The Problem of Evil:
A New Confusion

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This paper distinguishes between two accounts of divinity in order to
clarify the discussion about God and evil things.

Introduction

It was not until recently that I picked
up Atle Ottesen Søvik's paper with the
ambitious title "The Problem of Evil:
A New Solution". His proposed solution
to this age-old problem "denies that there
is a real contradiction [...] by adding an
extra claim [...] that God wanted to create
an independent world." (p. 18)[1] In this
paper I briefly argue that this confuses
two (of many other) uses of 'God', namely
'God' as signifying "the One" and 'God'
as signifying 'disembodied mind'. Søvik
aims to solve a purported problem for the
traditional use of 'God' but replies with a
modern use of 'God'. Thus there is a new
confusion about rather than a new solu-
tion to the so-called problem of evil.[2]

On "God" and "God"

It is not easy within the space of a very
short paper to distinguish two (of several)
uses of 'God'. Still, I will do so in this sec-
tion for clarification.

Let me begin by setting out my use of
'traditional' and 'modern' here. By 'traditio-
nal' I mean the account given generally of
divinity primarily in the broad western
philosophical and theological tradition,
but also in parts of the eastern tradition.[3]
By 'modern' I mean the account given
mostly of divinity in the western tradition
since and dependent on René Descartes
and John Locke.[4] Fundamental to the tra-
ditional account of divinity is the distinc-
tion between God and everything else,
whereas the similarity between God and
human beings is fundamental to the mo-
dern account of divinity. In other words,
the traditional account of divinity is
apophatic, that is, contending for the
inadequacy of human understanding in
matters divine, while the modern account
of divinity is cataphatic, that is, maintain-
ing the adequacy of human understan-
ding in matters divine.[5] These accounts of
divinity differ over their procedures and
these I now turn to outline.

The traditional account of divinity
proceeds from an argument for the
unmoved mover and/or the doctrine of
creation. Whether divinity is articulated
in terms of the first cause being the in-
transitive mover of whatever moves tran-
sitively or in terms of the doctrine of free
creation out of nothing,[6] the starting
point is a radical ontological distinction
between God and everything else. What-
ever is the beginning and end of every-
thing else is not one of those things. So,
the First Cause or Creator cannot have
any of the features that constitute secon-
dary causes or creatures: parts, genus and
difference, substance and accidents,

potentiality and actuality, nor existence and essence. Thus the First Cause or Creator is the One. Yet, the argument for that which moves transitively but not intransitively and the doctrine of creation not only distinguishes God from whatever else exists, but also makes that which is caused or created distinctive. Each secondary cause or creature and each of its activity are both for their origin and continuance causally dependent on the First Cause and Creator. Thus that there is anything at all in addition to God is God's doing.

The modern account of divinity proceeds from an argument that there is a similarity between God and humans, since words must be used of them in the same way. Humanity is here articulated in terms of persons as minds and divinity must then be similar to that. The difference between divine and human minds is of course great, and so 'God' signifies something like "the greatest disembodied mind". Human minds have knowledge, can will and do good, and thus the divine mind has maximal knowledge, will and goodness. This maximally great mind has created and designed the world, and like humans there is mutual dependence so that God acquires knowledge of the world as the world develops, takes risks in running the world but yet is not blameworthy for what occurs. Thus that there is anything in addition to God is partly God's doing.

Søvik clearly adheres to the modern and anthropomorphite account of divinity.[7] Fundamental to his "new solution" is the significance of "an independent world":

> Let me specify that by 'independence' I do not mean that we are not dependent on God for our existence. God keeps everything in being from moment to moment, so in that sense we are totally dependent on God. What is meant by 'independence' here, is that God has given both humans and the world room to develop themselves on their own. (p. 19)[8]

Although this passage begins with a nod at the traditional account of divinity, it explicitly aims to spell out 'independence'. Here the key phrase is "room to develop themselves on their own", which is synonymous with the later "must give them some space to become independent" (p. 19). This pictures God and the world over against each other as parts of a whole where they compete for space. Among the things spatially related – mountains, trees, horses, tables, humans and so forth – there is God, and "God has given both humans and the world room to develop themselves on their own." However, on the traditional account of divinity the verbs 'to be in a room' or 'to give others room' are not predicable of 'God'; that is, they can neither be falsely nor truly said of 'God'. On this account, to say "God gives others room" is as unintelligible as saying "God bicycled a red-light", "I hear yellow" or "Stephen chops milk". On the traditional account, divine omnipresence does not mean that we have to elbow spatially or squeeze morally into a room where God is, but rather that because God is present everywhere we can be present at all. It is because of the divine presence and causality that there can be human presence and causality at all. According to the traditional use of 'God', no existent is independent of God but the First Cause and Creator orders immutably and infallibly all secondary causes to occur necessarily, contingently or freely according to their natures.

Again Søvik predicates "intervene", "interrupt" and "disturb" (p. 21) of "God", namely he supposes that it may be true or false to say that God can intervene, interrupt or disturb the world. This also places God alongside the world. However, on the traditional account of divinity 'to intervene', 'to interrupt' and 'to disturb' are not predicable of 'God' but incompatible because of the meanings of the subject and predicate terms. On that account, to say "God can(not) intervene, interfere or disturb the world" would be like saying "God is rather tall for his age", "Horses hinder coagulation" or "The lemon soured extremely", which cannot be true nor false but are sheer nonsense. Two (or more) things may interfere with each other, but one thing cannot interfere with itself. Things in the world may and do interfere with each other, but since God is not something in the world, God cannot interfere with anything. Rather God is what causes everything else to exist and continue to exist.[9]

So Søvik equivocates over 'God'. He aims to solve a purported problem for the traditional and apophatic account of divinity, but replies with a modern and anthropomorphite account of divinity. It is this implicit shift that is confusing and we need to be clear about what we are talking.[10]

Conclusion

In this brief paper I have not argued that the traditional account of divinity is true nor that the modern account is false, but only that Søvik confuses the two accounts of divinity and thus does not provide a solution to the purported problem of evil. Nor have I considered whether or not his is a good solution to a problem for an anthropomorphite. This conclusion does not imply that the "problem of evil" is well formulated, but only that the proposed solution to one formulation of that problem is confused. This modest conclusion is however important if we are to think straight about God and things that are evil. If our terms fail to be clear, we will never solve our problems or mistake solutions for solutions. Clarification is the way to solution.[11]

Notes

1. All page references in this paper refer to Atle Ottesen Søvik, "The Problem of Evil: A New Solution," *Theofilos* 4, no. 2 (2012): pp. 18-27. In this paper "[...]" signifies abbreviation of citation within a paragraph.

Søvik qualifies the originality of his solution: "I present how Keith Ward solves the problem, but at different places I add ideas of my own." (p. 18) Since the bulk of his paper is formulated as his own solution, I do not complicate my analysis by considering whether or not Søvik is faithful to Ward but treat the solution as if it is Søvik's own. To the extent that Søvik is faithful to Ward, my argument applies of course to Ward as well.

2. Five subordinate confusions are noticeable. First, Søvik reduces "the problem of evil" to its logical version – "contradiction" – as opposed to its empirical version (pp. 18, 19, 25). No argument is given for denying the widely accepted distinction between logical and empirical versions. Second, Søvik claims to present a "theodicy" (p. 18) namely "a coherent theory of God" (p. 20). However, there is a widely accepted distinction between a "defence," whereby an argument aims to establish the consistency or coherence of theism in the face of evil, and a "theodicy," whereby an argument seeks to establish the probability or truth of theism in the face of evil. According to this distinction, Søvik is offering a defence and not a theodicy, but he gives no reason for blurring the usual distinction. Third, the problem of evil is "defined" as "there seems to be a contradiction between on the one hand believing in a good and omnipotent God, and on the other hand believing that there is genuine evil in the world." (p. 18) Although this is rather a description than a definition, it is noticeable that the standard inclusion of omniscience is excluded from this formulation. (The verb "to believe" is here used without any voluntary or conative significance and merely for intellectual or assentient significance.) Fourth, "The term "evil" is used in a wide sense to include suffering caused by human and other causes." (p. 18) This conflates however the distinction between natural and moral evil that has been widely accepted since antiquity (at least). Søvik moreover appeals to this distinction in his conclusion (p. 25), but it requires separate arguments for natural evils and moral evils as opposed to Søvik's single kind of argument. Fifth, by "genuine evil" is meant "that

it does not serve a higher good which in a wider perspective would make the evil good." (p. 18) This may seem first to be merely a statement of non-consequentialism, but consequentialism(s) does neither contend that things are good or bad, nor that a bad thing can change into a good one, but that states of affairs consequent on actions make the latter good or bad. However, consequentialism is later affirmed: "an extremely great good clearly outweighs a much smaller evil" (p. 23), and "the evil they suffer will be compensated if they accept the offer of salvation." (p. 25) I will leave these confusions for the remainder of my paper and limit myself to the concept of divinity.

3. For example, such diverse figures as Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Athanasius, Augustine, Boëthius, Dionysius the Preudo-Areopagite, Anselm, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroës), Maimonides, Aquinas, Fourth Lateran Council, Protestant and Roman Catholic confessions of faith. I cannot of course in this little paper argue for the historical accuracy of this, but refer the reader to, for instance, C. C. J. Webb, *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1915), Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers: The Gifford Lectures* 1936, trans. Edward S. Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), Leo Elders, *Aristotle's Theology: A Commentary on Book L of the Metaphysics* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), L.P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (London: Routledge, 1990), Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, ed. Bradley J. Malkovsky, 2 ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and Sebastian Rehnman, "The Doctrine of God," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

4. "In the conception of God, as in so much of early modern philosophy, Descartes is the seminal figure." Thomas M. Lennon, "Theology and the God of the Philosophers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Donald Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283, Anthony Kenny, *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, 4 vols., vol. 3, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) esp. 303-331, and Charles Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

5. Perhaps I should add here that I am not first in identifying the anthropomorphite shift in modern philosophy. For instance, Steven Nadler characterises the early modern conception of God as one that "is essentially an accessible, intelligible God, one whose ways are familiar to us. His nature and faculties can be understood by human reason and his way of acting conceived in terms very similar to those that capture our way of acting." Steven Nadler, "Conceptions of God," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Desmond M. Clarke and Catherine Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 546. See further in, for example, Brian Davies, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion*, 3 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1997), Paul Helm, "Anthropomorphism Protestant Style," in *Whose God? Which tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), Guyla Klima, "The 'Grammar' of 'God' and 'Being': Making Sense of Talking about the One True God in Different Metaphysical Traditions," in *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), and Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). One starting point for readers of this paper to pursue this issue further may be the recent debate between the traditionalist David Burrell and the anthropomorphites William Hasker and Richard Cross. See references in David B. Burrell, "Response to Cross and Hasker," *Faith and Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2008): 205-212.

6. These accounts are arguably compatible and complimentary; see, for instance Brian Leftow, "Can Philosophy Argue God's Existence?," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*, ed. Thomas Senor (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

7. Søvik's Cartesianism is even clearer when it comes to animals (p. 24).

8. Søvik's three consequent arguments in favour of divine reasons for an independent world are irrelevant to the significance of "independent" (pp. 19-20).

9. It may be that Søvik misunderstands the traditional account as teaching that "everything is controlled by God" (p. 18) and that "God [is] directly producing everything from nothing." (p. 19). These clearly misdescribe the traditional account of divinity as if God forces free actions of creatures or manufactures whatever exists.

10. It should be noted that at one point Søvik seems to hesitate about his solution being in accord with the traditional account of divinity. For, although he seeks to provide "a Christian theodicy" (p. 18) and a solution for "Christian belief" (p. 19), he notes that his account of divinity "seems to contradict an obvious part of Christian belief" (p. 19). He is quite right in this hesitation. For reference could, for instance, be made to the great "As" that the Church has received – Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas – or the Fourth Lateran Council, but I will use the Augsburg Confession as an illustration. Article 18 on free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) teaches that all naturally good humans actions (such as work, nourishment, friendship, marriage, housing, arts, etc.) "do not subsist without divine governing, indeed they exist and have their beginning from him and through him." (*Quae Omnia non sine gubernaculo divino subsistunt, immo ex ipso et per ipsum sunt et esse coeperunt.*) Article 19 continues that "although God creates and preserves nature, still the cause of sin is the will of evil-

doers, such as that of demons and ungodly, God not helping". (*tametsi Deus creat et conservat naturam, tamen causa peccati est voluntas malorum, ut diaboli et impiorum, non adiuvante Deo*). This teaching that God causes everything that is naturally good (*bonum naturae*) in the freely chosen good and bad actions of creatures is a clear endorsement of the traditional account of divinity, and a denial of "an independent world" in Søvik's sense. (My quotations are from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 13 ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010) 73-75. The first formulation the Augsburg Confession takes from Pseudo-Augustine *Hypomnesticon*.)

11. I thank the editor and two anonymous referees for comments on the penultimate version of this paper. I am alone responsible for its claims.