

Commentaries

A PSEUDOSOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

by Philip L. Quinn

In a recent paper called "A Logical Solution to the Problem of Evil," William S. Hatcher tries to dispose of the traditional problem of evil by proving the consistency of seven propositions.¹ These propositions and Hatcher's transcriptions of them in first-order logic are the following:

- $(Ex)(Ey)[Val(x, y)]$ (i)
"There exist x and y such that x is better than y ."
- $(x)(y)[Val(x, y) \supset \neg Val(y, x)]$ (ii)
"For any two things x and y , if x is better than y , then y is not better than x ."
- $(x) \neg Val(x, x)$ (iii)
"Nothing is better than itself."
- $(E!x)[Cr(x)]$ (iv)
"God exists."
- $Pw[\omega Cr(x)]$ (v)
"God is all-powerful."
- $(y)\{[y \neq \omega Cr(x)] \supset Val[\omega Cr(x), y]\}$ (vi)
"God is better than every other thing."
- $(x)\{Pw(x) \supset (y)[Rsp(x, y)]\}$ (vii)
"If something is all-powerful, then it is responsible for everything that exists."

A model which satisfies (i)–(vii) is the set of negative integers with Val read as "is greater than," Rsp read as "is greater than or equal to," and the unit set of -1 as the extension of both Cr and Pw . In fact, as Hatcher notes, (i)–(vii) have two-element models, for instance, $\{-1, -2\}$.

This result, though interesting, is no solution to the problem of evil. The trouble is that (i)–(vii) do not assert or imply that there is any evil. Informally,

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this should be obvious once we observe that if only God and Archangel Michael existed, then (i)–(vii) would still be true and yet there would be no evil thing. More formally, we can consistently add to (i)–(vii) the proposition:

$$-(\exists x)[Ev(x)] \quad (\text{viii})$$

“There is nothing evil.”

A model which satisfies (i)–(viii) is the set $\{1, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{4}, \dots, 1/2^n, \dots\}$ with *Val* read as “is greater than,” *Rsp* read as “is greater than or equal to,” *Ev* read as “is less than zero,” and the unit set of 1 as the extension of both *Gr* and *Pw*. The two-element set $\{1, \frac{1}{2}\}$ is also a model of (i)–(viii).

Where Hatcher goes astray is in assuming that “*x* is better than *y*” (his “*Val[x,y]*”) is the converse of “*x* is more evil than *y*” (his “*Ev[x,y]*”). That this is not the case is quite evident. There may be, indeed there are, two things such that one of them is better than the other, both of them are good, and neither of them is evil at all. The example of God and Archangel Michael makes this quite plain. If free, we are not always forced to choose the lesser of two evils; sometimes we are fortunate enough to be able to choose the greater of two goods. All Hatcher has really shown is that the existence of a supremely good and all-powerful God is consistent with there being something less valuable than God. But who, theist or atheist, ever denied this platitude? What he has not demonstrated is that the existence of such a God is consistent with there being something evil. In short, he has completely missed the point of the traditional problem of evil.

In reply to criticism of this sort it might be said that we ought to adopt a “purely relative” conception of good and evil. One way of putting this point² is to claim that we should never, strictly speaking, talk of something being evil (or good) but only of one thing being worse (or better) than another. Since we do think and talk of things being evil as well as of some things being worse than others, this is obviously a proposal for conceptual and linguistic reform. As a proposed revision in our ways of thinking and speaking, it is quite clearly defective. It is, after all, a plain fact that there are many states of affairs, for example, the Nazis slaughtering millions of Jews, thousands being killed in Anatolian earthquakes, which are evil and not merely worse than certain other states of affairs such as Candide’s cultivating his garden. Moreover, it is commonly and correctly believed that the proposition that there is evil (in a noncomparative sense) is an essential part of orthodox theism and hence a datum of the traditional problem of evil.³ A proposal for conceptual and linguistic reform which would prohibit stating such facts and even formulating the problem of evil which perplexes orthodox theists cannot provide a basis for an adequate solution to their problem. Such a reform may allow us to formulate many sets of propositions whose consistency can be proved, as Hatcher has shown. However, the particular set whose consistency is of interest to the orthodox theist must include the proposition that there is evil; otherwise a consistency proof will not be a materially adequate solution to his problem. A form of linguistic asceticism which does not even permit this proposition to be formulated would fail, as it were, to take evil seriously. But, surely, the reason evil troubles orthodox theists is that their experience persuades them that it is a very serious matter indeed—often a real threat to their faith.

Hatcher wonders whether Leibniz may have failed to see the solution to the problem of evil because he lacked the logic of relations which we now possess.

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What Hatcher's paper shows is that the logic of relations, when ineptly used to generate misunderstandings about what the problem is, merely muddies the philosophical waters. All Hatcher really achieves by replacing the monadic predicate "is evil" with the dyadic relation "is better than" is a complicated begging of the question. This can scarcely be called intellectual progress, for we do not require the modern logic of relations in order to commit or to detect that fallacy.

NOTES

1. *Zygon* 9 (1974): 245–55.
2. Suggested to me by comments of an anonymous referee for *Zygon*.
3. See Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defence," in *Philosophy in America*, ed. M. Black (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), pp. 204–20, and literature cited there.

THE RELATIVE CONCEPTION OF GOOD AND EVIL

by William S. Hatcher

Philip L. Quinn obviously feels that he has seized the main thrust of my article entitled "A Logical Solution to the Problem of Evil," and for him this main point is, "though interesting," essentially trivial. I find that I feel rather that he has thoroughly missed the point and that for whatever reasons—be they due to my exposition, to his framework of interpretation, or to a combination of both—his critical remarks are largely beside the point.

My article consists of two distinct parts, only the last of which is substantially discussed or even mentioned in Quinn's criticism. The first part of the article consists of a fairly detailed examination of the argument which constitutes what I have called the problem of evil. This examination involves first a formalization of the argument in order to establish clearly that there is real, logical contradiction and not just a paradox of some sort. Once the set of premises which leads to contradiction is clearly established, there follows a philosophical discussion of each of the premises with a view to answering the implicit question, "Which, if any, of these premises can we acceptably reject on philosophical grounds in order to avoid contradiction?" The only *a priori* restraint I impose is that we shall not reject God's existence, or his omnipotence, or his goodness. This discussion tends to show that none of the other premises can be reasonably rejected on philosophical grounds as long as one insists on an absolute (monadic) concept (predicate) of "good" and of "evil."

The conclusion to this first part of the article is that if one insists on maintaining belief in the existence of a good and omnipotent God, one must

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