95. The problem of evil

And the Lord spake unto the philosopher, 'I am the Lord thy God, all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing.'

'Surely not,' replied the philosopher. 'I look at this world and I see horrible disease, hunger, starvation, mental illness. Yet you don't stop it. Is it that you can't? In which case, you are not all-powerful. Is it because you don't know about it? In which case you are not all-knowing. Or perhaps you don't want to? In which case you are not all-loving.'

'Such impudence!' replied the Lord. 'It is better for you if I don't stop all this evil. You need to grow morally and spiritually. For that you need the freedom to do evil as well as good, and to confront the chance occurrence of suffering. How could I possibly have made the world better without taking away your freedom to grow?'

'Easy,' replied the philosopher. 'First, you could have designed us so that we felt less pain. Second, you could have made sure we had more empathy, to prevent us doing evil to others. Third, you could have made us better learners, so we didn't have to suffer so much to grow. Fourth, you could have made nature less cruel. Do you want me to go on?'

Source: The problem of evil recurs in different forms throughout the history of theology

Could God have made a world in which there was less suffering but in which we had the same opportunities to exercise our free
The problem of evil

will and, as the religious put it, grow spiritually? It is difficult to answer this question without simply pandering to our prior prejudices. For atheists, the answer is obviously yes. The philosopher in our story makes four suggestions straight away. None of these seems impossible. Consider that a certain amount of empathy comes naturally to us, and that makes most of us less willing to harm others. If that is compatible with us having free will, why would having more empathy threaten it?

Consider also that our ability to learn is also something we have no direct control over. Indeed, some of us are better at it than others. Why couldn’t God have made us all better learners, so we could understand why things were right or wrong without the need to be exposed to terrible evil? Considerations such as these lead many to conclude that God could very easily have created a world in which there was less suffering. That he did not do so is proof that he either doesn’t exist or is not worthy of our worship.

But if you do believe in God, these arguments can seem very weak. For who are we to say that God could have done a better job? If God exists he is infinitely more intelligent than us. So if he created a world full of suffering, he must have done so for good reasons, even if those reasons elude our pathetic minds.

As a response this can seem unsatisfactory. For what it adds up to is the claim that, if ever we are presented with rational reasons to doubt the existence of God, we simply have to accept that our intellects are finite and that what might seem irrational or contradictory does make sense from the divine point of view. But that just means dismissing the role of rationality in religious belief. And you can’t have it both ways. It’s no use defending your belief using reason on one occasion, if you don’t accept that a reasoned argument against belief has any force.

This is where the problem of evil seems to leave the believer.
The problem of evil

The best rational attempts to resolve the problem are all effectively versions of the argument that it must be all for the best in the long run. But to accept that requires a faith that defies reason, for our best reason tells us this is not the best that God could have done. If the atheists can be accused of claiming to know better than God, believers can be accused of knowing better than reason. Which is the more serious charge?