

## A Kantian Solution to the Problem of Evil

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### Abstract

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The problem of evil is, basically, the problem of understanding how, if there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good God, there can be (so much) evil in the world. Wouldn't a God of this kind prevent such evil from occurring? In the course of this paper, I consider what I take to be certain consequentiality assumptions underlying typical statements of the problem of evil. These assumptions relate, for example, to the consequentiality's understanding of the nature of perfect goodness and to his understanding of God's responsibility for human actions he fails to prevent. I call these assumptions into question and, adopting a non-consequentiality, Kantian perspective on morality, I consider what, for a Kantian, God can be said to be morally "required" to do. In particular, I respond to the problem of evil by arguing that for a Kantian moral goodness (indeed, perfect moral goodness) does not involve God performing acts of intervention in cases of moral or natural evil.

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### 1. Introduction

The problem of evil (whether moral or natural) invites a question about God's creation of the universe; and a separate but perhaps related one about his intervention in his creation. The first addresses the issue of whether God could have created the universe in such a way that there is no, or significantly less, evil within it. The second invites a question relating to whether God can intervene within the universe to prevent specific evils from occurring. In this paper, I'm going to address the problem of evil largely in relation to the second issue. In doing so, I will make the usual assumption that God's omniscience is such that he knows about evil. The central questions I want to consider are whether God can prevent evil; and whether, if he doesn't, this is any evidence that he lacks moral goodness. Responses to the problem of evil typically assume that goodness would ordinarily require of God that he intervenes to prevent evil, so that the existence of evil automatically provides, as it were, a *prima facie* case for the theist to answer. It is then sometimes argued that this is a case that the theist *can* answer, and appeal is then made to a special reason why God wouldn't intervene. However, in this paper I want to question the assumption that goodness would ordinarily require of God that he intervenes to prevent evil. My suggestion will be that we can respond to the problem of evil by saying that cases where God doesn't intervene can be seen as cases where acting morally – moral goodness – doesn't involve him performing acts of intervention of this kind. What I want to do in this paper is to make this response a plausible one.

In the course of attempting to do this, I will be adopting a non-consequentiality and in particular a Kantian perspective on morality. My view is that there are certain consequentiality assumptions underlying typical statements of the problem of evil; that these assumptions give it its force; and that one way of responding to the problem is to call these assumptions into question. Of course, I recognise that not everyone – indeed, not every theist – will want to endorse a non-consequentiality, nor a Kantian view of morality; and my intention in this paper is not to independently defend these views. (Indeed, I also recognise that not all Kantians are theists.)

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Rather, my intention is to explore some of the consequentiality assumptions underlying the problem of evil, and to say how we might be able to respond to the problem should we decide to reject these assumptions and adopt a non-consequentiality, Kantian, approach. Moreover, my intention is to consider only certain aspects of Kant's specific views. The response I adopt to the problem of evil is not meant to be Kant's, but it is one that can be adopted by anyone who thinks (as I do) that Kant's general view of morality is correct.

## 2. Can God, as an Omnipotent Being, Prevent Evil?

In thinking about what God is morally required to do, it is tempting to place too much emphasis on his omnipotence and think that just because he is perhaps able to bring about some supposedly good state of affairs (or prevent some supposedly bad state of affairs), he is under a moral obligation to do so. But this seems to me to be a mistake: though "ought" implies "can"; "can" does not imply "ought". In any event, just because there is some supposedly good (or bad) state of affairs, we shouldn't think that it automatically follows that God *can* bring it about (or prevent it). Indeed, in thinking about what God can do, we might take the view that this is determined or fixed by what he is morally required to do; and so that we need to *first* consider what he is morally required to do. However, the question of what God is morally required to do might itself seem rather strange. It might seem strange to talk about God being morally *required* or having a *duty* or being *obliged* to do something. How can these notions apply to an omnipotent being like God? One issue relates to whether God being morally required to do something is consistent with his omnipotence: if God is omnipotent, then morality and its requirements cannot be thought of as imposing some kind of external demand on him. However, the idea of God being morally required to do certain things need not be thought of as conflicting with his omnipotence if the moral requirements in question aren't thought of as having an external source but are instead thought of as being self-imposed (as a Kantian would undoubtedly think of them). On this view, then, moral requirements are to be thought of as requirements that God freely imposed on himself. Another reason why it might seem strange to talk of moral requirements in relation to God relates to the fact that God shouldn't be thought of as a being who *needs* to be morally required to act in certain ways in order for him to do so. Indeed, Kant makes this kind of point in comments he makes about the divine or holy will in his *Groundwork*: "A perfectly good will would, therefore, equally stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not on this account be represented as *necessitated* to actions in conformity with law since of itself, by its subjective constitution, it can be determined only through the representation of the good. Hence no imperatives hold for the *divine* will and in general for a *holy* will: the "ought" is out of place here, because volition is of itself necessarily in accord with the law." (Kant (1): 4:414)

Similarly, in his *Critique of Practical Reason* he claims that a holy will is a will which "... would not be capable of any maxim conflicting with the moral law." (Kant (2): 5:32) A Kantian's understanding of perfect goodness is, then, one such that a perfectly good being such as God (even if subject to desires or other inclinations) never deviates from the good. On this understanding, whatever God does is – indeed, has to be – good. So, where in what follows reference is made to God being morally required to do something, the implication is not that this is something he needs in order for him to act morally. *We* need such a requirement, because we can and of course do deviate from the good. But for God there is – can be – no such deviation. Of course, on a consequentiality understanding of perfect goodness, a perfectly good being is one who brings about as many supposedly good, or prevents as many supposedly bad, states of affairs as she can. She might, for example, maximise happiness or minimise suffering as much as she can. A consequentiality will therefore be rightly puzzled about how the existence of a perfectly good being could be consistent with there being, for example, so much evil in the world. But a Kantian can say that God's will is perfect not in the consequentiality sense which sees perfection in the maximisation of some supposedly valuable outcome, but in the sense given above: his will (even if subject to desires or other inclinations) never deviates from the good. What remains to be seen, of course, is whether God not intervening to prevent evil can be seen as something that is consistent with the Kantian view that his will never deviates from the good.

## 3. Wouldn't God Intervene to Prevent evil if he loves us?

It might be argued that if God loves us, he would – indeed, should – help us (more than he does) – for example, and in particular, in cases involving natural or moral evil. A Kantian can respond to this by appealing to Kant's claim that morally worthy actions aren't done out of love or other "inclination".

Indeed, Kant indicates why *our* actions wouldn't have moral worth if performed from inclination in the preface to his *Groundwork* where he claims that: "... in the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that it conform with the moral law but it must also be done *for the sake of the law*; without this, that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, since a ground that is not moral will indeed now and then produce actions in conformity with the law, but it will also often produce actions contrary to the law." (Kant (1): 4:390) Kant's thought is that if an individual acts from duty, her actions will necessarily conform to the moral law; but if she acts from inclination, any conformity of her actions to the moral law will be contingent and precarious. Indeed, he makes this very point in the course of his discussion of an individual's duty of beneficence: "To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example, the inclination to honour, which, if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact in the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honourable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*." (Kant (1): 4:398)

So, for Kant the action of an individual who helps others out of inclination has no genuine moral worth because actions done from an inclination to help others may not conform to the moral law (and thus where they do, such conformity can be said to be contingent and precarious). To see this, we can perhaps imagine an individual's inclination to help others motivating him to help someone to commit a crime of some kind. For example, we can easily imagine a situation in which an inclination to help others would lead someone to lie (for example, in court) on their behalf. On similar lines, in "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty", Barbara Herman makes the point that an inclination of this kind could lead one to help an art thief whom one sees, late at night, struggling to remove stolen art from a museum. (pp. 4-5) Imagine, then, that God is motivated by an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around him and the delight in bringing about the satisfaction of others. Actions based on such motives would clearly include acts of evil prevention. But a Kantian can say that these actions would – for the reasons given above - have no true moral worth; and so that any motivations of this kind would not lead God to perform them. A Kantian can therefore say that occasions where God doesn't intervene to prevent evil provide no evidence that he doesn't, for example, love us.

#### 4. Is God Morally Responsible for the Actions he fails to prevent?

Is God's "failure" to prevent (serious) cases of moral evil any evidence that he lacks moral goodness? Underlying the thought that it might be, is the idea that God is just as morally responsible not merely for what he does, but also for actions he fails to prevent. But is he? Are *we* morally responsible for actions that we don't prevent? This last question famously arises in Bernard Williams' example of Jim and the Indians. Jim is travelling in South America, and one day finds himself in the central square of a small town. Twenty Indians are tied up against the wall and a military captain explains to him that they are a random group of inhabitants who are going to be shot: there have been protests against the government recently, and they are going to be killed as an example to the general population of the advantages of not protesting. However, the captain says that because Jim is an honoured guest in the country, he will be allowed the privilege of shooting any one of the Indians, whereupon the other nineteen will be released. (Jim will also be allowed to choose who to shoot.) Jim is informed that if he doesn't take up the offer and kill one of the Indians, one of the captain's men will kill them all. So, what should Jim do? Should he shoot one of the Indians and save nineteen others, or refuse the captain's offer - in which case twenty Indians will be killed? The example is particularly directed against act utilitarianism but applies to consequentialism more generally. If Jim declines the captain's offer, consequentiality would hold him morally responsible for the twenty deaths. Williams questions whether this could be right: "A feature of utilitarianism is that it cuts out a kind of consideration which for some ... makes a difference to what they feel about such cases: a consideration involving the idea ... that each of us is specially responsible for what *he* does, rather than for what other people do." (Williams: p. 99)

"It is because consequentialism attaches value ultimately to states of affairs, and its concern is with what states of affairs the world contains, that it essentially involves the notion of *negative responsibility*: that if I am ever responsible for anything, then I must be just as responsible for things that I allow or fail to prevent, as I am for things that I myself, in the more everyday restricted sense, bring about." (Williams: p. 95) This line of thought does seem to me to be a good reason to call consequentialism into question. Moreover, it seems that we can apply similar reasoning to cases where God doesn't intervene to prevent moral evil; and say that he is not responsible for the moral evil that he doesn't prevent. However, it should be noted that this response relies on the idea that God creates us as genuinely free beings; and wouldn't be open to anyone who thought that God causes our actions in such a way that they aren't performed freely by us.

### 5. The Categorical Imperative, God and Evil

What, then, is the extent of God's moral obligation or duty to help others, and in particular us? For Kant there is a well-known connection between morality and maxims that cannot be willed as a universal law. These maxims are of two kinds: maxims that cannot be universalised - the attempt to universalise them is said to involve a contradiction in conception; and maxims that can be universalised but cannot be *willed* as a universal - the attempt to will them as a universal law is said to involve a contradiction in the will. The first kind is exemplified by a maxim of false promising; the second by a maxim of not helping others in need. In relation to a maxim of not helping others in need, Kant asks us to consider an individual "... for whom things are going well while he sees that others (whom he could very well help) have to contend with great hardships ... "who thinks"... what is it to me? let each be as happy as heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall nothing from him nor even envy him; only I do not care to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in need!" In relation to this example, Kant claims that: "... although it possible that a universal law of nature could very well subsist in accordance with such a maxim, it is still impossible to **will** that such a principle hold everywhere as a law of nature. For, a will that decided this would conflict with itself, since many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself." (Kant (1): 4:423)

To what extent can this or similar reasoning be applied to God? One point a Kantian can make is that if we are only morally required to *sometimes* help others, the same might be said of God. Indeed, a Kantian might press this point further and say that there may be relevant differences between us and God such that although we are sometimes under an obligation to help relieve others' suffering, God never is. At least, we should not assume that just because we are morally required to do something, so too is God. After all, the reasoning above doesn't apply to God in the sense that he doesn't need our love, sympathy and help; and there seems to be no obvious contradiction in God's will were he to universalise a maxim of not helping us - for example, in cases involving moral and natural evil. On the contrary, there might - as we shall now perhaps see - be contradictions involved in an attempt by God (i.e. in an attempt that we might imagine him making) to adopt a maxim of helping us in cases of this kind. Consider firstly natural evil. Most theists think that God is the source of the laws of nature governing the universe. Could God also will that he sometimes violates these laws? Our answer to this question will largely depend on how we understand the concept of a "law of nature"; and in what follows, I am going to assume that laws of nature are to be understood as *universal* i.e. as laws which hold everywhere and at all times. (This is how Kant himself seems to think of them.)

A Kantian can then say, in response to cases of natural evil, that it is not permissible for God to violate laws of nature and prevent cases of this kind; because there would be a contradiction in his will were he to decide to both create *universal* laws, and yet nevertheless reserve for himself the right, as it were, to violate them (e.g. to prevent serious cases of natural evil). In his *Enquiries*, David Hume famously defined a miracle as "... a *transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity ...*" (Sect. X, Part I, 90). If what has just been said is correct, it would seem that for a Kantian miracles - if thought of in this Human way - wouldn't be possible in the sense that they wouldn't be *morally* possible. Now, there is of course a separate but important question about whether God could have initially created better laws of nature, and in particular ones that don't give rise to (so much) natural evil. This question, as I said at the beginning, isn't the main focus of this paper. Nevertheless, I do want to make some brief comments on this issue here. God was presumably under no moral obligation to create a universe ("world") in the first place. Indeed, from a Kantian perspective, there seems to be no contradiction of any kind in him not doing so. Nevertheless, let's assume that if God does create a universe, he is at least under a moral obligation to create the "best" one. So, is this the best possible world that God could have created?

It is easy to see serious cases involving moral and natural evil as clearly establishing that this world cannot be the best. But one thing a Kantian can do in response to this kind of thought is to point out the consequentiality thinking that underlies it: "best" is being interpreted in consequentiality terms; and this world seems to clearly not be the best in these terms. But why should "best" be interpreted in this way? Why should we think that in deciding which possible world to create, God is making a (purely) consequentiality decision? The fact that one possible world has more "good" states of affairs in it – or less evil in it - than another doesn't make it automatically preferable unless it is assumed that God is making a consequentiality decision. But how, then, should we interpret "best" in this context? In thinking about whether a vase produced by a potter is the best one that he could have created; we need to ask what he produced the vase for. Similarly, in thinking about whether this is the best universe that God could have created; we need to ask what he created a universe for. We need to first ask why God originally decided to create a world - what was he aiming to achieve by doing so? For all we know, this might well be the best world that God could have actualised in order to achieve these aims, whatever they are. From God's perspective – from the perspective of God's aims - this may well be the best possible world that he could have created; even though from a consequentiality perspective it may seem to clearly not be. Consider now moral evil. Many attempts to explain moral evil appeal to the free will defence. For example, in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga argues that:

"... God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good." (Plantinga a: p.30)

Much of this line of thinking can be appealed to by a Kantian in defending a theist against the problem of moral evil. Beginning with the thought that God wills that we are free; she can proceed to argue as follows. If God wills that we are free (if, as most theists think, God creates us as free beings), he could not at the same time make it his maxim to intervene in our free actions (for example, whenever there is a need to do so to prevent moral evil) because this would involve a contradiction in his will. A Kantian can therefore say that it is not permissible for God to intervene in our freedom to prevent cases of this kind. In summary, then, a Kantian can say that God isn't under an obligation to intervene to prevent (moral or natural) evil; indeed that it's not permissible for him to do so. For all that has been said so far, it might be thought that on the Kantian view God is not under a moral obligation to do anything in relation to the universe he creates and the beings within it. This might lead one to think that for a Kantian God isn't really a moral agent at all. (This is a position defended, though for different reasons, by Brian Davies in *The Reality of God and The Problem of Evil*.) However, for a Kantian there *are* things God is morally obliged to do. In particular, a Kantian can defend the view that God is under an obligation to sustain– keep in being - the universe he has created. For if we assume that God wills the creation by him of an enduring universe; he could not at the same time adopt a maxim of not helping to sustain it (whenever such help is required). To adopt a maxim of not sustaining would involve a contradiction in his will.

### Conclusion

A Kantian can argue that God's apparent failure to help us in cases involving moral or natural evil isn't evidence that he doesn't love us, nor that he lacks moral, indeed perfect, goodness. A Kantian can deny that the moral and natural evil in the world provides any evidence that God doesn't exist.

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