

The Participation Theodicy John buck

Abstract:

Why does God allow gratuitous suffering to occur?

In this paper, the author puts forward a variation on the greater good theodicy, which rather than suggesting that every evil which occurs brings about some greater-good, the paper instead argues that for any great world God could have created by himself, God's generosity would instead motivate him to allow creatures to participate in the bringing about of that great world. This scenario would require God to initially create a world that was 'less-than as great as it could be' (opening up the possibility for evils to occur), so that the creatures that would inhabit said world could causally contribute towards its achieving of greatness. Such a world would feature the goods of participation that would be lacking in a world God were to create by himself.

Section 1: Opening

There's a story associated with a first-century Jewish rabbi (not Jesus), which can provide a novel response to the problem of evil. This Rabbi, Rabbi Akiva, was confronted by several Roman pagans mocking the Jewish-orthodox practice of circumcision.

"Why didn't God create men already circumcised," they asked, "if that's how he wanted us to be?"

In a classical Rabbinic fashion, Akiva answered this question with another question. "Tell me, whose works are greater? Man's works, or God's?"

Confused, the Romans answered "Obviously God's works are greater than man's, since God creates from nothing, whereas man can only create from what is already there."

Rabbi Akiva adamantly shook his head in silence. He then plucked some heads of wheat from the ground and showing it to them, said "This here is the work of God's hands. Unrefined, disgusting, barely edible." He then dropped the wheat to pull out a loaf of bread from his bag. "And this here is the work of man's hands. Delicious, warm, and fulfilling. Truly, man's works, which take what God has already started and finishes them, these are greater than God's. Because man's works lift up God's works, which by themselves would remain unfinished and imperfect."

Section 2: Explanation

Drawing from this likely apocryphal event, the 'participation theodicy' I'll defend in this paper contends that for any great world God could have created by himself, this world would lack the *intrinsic good* of participation on the part of creatures contributing towards the production of such a great world. And, considering that God, as a greatest possible being, would be maximally generous, God would be willing to share the good of participating in the creation of a great world with others, even if this would entail creating an initially less-than great world with creatures within it, so that those creatures could causally contribute towards bringing about that

great world.

And, if this 'less-than great world' with creatures within it would be one that is intrinsically good for God to create, then God would have reason to allow creatures to contribute towards bringing about that 'less-than great world', which would require God to initially create a 'less-than, less-than great world'. This chain of participation would eventually either stop at a threshold of goodness, or at a point at which it's impossible for creatures to participate any further, such as in the initial creation of the first creatures, since no creature could participate in the creation of itself.

This theodicy maintains that we happen to find ourselves in the midst of one of these 'less-than, less-than, less-than, less-than great worlds', which God created us within so that we, our ancestors, their ancestors, etc., could each causally contribute towards the eventual bringing about of a truly great world.

Section 3: Formal Explanation

So for any good state of affairs (or 'world') that God could bring about on his own, we can ask three questions to see if it would be morally permissible for God to bring about some world other than that, wherein the eventual goods it will have are initially lacking:

- Would it be good *for creatures* to bring about that good world?
- *Could* creatures bring about that good world?
- Would it be good *for God* to allow creatures to bring about that good world?

If the answer to all three of these questions is 'yes', then God would be morally permitted to bring about such a world where the eventual goods it could have are initially lacking.

So, for example, let's suppose that it would be good if God created a world wherein all rational agents were in a consensual loving relationship with God.

- Would it be good for creatures to contribute towards bringing about such a world?

It would seem the answer is yes. Since such a relationship with God would represent the highest good that could be had for rational agents, and it'd be good for creatures to bring about this highest good, since doing so would bring about something intrinsically good.

- Could creatures contribute towards bringing about such a world?

Yes. In order for a relationship to be consensual, all parties within it must be willing for it to occur. Furthermore, rational agents *are* capable of willing such a relationship that is for their ultimate benefit, and some non-rational agents are capable of producing rational ones.

- But would it be good for God to allow creatures to participate in the bringing about of such a world?

Yes, since by allowing them to participate, God would be expressing the virtue of generosity towards creatures, giving them the opportunity to help bring about intrinsic goods, and thus share in the praiseworthiness for such actions.

So, we can see that it'd be morally permissible for God to initially bring about a world where not every rational agent is in a consensual loving relationship to God, so long as the creatures within that world could causally contribute towards the *eventual* state of affairs in which all rational agents were in such a relationship. Thus we can see how this theodicy also provides resources towards responding to the problem of divine hiddenness.

Section 4: The Problem of Evil

Before addressing the major objections to this theodicy, we should first articulate a version of the problem of evil which this theodicy might address.

The Argument From Gratuitous Evil

1. If God existed, then our world would not contain any evils unnecessary for the bringing about of greater goods.
2. Our world does contain evils unnecessary for the bringing about of greater goods.
Therefore,
3. God does not exist.

The participation theodicy will primarily be targeting the first premise rather than the second, in contrast to certain greater-good theodicies, but will still provide justification for the second premise's consistency with God's omnibenevolence.

We can grant that if God were creating the world and everything in it all by himself, then yes, no unnecessary evils would take place, since God would know how to, and would be motivated to create the world in such a way that would avoid these evils. But, if God were motivated to allow creatures to causally contribute towards the creation of an ideal world where nothing wrong could ever occur, those creatures would necessarily have to first exist within a non-ideal world. And in such a world there'd be possibilities of error that could occur, errors unnecessary for the procurement of the good things that might be brought about, even errors which ran contrary towards the ultimate ideal good sought after by God. So, if premise one is suggesting that God would never allow a non-ideal world to exist, we can provide a reason to think that God would have motivation in line with his omnibenevolence to allow creatures to contribute towards bringing about of a great world, with the caveat that allowing them to do so would require creating an initially imperfect world wherein gratuitous evils can occur.

And to respond to the second premise of the argument; while there do seem to be (and very likely are) particular evils unnecessary for the bringing about of good things, the world itself is justifiable for God to create because it is part of the process of allowing creatures to participate. Specific evils themselves might not contribute towards greater goods as a consequence, but, the great good of participation a priori requires the general possibility for various evils to occur, even if the specific ones that do, don't bring about a greater good.

Section 5: Objections

This paper will now respond to three strong objections to this theodicy. I'll try to best characterize each objection and then respond accordingly.

Objection:

While this theodicy might give God justification for creating a less than ideal world, it doesn't justify God creating a world with evils in it, for evils are things which are themselves worth avoiding or preventing from occurring, such as pain or immoral acts. God's knowledge and benevolence would motivate him to prevent these evils. For God to knowingly create creatures within a world where they will inevitably suffer is itself an immoral act for him to do, so God could not do this. To elucidate this point, imagine a scenario like in the *Saw* film franchise, in which the villain kidnaps and imprisons his victims inside a torture chamber. But this torture chamber is carefully made to allow the captives to eventually causally contribute towards their escape. This 'Jigsaw'-like mastermind would obviously be immoral for doing this, and so too

would God be for creating us in this world where torture and hardship are a certainty, even if the hardships will eventually be overcome through creatures' causal contributions.

Response:

The reason that it's immoral to put people into torture chambers, even if the people within it could causally contribute towards their escape, is because to escape a bad set of circumstances is only an *extrinsically*-good thing to do. The reason for the kidnapped victim to leave the prison is not something that is worth doing in and of itself, but is only worth doing in consideration of avoiding the negative things that will happen to them if they do not leave. Whereas, a world that it'd be morally permissible for God to create (according to this theodicy) is one where it'd be *intrinsically*-good for creatures to help bring about, where the participation in bringing about an ideal world is worth doing for its own sake.

One such intrinsically-good world might be one where 'only doing very bad things will make a creature feel bad'. Since such a world would feature some sort of natural motivation in place to disincentivize negative behavior. So, in order for creatures to contribute towards bringing that type of world about, it would have to *initially* be such that sometimes creatures will feel bad even when they aren't doing things that are very bad. Since in order for creatures to causally contribute towards bringing about X, those creatures must first exist in a world where X is not the case.

Objection:

Supposing that it's a good thing that God creates creatures in a less-than ideal world, so that those creatures can causally contribute towards the bringing about of that ideal state, and each less-than ideal state would also be good for creatures to contribute towards, so God has reasons to create the state initially less good than that; Wouldn't this line of reasoning continue going further and further back, to where all creatures initially suffer the worst possible suffering that they could, so long as they can still causally contribute towards the ease of that suffering, by slowly, but eventually bringing about an ideal state of the world? But, obviously creating such a hellish world would be immoral for God to do! Yet the principles behind this theodicy would suggest that it would be morally permissible for God to do this, so, we should reject the principles behind this theodicy.

Response:

The principles behind the theodicy require three things:

- That it be intrinsically good for creatures to bring about a good world.
- That said creatures can bring about this good world.
- That it be intrinsically good for God to allow said creatures to bring about this good

world.

The hell-world example does not satisfy criteria one and three, since, for a creature to ease the suffering of themselves or others, would not be *intrinsically* good for them to do, rather, it'd be *extrinsically* good for them to do so, since it does not bring about a positive state of affairs, it only ceases a negative one from occurring. The goodness of a world without suffering is a goodness only had in comparison to a worse world with suffering. This 'worse-than' relation, is extrinsic, since it requires reference to something other than the original subject. So we can see that a world without suffering, being told nothing else about this world, is not itself a world with intrinsic goodness.

And, it wouldn't be good for God to create creatures in this hellish world, because it wouldn't exhibit generosity on God's part to put creatures in a set of circumstances where it's only extrinsically good that they avoid their current state of suffering.

Now, some might suggest that our world is in fact quite like the hellish scenario, so, if it'd go against God's benevolence to create us in that initially hellish world, then it'd also be immoral for God to create us in this world. But, our world differs from the hellish world because the creatures in our world can secure good states of affairs for their own sakes, rather than

exclusively for the sake of avoiding suffering. While in the hellish world, initially no one could bring about intrinsically good states, only avoid certain bad ones.

Objection:

There are some evils in this world which creatures cannot contribute towards changing, such as the laws of nature which produce suffering in creatures in ways that don't benefit those creatures, or the past suffering that has taken place in our evolutionary history. Since creatures can't contribute towards the idealization of these states of affairs, God would still be on the hook for bringing them about, making this theodicy incomplete in accounting for all types of evils.

Response:

Regarding laws of nature which promote suffering: we can grant that these laws are fixed, and cannot be affected by creatures. However, if it'd be good for God to create a world with laws of nature which only promoted flourishing, and God could do this on behalf of creatures, due to their requesting this of him (in prayer, let's say, or through their intentions), then, there is a sense in which creatures *can* contribute towards the bringing about of this ideal world. And so this would provide God with some reason for creating a world with initially imperfect laws of nature, which do not perfectly promote flourishing in creatures, rather, sometimes promote the opposite. Another possibility is that creatures will eventually be able to exist harmoniously in nature despite the laws it has, and God allows creatures to contribute towards bringing about that world, which requires them to first exist in a world disharmonious in nature.

Regarding past suffering which creatures can't contribute towards preventing: Consider the life of a young dodo bird which froze to death at some point during the ice age. This poor bird had no opportunity to causally contribute towards the ideal world, and was instead a victim of the imperfect one it was brought up in. This seems to be an example of a gratuitous evil. Yet, God still acted generously towards this creature, since God allowed it to be a member of the process behind bringing about an ideal world, since, part of that process is going to be a world where some creatures are incapable of contributing, in order to eventually bring about a world where all creatures can contribute. Were this dodo bird capable of seeing the part its existence played in the broader picture, it'd recognize that it was good that it could come to exist, even if that bird personally wasn't able to contribute towards any good things.

Whether or not God actually does grant such creatures a rational nature in the eschaton goes beyond the scope of this paper, but so long as a world where some creatures can't contribute is a world worth creating, so that the other creatures within it could contribute towards a world where eventually all creatures can contribute, God would be morally permitted to create such a world.

Section 6: Conclusion

I will conclude this paper with another analogy for this theodicy.

Imagine it's Mother's Day and a loving husband wants to do something special for his wife, and so decides to wake up early to make breakfast in bed for her. The father could do this all by himself, but he could instead wake up the kids so that they could help out and also show their love for their mother. So, he wakes up the kids. Some of them choose to stay in bed, but the youngest ones agree to help make breakfast for mommy.

He assigns the kids with tasks they can accomplish, but, given their limited skill level, they aren't always going to be the best at them. For example, there's some shells mixed in with the scrambled eggs, the butter isn't properly smoothed on the toast, and there are seeds left in the orange juice. The father could step in and fix all these mistakes made by his children, but, in doing so, he would partially deprive their agency and diminish the amount that they actually

contributed towards their mother's breakfast. And even though the mother's breakfast will not be as good as it could have been if the father had made it entirely himself, the mother still appreciates the partially crunchy eggs and burnt toast, because she knows that her kids made them out of a love they had for her.

So too, the participation theodicy offers as explanation, God allows us to imperfectly contribute towards the conditions of the world, so as to provide us, and all the creatures we share this world with, the paradise that is due from causally contributing towards the wonderful world this world can eventually become, through the help of God, who works all things together for the good.