INFINITY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract. God seemingly had a duty to create minds each of infinite worth through possessing God-like knowledge. People might object that God's own infinite worth was all that was needed, or that no mind that God created could have truly infinite worth; however, such objections fail. Yet this does not generate an unsolvable Problem of Evil. We could exist inside an infinite mind that was one among endlessly many, perhaps all created by Platonic Necessity. "God" might be our name for this Necessity, or for the infinite mind inside which we existed, or for an infinite ocean of infinite minds.

I.

Defenses against the Problem of Evil run into a potentially great difficulty. God is typically described as an immaterial mind sufficient unto itself, a mind lacking nothing that is worth having. Without creating anything, God could have existed in eternal, immensely good self-contemplation, enjoyment of divine knowledge of everything worth knowing. God would have known all the beauties of geometry and other such fields of abstract truth. Presumably, too, all the glories of music and other things which can be known only through actually being experienced. God's knowledge would further have included knowledge of hugely many thoughts that were worth thinking, thoughts known through God's actually thinking them. And the immense worth of the divine mind, it is typically declared, would have been all the good that could possibly have been needed, so God had no duty to create anything: Keith Ward, for instance, writes that "God in the divine being is perfect anyway and it may be better to leave well alone".[1] Now, the last of those points might be hard to accept. God is fairly standardly described as omnipotent. Why,

1 Keith Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 189.

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then, no duty to create infinitely many minds that were like God in knowing immensely much that was worth knowing? Why do we see a world which, besides having the plagues and earthquakes which are grist to the usual Problem of Evil mills, can seem severely unsatisfactory through not containing minds of that type?

True enough, a duty to create minds that would benefit from having been created might be appreciably weaker than the duty not to destroy such minds once they had in fact been created: it is a point often made in discussions of whether one ought to have children if the human race faced extinction through folk finding it a nuisance to have them. Some philosophers even say that since beings who were not yet in existence would have no identities there could be no obligation to create them: failure to create them would not be wronging anybody. It can also be argued that Simplicity often contributes to a situation's intrinsic value: now, the existence of God plus other minds would clearly be less simple than the existence of God alone. Again, it may be insisted that no situation except one consisting of God alone could have the supremely desirable quality of being maximally excellent throughout. Nevertheless it can well seem that God, if existing as an omnipotent, morally perfect mind, would have created infinitely many other minds each having an existence that was immensely worth having because its knowledge was like God's knowledge. So if God is not a fiction, why does the world contain plagues, earthquakes, and minds as inferior as ours? Why did not God create infinitely many God-like minds, and nothing more?

Reply A)

A first possible reply is that the worth of the divine mind would be more than just immense. Like the divine knowledge of infinitely many things worth knowing, it would of course be infinite. Suggesting that it would fail to be all the good that could be needed is therefore idiotic. Obviously creation of any further minds would never result in an amount of good greater than infinite! Hence there would have been nothing unsatisfactory in an eternity of solitary divine self-contemplation. Whether to create anything at all was a matter not of duty but of divine free choice of a kind not restricted by a need to make any created situation outstandingly good.

Ought we to accept such reasoning? Were the divine mind infinite in its worth, would it be idiotic to think that Mozart had increased the worth of the

cosmos, the totality of all existence of which God was a part? Would it have been pointless, a futile attempt to improve the totality whose value was infinite, to try to make Mozart happier? The good of God-plus-Mozart being unboundedly great despite all human miseries, would there have been nothing wrong in making Mozart miserable? Were a mind infinite in negative value, perhaps because it was filled with infinitely much agony, would we say that because its negative value *was already itself limitless* the coming into existence of ninety-nine more such minds would obviously make matters no more terrible, and that there was no duty to lessen the suffering of the ninety-nine? And if there were infinitely many minds in addition to God, each enjoying an existence infinitely worth having because it knew everything worth knowing, would it be no tragedy if those other minds all suddenly vanished? Thinking about questions like these can persuade us that even infinite value may fail to be maximal, unsurpassable value, and that good which was the greatest possible in the case of any one entity could be greatly surpassed by the good of a situation containing many entities, for instance through its featuring infinitely many minds, each knowing infinitely many things worth knowing.

Theologians typically describe God as the one and only mind that knows infinitely many things, but it is by no means clear that Christians, for example, should heed them. The Bible is no textbook of metaphysics. While forbidding worship of more than one deity it nowhere says that God could not tolerate the presence of God-like minds which, never interfering with the events of our universe, had an existence of just as much benefit to those minds as the existence of God was of benefit to God. Why, then, should Christians deny that infinitely many minds, each knowing infinitely many things, exist beyond our universe as entities that God created? Perhaps because such minds would have to endure endless boring repetition? Surely not, for how could the mere fact of there being infinitely many minds God-like in their knowledge mean boredom for each of them? We might equally well suppose that watching a sunset was boring whenever several people watched it.

Reply B)

A second possible reply is that a mind can know infinitely much only if it is an infinite thing, a thing perhaps not infinite in spatial extent but at least infinite in its complexity; now, there cannot be more than one infinite thing, as Spinoza understood. Being infinite means being without any limits, which

in turn means being all-inclusive. God plus a mountain is impossible since the mountain would limit God's existence by not being part of God. Mountains and mountaineers must be constituents of God's own being. Yet just why, we can ask, would one thing limit another, let alone limit it in an unfortunate fashion, simply by existing outside it? Cosmologists often talk of a multiverse in which many universes co-exist, each in a space of its own. The fact that a universe stretched continually onwards would not mean that no others could do this, so each universe is sometimes described as infinitely large. Each would not be absolutely everything, but why view not being absolutely everything as a disastrous defect, or any defect at all, in a universe or in anything else? When a mind had an existence in itself worth having, how on earth could such intrinsic worth be reduced by there existing another mind equally fortunate?

Reply C)

It might instead be argued that creation of infinitely many minds, each fully equal to God in its knowledge, would be impossible because violating Identity of Indiscernibles, the principle that no two things can have precisely the same qualities. Yet what if such an argument were correct? God might still create infinitely many minds, each almost identical to God in what it knew. Each might lack only an infinitesimal part of God's knowledge, a new infinitesimal part in each new instance. While not knowing absolutely all the infinitely many things worth knowing, each would then still know infinitely many of those things, just as a line of infinitely many apples would continue to be a line of infinitely many apples after you had eaten five of them. Although God was the sole entity with an existence unsurpassably worth having, the minds would each still have an existence infinitely worth having.

Likewise with the objection that minds which were God-created would lack God-like omnipotence. Omnipotence, it is argued, could not be had by several minds at once since one of them might want to do what another wanted to prevent. But, we can ask, why should lack of omnipotence be considered important? It is tempting to declare that genuine omnipotence, power to create not only all possible good worlds but also all possible bad ones, would add nothing to the intrinsic worth of a mind. Let us at least say that changing from being powerless to being omnipotent would not at all evidently produce any increase in that intrinsic worth, because only *the instrumental worth* of

power—the value, positive or negative, of how power is used, for instance when a deity actually employs it to create something instead of resting content with contemplating the mere fact of being powerful—can at all obviously grow when power grows. And similarly with lack of self-existence: existing, in other words, only thanks to God's power. Like failure to be omnipotent, failure to be self-existent could well be considered no threat to intrinsic worth. Yet suppose that lack of omnipotence or of self-existence did lessen a mind's intrinsic worth. This could not make that worth *finite* when the mind in question knew infinitely many things worth knowing. We might almost as well think that it could somehow manage to be a finite mind despite knowing those infinitely many things.

What if a philosopher wanted to distinguish between worth "merely infinite", which could be had simply by knowing infinitely many of the things that were worth knowing, and the greater worth, "Absolutely Infinite worth", of a mind which knew every last one of those things, which had created everything apart from itself so that it was unique in possessing self-existence, and which was omnipotent, too? Well, there might be nothing too very wrong in all this so long as it was clear that the all-creating mind whose worth was called Absolutely Infinite possessed worth superior only to the worth *of every other single entity* so that it might be surpassed when a situation contained more than one entity: the all-creating mind *and also* Mozart, for example. It could be worth greatly surpassed when the all-creating mind was joined by infinitely many other minds, each of which knew infinitely much.

II.

Nothing in what I have said strikes me as making belief in God unreasonable. All the same, I may have identified limits to how God can reasonably be conceived.

Of one matter we might be fairly confident. As a first step towards explaining why we know so few of the things worth knowing, believers in God should accept that it is inside an infinite mind, a mind knowing infinitely many things worth knowing, that we live and move and have our being, as is maintained by Christian pantheists and by Islamic writers who hold that, wherever we look, Allah is what we see. We and all other ingredients of our universe would be patterns carried by a mind unlimited in its complexity. Here it could be useful to think of how, in the speculations of some physi-

cists, our universe is a pattern of activity inside a gigantic computer built by a very advanced civilization. But the mind in which we lived and moved and had our being would be unified in its existence in a way in which no digital computer is unified. Its parts, for instance humans with their severely limited knowledge and their lives of severely limited worth, could no more exist independently of this infinite mind than the grin on a face could exist without the face. Moreover, this unimaginably complex mind would presumably carry the patterns of events not only in our universe but in countless other universes as well, the other universes perhaps often obeying physical laws very different from those that our universe obeys. [Ours could be far from the best of the universes, but this would be no good reason for wishing it destroyed.] Again, the thoughts of the mind would presumably include thoughts about infinitely many things which were not parts of universes.

Additionally we could well say this. Unless there already existed minds whose knowledge was equal or almost equal to God's knowledge, God would have created such minds instead of resting content with solitary self-contemplation. What is more, God would have created infinitely many of them instead of only a few score or a few trillion, for the existence possessed by each mind would be just as much worth possessing, no matter how many others existed. And apart from such minds, God would have created nothing.

The cosmos may, however, be composed of infinitely many minds, each knowing infinitely much that is worth knowing, without one of them having created the others. Dissatisfied both with thinking that God just happens to exist and with the idea that God's existence is logically required, we could accept Plato's theory about why there exists anything at all. In Book Six of his *Republic* Plato suggests that The Good, while itself beyond existence, gives existence to all known things. Today we could present the suggestion as follows. Even if there existed nothing at all, the existence of good things would be ethically required (or, as Nicholas Rescher prefers to say, required "axiologically"); now, if some things were sufficiently good then their requiredness could be *creative* ethical requiredness, itself responsible for their coming into existence or for their always having existed. Our theory, we could say, is that the cosmos exists through Platonic Necessity: this is the theme of Rescher's

Axiogenesis[2] and of my *Value and Existence*.[3] If offered as a speculation, not as something provable from the very meaning of the words "ethically required", the theme could be non-absurd because, for a start, we may have no evidence making it silly to think that the cosmos consists solely of infinitely many infinite minds knowing all or almost all that is worth knowing, one of them a mind in which we live and move and have our being. My *Infinite Minds*[4] tries to describe those minds and suggests that we have immortality allowing us to share more and more of the things that they know, an idea to which I return in *Immortality Defended*.[5]

If agreeing with Plato we might still use the word "God". We might use it as the name of an infinite mind inside which we existed. Alternatively, we might use it to mean an infinite ocean whose waters were infinitely many infinite minds. Or, imitating Plato's talk of The Good as explaining the world's existence, we might make "God" our word for the creative ethical requiredness of that ocean.

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2 Nicholas Rescher, *Axiogenesis: An Essay in Metaphysical Optimalism* (Lexington Books, 2010).

3 John Leslie, *Value and Existence* (Blackwell, 1979). Chapter thirteen of J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982) is largely devoted to a discussion of it, calling its Platonic creation theory "a formidable rival to the traditional theism which treats God as a person."

4 John Leslie, *Infinite Minds* (OUP, 2001).

5 John Leslie, *Immortality Defended* (Blackwell, 2007).