact that A has used B for C's benefit, and no amount of reward will justify A's treatment of B. So it seems as though afterlife rewards, while nice, will not justify suffering for another's benefit.

2) What about cases in which the sufferer herself benefits, or cases in which there is a 'split' benefit (e.g., the sufferer benefits in some way from suffering which provides benefits for perhaps many others)?

I would reply that, in cases in which the sufferer benefits as well as others that arguably the sufferer has not been used as a mere means, and thus has (possibly) been respected. However, it certainly seems that there have been cases in which the sufferer does not benefit (at least in the way many FTGG theodacists would wish to claim) in this life. In cases in which someone suffers and dies without reaping any of the greater goods (i.e., if the sufferer is an infant, or dies quickly enough that there is no time for any moral benefit), even if others obtain such goods, I would maintain that that person has been used in just the way I specified earlier.

3) One could claim that God has a 'higher morality', and thus we cannot judge God's actions in a moral context. Thus, FTGG theodacies can still be acceptable to theists because we simply cannot judge the morality of God's apparently using people as a mere means from our standpoint.

From a religious standpoint, if God has a higher morality, then that would seem to leave humans in dark about moral law. It certainly would be odd to claim that what we would normally

call 'bad' (e.g., treating people as things to be used rather than as persons) God would call 'good'. At this point, one might wonder what evidence we would have to call God 'good'. I think this would be unacceptable to most theists.

4) I think the most promising response might go something like this: when we think of God's using someone we are thinking about the relationship between humans and God in the wrong way. The best way to conceive of the relationship between God and humans is as that of parent to child. Thus, God's allowing humans to suffer from time to time is analogous to a parent allowing a child to make their own mistakes in order to learn; or, God allows us to suffer in order to teach us how *not* to live. For example, if I see my two-year-old reaching for an electrical outlet, I may slap his hand (especially if he is persistent in trying to get to the outlet), thus actively causing (some) suffering in order to prevent some greater evil (grievous injury). He may not understand why I did such a thing, and he may even be resentful for a while, but it is I that knows best in this case. Analogously, it is God that knows best; the suffering that God allows really does have some reason, although we may well not know what that reason is.

I think that this response, if appropriately developed, may eventually lead to a response to the criticism of FTGG-type theodicies. However, any response along these lines will have to account for situations in which one suffers in order that another (or humans in general) may benefit. Continuing the above analogy, FTGG theodicies would seem to endorse a situation in which I punish my six-year-old in order to improve my two-year-old's behavior. To make the analogy even more to the point, suppose I punish my six-year-old in such a way as to benefit my whole family minus my six-year-old (he doesn't receive any benefit, although everybody else does). In both of the above cases, even though I may know a *lot* more about the consequences than anyone else in my family, I still seem to have used my six-year-old as a means, and have thus wronged him, even if the benefits for the rest of my family are great. It would be wrong of me, no matter how much I know about the consequences and no matter how little my son knows

about them, to use him in such a way. If an FTGG theodicy would sanction such behavior on God's part, then I would say so much the worse for theodicies of that type.

5) Another possible reply could be based on an alternate account of what it means to use a person as a means. On this account, to use someone as a mere means would be to treat them in a way to which they would not (or could not) in principle consent. If A, for example, steals B's property, and B does not or would not consent to being the victim of A's plans to obtain more wealth, then A has used B as a mere means. If A asks B for some money (and perhaps even admits that he cannot pay B back), and B still freely gives A the money, then A has not used B as a mere means. This account yields something like the following principle:

**M<sup>2</sup>: For any person S, S uses person P as a mere means if S treats P in a way to which P would not or could not consent.**

Note that the 'consent' condition is sufficient for treating someone as a mere means, but is not necessary.

This may generate an objection to my account of FTGG theodicies in the following way. One may claim that, when God allows a certain amount of evil to either produce a greater good or to prevent a greater evil, even if a person who suffers for the good of others does not consent to undergo such suffering (and thus, on my account, is being treated as a mere means), perhaps such a person *should* consent to being treated in such a way. The 'should' in the previous sentence could be taken in at least two ways. First, one could claim that one who suffers for the good of others is somehow morally lacking if they would fail to consent to suffer for the good of others. Alternatively, one could claim that one who does not consent to suffer for the good of others is simply not in an epistemic position to withhold rational consent (presumably 'rational' consent would require the consentor to possess a certain amount of knowledge of the consequences of consent versus the withholding of consent). The first sense would be the 'moral' sense; the

second the 'rational' sense. I will, given space considerations, only deal with this objection in the moral sense.

Holding to the moral sense in the context of FTGG theodicies would yield the something like the following principle:

**G<sup>2</sup>(M): God treats a person S as an end if God treats S in a way to which S should (morally) consent, even if S does not or would not in fact consent.**

The insight of this objection is, I think, this: God doesn't really treat someone as a mere means when the person does not *actually* consent to suffer; the person's non-consent is actually a moral failure on the part of the sufferer herself. She *should* consent; if she doesn't, she has shown herself to lack certain virtues.

What are we to say about this objection? The point of the objection seems to be that, morally speaking, we are required to suffer in order to produce goods for others. In other words, a person is morally *obligated* to suffer, at least in some cases. This account seems to blur the distinction between obligation and supererogation, and is counter to the intuition that the moral requirement of such self-sacrifice is to put too heavy a moral burden on the moral agent. Further, how would this principle fare if universalized? If it is true that I *should* (morally) consent to suffer in any case in which my suffering would result in the production of greater good or the prevention of greater evil, then a theory that embraces this has already given up on respect for the individual. Secondly, if God is omniscient, then God would presumably already know who would consent to suffer and who would not. To treat someone in a way to which they should consent, but actually would not, still does not seem to be respecting that individual as someone who is autonomous and responsible for their own decisions.

In short, this line of defense amounts to saying that God morally requires self-sacrifice for the production of greater good. However, in a case in which one does not consent to suffer to

produce that good, even if it indicates a moral failing on the part of one who does not consent, would still not respect the non-consenter. Further, any theory that requires such self-sacrifice seems to have already given up the claim that we ought to respect persons. I suppose that one could argue that we ought to either a) give up the claim that respect for persons is a fundamental intuition that any moral theory ought to observe, or b) that God really does hold to a higher morality. Both options are, however, fraught with peril.

## **VI. Conclusion.**

I have argued that FTGG theodicies are consequentialist in nature, and as such should be unacceptable to theists because FTGG theodicies seem to justify the using of persons as mere means to the production of some good for others, which seems to undermine the religious notion of the value of a person. If I am right, FTGG theodicies should be unacceptable to theists on religious grounds, and thus do not offer the justification for the existence of evil that they claim