**Reversing the Problem of Evil**

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Abstract: The problem of evil—particularly in the form that emphasizes the intense severity and unfair distribution of suffering in the world—is widely regarded as a major challenge to theistic belief in an omnipotent and perfectly good God. In this paper I discuss Richard Swinburne's theistic response to this version of the problem. I argue that, drawing on Swinburne's approach, we can "reverse" the problem of evil. That is, we can show that the existence of profound and unevenly distributed suffering poses a greater challenge to atheism than to theism.

**Keywords** Richard Swinburne, the problem of evil, atheism, horrendous evil, suffering

## Introduction

The debate over the problem of evil typically follows a familiar pattern: Atheists point to the existence of suffering in the world as a serious challenge to theism, arguing that it is incompatible with belief in an omnipotent and perfectly good God. Theists, while acknowledging the strength of this challenge, seek to show that there is ultimately a successful theistic response offering plausible reasons why God might permit suffering. Professor Richard Swinburne's paper, "Why a Christian God Would Permit So Much Human Suffering," follows this pattern. Swinburne explains how human suffering appears to pose a major challenge to theistic belief. He then carefully develops a range of responses in defense of Christian theism, explaining how a God understood as our greatest benefactor might justifiably allow such suffering.

The present piece responds to Swinburne's discussion of the problem of evil, but it does not aim to offer specific objections to his response to the problem. Rather than critiquing his approach, I draw attention to a broader question that Swinburne's paper raises: What implications may theistic responses like Swinburne's have for *atheism*? To address this question,

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I propose a "reversal" of the problem of evil. That is, I argue that, by adopting Swinburne's approach, we can show that the existence of profound and unevenly distributed suffering in the world poses a greater challenge to atheism than to theism. I argue that, the more forcefully atheists press the problem of evil against theism, and the more persuasively theists respond, the more unsettling the atheistic worldview begins to appear. I advanced a similar line of argument in my book *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* (Nagasawa 2024). In the present paper, I aim to reinforce that argument from a new perspective by drawing on Swinburne's approach and introducing new examples.

**The problem of evil and Swinburne's response**

Swinburne opens with the thesis that God is our greatest possible benefactor and therefore has a greater right than parents or the State to permit suffering at the level He does. God qualifies as such a benefactor because He sustains all existence and natural laws and can offer compensatory goods far beyond what any other being could, especially through granting life after death. According to Swinburne, this does not, however, mean that God's right to permit suffering is without limits. First, the suffering that God allows must be proportional: Our suffering must not outweigh the benefits that God has already provided or can reasonably be expected to provide. Second, God must ensure that the suffering is necessary; it must be the only way to bring about a comparable good.

Swinburne explores reasons that might explain the necessity of evil. The first reason is that evil may be required for realizing libertarian free will, which is intrinsically valuable. Libertarian free will is a "genuine" freedom which allows free human agents to choose between good and evil. The second reason is that suffering can provide people the opportunity to achieve spiritual development by choosing good over evil, cultivate virtue, and shape their eternal destinies. In summary, Swinburne seems to defend here the free will theodicy and the greater-good theodicy.

Swinburne pays particular attention to a specific form of evil, which Marilyn McCord Adams (1999) calls "horrendous evil." Adams defines horrendous evil as a kind of evil "the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole" (Adams 1999, p. 26). Horrendous evils are marked by exceptionally intense forms

of suffering that can call into question the overall worth of a person's life, causing profound existential anxiety for those affected.

Swinburne highlights three features of horrendous evil. First, regarding the sheer intensity and duration of suffering they involve, he emphasizes that all human suffering is temporally limited to a single lifetime. No matter how extreme or prolonged the suffering, it remains finite given the physical constraints of human existence—there is a limit to how much pain a person can endure and how long it lasts. Swinburne contends that, in contrast, God can compensate sufferers with an eternal life of incomparable goodness, which ultimately outweighs any finite suffering endured. Swinburne claims, moreover, that such intense suffering could offer a unique opportunity for individuals to freely choose to become saints, that is, those who respond to profound adversity with extraordinary love, compassion, and moral integrity.

Second, Swinburne considers the seemingly unfair distribution of horrendous evil. Some individuals endure immense suffering while others are spared, often through sheer luck. For instance, one may become a victim of war or a natural disaster simply because of where one happens to have been born, while others avoid such suffering also purely by chance. In addition, some individuals are morally disadvantaged by other contingent factors beyond their control. For example, a person may grow up experiencing an abusive or neglectful upbringing, which can impair moral development and negatively affect that person's life trajectory. Swinburne engages with these cases of moral bad luck by exploring how such disparities might be compatible with a broader theistic framework in which divine justice and the possibility of greater goods are preserved.

The apparent unfairness of life also raises theological concerns. Some individuals seem to miss the opportunity to be admitted to Heaven simply because they die young, before experiencing intense suffering or having the chance to respond to it with freely chosen saintly virtue. In response, as Swinburne notes, the Christian tradition often holds that God graciously receives into Heaven those who die young before they are capable of making serious moral decisions. This view appears, however, to introduce another kind of inequality: Such children are granted entry into Heaven without exercising significant moral agency, while others must endure great adversity and make difficult moral choices to attain sainthood. This disparity raises difficult questions about the fairness of divine justice and the role of suffering and moral effort along the path to salvation.

Swinburne argues that the Orthodox tradition offers a compelling response to the problem of unfairness by allowing for moral development beyond earthly life; that is, it permits continued moral growth after death. According to him, God respects human freedom—even to the extent of allowing total moral failure—but also ensures that everyone is given sufficient opportunities to make the right choices, even if this requires extending those opportunities beyond the span of earthly life. Swinburne acknowledges that his view comes with a "hard consequence", namely, that we all must eventually demonstrate a free and total commitment to goodness by responding to some form of horrendous evil in the right way. Swinburne, however, also offers the reassurance that, on this account, we will be given many opportunities to manifest such a commitment.

As we have seen, Swinburne's approach to the problem of evil is not a single theodicy but instead a composite of multiple responses that are interconnected: The greater-good theodicy, the free will theodicy, and a theological account that includes post-mortem moral development. Again, my aim is not to evaluate the cogency of these responses. I make only the modest assumption that they are at least somewhat plausible—offering, at minimum, a partial explanation of how God might be justified in permitting evil. Such an explanation may help alleviate the existential anxiety provoked by horrendous evil, which involves exceptionally intense forms of suffering and can appear to undermine the overall worth of a person's life.

**Reversing the challenge**

As Swinburne acknowledges, the high intensity and unfair distribution of suffering in the world makes the problem of evil particularly challenging for theists. I argue, however, that these challenges should also trouble *atheists*. Theists who find the existence of suffering irreconcilable with their beliefs may choose to abandon theism. Yet their mere renunciation of theistic belief would not relieve the existential anxiety provoked by the reality of profound and unevenly distributed suffering in the world. This point becomes especially pressing when we consider that suffering is not accidental but is ultimately necessitated by evolution and natural selection. The pain endured by sentient animals, including humans, is the result of biological processes that systematically demand competition for survival—processes that inevitably give rise to suffering that is intense, widespread, and unevenly distributed.

To illustrate the above point, consider the following imaginary scenario: Jane, a theist, comes to realize that her life is marked by profound suffering. She gives birth to a child who endures intense pain and then dies from a genetically induced illness. Jane cannot help but notice how unlucky she and her child are, especially in comparison with many others who enjoy good health and long, happy lives. This confronts her with a deep existential anxiety: How can one come to terms with the harsh reality of the world's cruelty and unfairness, and how can one make sense of it, or even begin to endure it? Suppose that, upon reflection, Jane decides to abandon her theistic belief: She no longer believes in an omnipotent and all-loving God who could prevent suffering. However—and this is a crucial point—her renunciation of theism does not fully dispel her existential anxiety. Whether or not God exists, she still faces the daunting task of making sense of a world marked by cruelty and injustice. This is why the problem of evil is not exclusive to theists; it also arises for atheists. Of course, atheists can embrace a thoroughgoing pessimism, accepting reality at face value: The world is simply cruel, violent, and unfair. Since they do not affirm the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent God, such a conclusion involves no contradiction. Yet, as far as I am aware, few atheists are willing to adopt such stark pessimism. Whether or not one believes in God, the sheer intensity and apparent unfairness of human suffering remains a deeply puzzling and disturbing aspect of reality.

Once theists and atheists face the problem of evil, both must find a way to grapple with their existential concerns. As Swinburne argues, however, no fully satisfactory response to horrendous evil appears possible without the assumption of post-mortem survival. If death marks the end of our existence, then there can be no ultimate justice or compensation for the intensity or unfair distribution of many instances of suffering. Moreover, in addition to life after death, God, or at least something comparable to God, must exist to ensure that such justification and compensation are meaningfully administered. Mere continuation of existence after death is not sufficient. Thus, both life after death and a divine benefactor appear necessary to overcome the existential anxiety provoked by the problem of evil. This observation suggests that, in one important sense, the problem of evil poses a greater existential challenge for atheists than for theists, as atheists lack access to the supernatural resources, namely post-mortem survival and God, that theists can invoke. That is what I mean by "reversing the problem of evil." Indeed, conversion to atheism in response to evil would exacerbate such anxiety, since not even

potentially satisfying ultimate justification of suffering is available without recourse to supernaturalist resources.

Let me further illustrate the reversal my argument proposes with another imaginary scenario, this time from an atheistic, rather than theistic, perspective. Suppose we are in the twenty-fifth century, in a society where atheism is widely accepted as truth. This consensus arose following the discovery, in the twenty-fourth century, of a "definitive" atheistic argument that convinced the global population of the falsity of theism. James lives in this world and, like Jane, he struggles to make sense of the intensity and unfairness of suffering.

One day, James visits a library and comes across an article by Richard Swinburne, published in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* in 2025, which is several centuries before his time. As we know, in the article Swinburne argues that theists can make sense of intense and seemingly unfair suffering by drawing on theological and supernatural resources, including the possibility of post-mortem moral development and ultimate justice. James, however, does not find Swinburne's approach helpful, because, again, in his society theism is widely regarded as having been long since definitively refuted. Suppose now that someone in his society discovers a flaw in the once "definitive" atheistic argument and, in its place, develops a powerful new argument for theism. This would suddenly reestablish theism as a live option—and, with it, Swinburne's response to horrendous evil. Such a development would be welcome news for people like James, as it reopens the possibility that we do not, after all, live in a cruel and unjust world devoid of ultimate compensation and moral resolution. It remains debatable, of course, whether Swinburne's responses to the problem of evil ultimately succeed. Nevertheless, the resurgence of theism makes it once again a live option to hold an optimistic and coherent view of the world, even in the face of intense and unequally distributed suffering.

The above examples suggest two key points: (i) the problem of evil poses a challenge not only for theists but also for most atheists—except those who embrace a thoroughgoing pessimism; and (ii) only theists, not atheists, can plausibly hope to resolve the existential anxiety provoked by suffering.

One might argue at this point that atheists can successfully respond to the problem of evil by appealing to naturalistic resources. That is, they may be able to develop a compelling "naturalistic theodicy" that does not rely on any supernatural assumptions. For example, an atheist might construct naturalistic versions of the free will theodicy or the greater-good

theodicy, offering a resolution to the problem of evil without invoking post-mortem survival or God.

It is doubtful, however, that a naturalistic theodicy could offer a fully satisfactory response because, as Swinburne contends, naturalism accommodates no possibility of ultimate justice or compensation for the intensity or unfair distribution of much suffering if death marks the end of our existence and there is no God. Nevertheless, let us assume for the sake of argument that such a theodicy succeeds. This would be good news for atheists, but it need not be bad news for theists, because they too could adopt this naturalistic theodicy to help alleviate their existential anxiety. Indeed, theists can incorporate any naturalistic response, since their supernaturalist ontology subsumes the naturalist one. In contrast, atheists cannot adopt supernaturalist theodicies because their naturalistic framework excludes entities such as God or events such as post-mortem survival. In this sense, the problem of evil poses a greater challenge for atheists than for theists. This, I believe, is a significant point, as the problem of evil is normally deployed to undermine theism and motivate atheism, rather than vice versa.

**Conclusion**

Let us return to the standard structure of the debate over the problem of evil: Atheists present the existence of suffering as a challenge to theism, and theists like Swinburne respond by appealing to supernaturalist resources. In this familiar exchange, atheists press the problem of evil as forcefully as possible, and theists strive to respond as persuasively as possible. Once we incorporate the perspective I have proposed, however, the dynamic is reversed: The more powerfully atheists raise the problem of evil, and the more effectively theists respond, the more unsettling the atheistic worldview begins to appear.

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