

16. EVIL AND A FINITE GOD: A RESPONSE TO MCGRATH

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ABSTRACT. P.J. McGrath has recently challenged the standard claim that to escape the problem of evil one need only alter one's conception of God by limiting his power or his goodness. If we assume that God is infinitely good but not omnipotent, then God can scarcely be a proper object of worship. And if we assume that if God is omnipotent but limited in goodness, he becomes a moral monster. Either way evil remains a problem for theistic belief. I argue that McGrath fails to distinguish between the deductive and inductive problem of evil and between a limitation in God's "strength" and a limitation in God's "ability to act", and that once these distinctions are made, his argument fails.

According to P.J. McGrath, almost all theologians and atheologists at least implicitly argue that to escape the problem of evil "one need only alter one's conception of God by limiting his power or his goodness". But this is wrong, he tells us. First, if we assume that God is infinitely good but not omnipotent, then God can "scarcely be a proper object of worship". For "some evils which formerly existed have been eliminated by human ingenuity" and "to say that [God] was unable to do so is to reduce his power to such an extent that it is difficult to see how he could any longer be regarded as divine".

Second, if we assume that God is omnipotent but limited in goodness, he becomes "a moral monster". For only a being "more akin to an evil demon than to a deity" would "tolerate the sorts of evils which actually exist simply because of his lack of concern for the welfare of others". And, finally, if we assume God is limited in both goodness and power, we can avoid some of "the difficulties surrounding the second option". But this option is "even less acceptable than the first", for a being doubly limited is even less worthy of worship than one limited only in power.

Thus, he concludes, "evil constitutes a problem for belief in even a scaled down version of deity".¹

McGrath's conclusion is important, and his discussion has an initial ring of plausibility. But he fails to make two *crucial* distinctions which *must* be made in this context. Once made, his argument is greatly weakened.

1. *The distinction between the deductive and inductive problem of evil.* Proponents of the deductive problem claim that the following propositions are logically incompatible: (a) God is perfectly good, (b) God is all powerful, and (c) Evil exists. Proponents of the inductive problem claim only that the truth of (a) and (b) is improbable, given (c). McGrath's argument falls into the latter category--i.e., his basic argument is that the existence of even a finite God worthy of worship is improbable, given evil. But given this fact, two problems appear. First, those who claim that the problem of evil can be circumvented by scaling down God's goodness or power are almost always talking about the deductive (logical) problem. Few who discuss the problem of evil in the manner done by McGrath--in its inductive form--deny that serious questions remain, however greatly God's attributes are pared down.

Second, and more importantly, when discussing evil inductively, one cannot only consider the probability of (a) and (b), given (c). One must consider the probability of (a) and (b), given *all* the relevant evidence, which includes all the happiness and meaning experienced in our world and also, for many, their alleged personal encounters with God. Once this is done, McGrath may still believe the truth of (a) and (b) to be improbable. But many others obviously will not, and it is difficult to see how McGrath could demonstrate objectively that all other rational people ought to weigh all the relevant data as he does.

2. *The distinction between a God limited in "strength" and a God limited in "ability to act".* To claim that God is metaphysically limited in power is to claim that he does not have the "strength" to do all he would like to do. Is such a God unworthy of worship, as McGrath claims? Finitists of this sort--e.g., process theists--obviously think not. They acknowledge that their God has less coercive (unilateral) power than humans. But it is their contention that since the use of persuasive power is morally superior to the use of coercive power, the exact type of finite God McGrath degrades is actually *more* worthy of worship than the "all powerful" God of classical thought.² And I don't see how one would go about demonstrating objectively whose perspective was the "right" one.

The real problem, though, is that most theodicians who are characterized as granting God "limited omnipotence" don't have a metaphysical limitation of this sort in mind.³ Such theodicians--usually those who employ a classical free will theodicy or defense--still believe that God can unilaterally control human behavior and the natural order. Thus, they believe that God has the "strength" to bring it about that no evil exists. He could have chosen to create no world at all or a world in which no human existed or a world in which humans existed but were not actually capable of making free choices (although they may have believed they were). However, they do argue that God cannot unilaterally control the actions of significantly free individuals and that significantly free individuals need a natural environment characterized by natural regularity. Thus, they conclude that if (or since) God has chosen to create a world containing significantly free individuals, he is necessarily *limited in his ability* to unilaterally remove much moral and natural evil. It stands as an unavoidable by-product of the type of world he has decided to actualize.⁴ This type of "limited omnipotence" theodicy may well have its problems. But *it*--not the finitism of which McGrath speaks--is the most common type of theodicy (or defense) today, and one of its problems is not that its God is too weak to be worshipped.

ENDNOTES

¹ P.J. McGrath, "Evil and the Existence of a Finite God" *Analysis* 46 (1986), 63-4.

² See, for example, David Griffin, *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), chapter 18.

³ Such theodicians, themselves, seldom claim that their God is "limited" in omnipotence. They, like almost all theodicians, claim that God has all the power it is possible for a being to possess. But in comparison to the God of classical Reformed thought--e.g., the God of Calvin or even Augustine--the God of classical free will theism is able to do "less" unilaterally. For a fuller discussion of this point, see David and Randall Bassinger, ed., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

⁴ Only those who claim God has actually created such a world are actually offering a *theodicy*--an explanation for evil. See Bruce Reichenbach, *Predestination and Free Will*. Those who argue only that, if God exists and has created such a world, his unilateral power is necessarily limited are really offering a *defense*--a justifiable basis for arguing that evil is not necessarily incompatible with God's existence. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), chapter 9. For our purposes, however, both can be considered theodicies.