

Does God Do His Best? George N. Schlesinger's Theodicy

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Introduction

The problem of evil is historically the most refractory problem faced by theism. For millennia theists have struggled to explain how their God, opined to be both infinitely powerful and infinitely good, can cause and permit such and so much evil in his creation. Believers and skeptics alike have wondered why so puissant a deity could not improve the world if he would, or why so benignant a one would not if he could. Even sophisticated theistic philosophers have at times been reduced to an unblushing appeal to mystery – a move which unbelievers may think useless, as well as question-begging.¹ The most astonishing maneuvers have been executed by theists to solve this problem, from introducing hypothetical invisible demons² to saying God has no more moral obligation toward his living creatures than a playwright's toward his imaginary characters³ Such efforts are "last-ditch" theodicies – philosophical kamikaze attacks, where logical sense and ethical sensibility commit intellectual suicide in defiant defense of dogmatic doctrine.

To this list of last-ditch theodicies may be added one offered by George N. Schlesinger.⁴ Where Plantinga's demon theodicy strains the willing suspension of disbelief, and Ross's exonerating of God is both morally odious and logically untenable,⁵ Schlesinger's entry may titillate the logical fancy. But on examination it is a fallacious argument, and thus is no more successful than its brethren in the defense of theism. Worse, if Schlesinger's reasoning is accepted it undermines that which is most morally admirable about theism, its claim that God is worthy of worship because he is morally perfect. The result is to reduce it to ignominious power worship.

I.

Schlesinger insists, correctly, I believe, that the criteria by which God's moral actions are judged must be the same as those applied to humans; otherwise the terms would lack their ordinary meaning. (p. 27) For example, a theodicy cannot succeed if it defends God as "good" by portraying him as a perfect Nazi concentration camp torturer. Schlesinger's main thesis is that God cannot be blamed for evil, since no world is the best that he could make; that is, no matter what world God created, being infinitely powerful, he could always have created a better one. Therefore, Schlesinger argues, it must always be logically improper to complain about

any world God made, since the same complaint would be equally in order about any world whatsoever.

Schlesinger argues that

... *one of the universal rules of ethics [is] "if everything is equal increase the degree of desirability of the state of A by as much as possible."*⁶ (p. 28; emphasis added)

But it is logically impossible for an infinitely powerful God to follow this rule, since no state of affairs he could produce would increase desirability "as much as possible." Schlesinger says

Just as it is logically impossible to name the highest integer, it is impossible to grant a creature a degree of desirability of state higher than which is inconceivable; thus it is logically impossible for God to fulfill what is required by *the* universal ethical principle, and therefore He cannot fulfill it, and so is not obliged to fulfill it. There is no room for complaint seeing that God has not fulfilled *the* ethical principle which mortals are bound by and has left His creatures in various low states of desirability. Thus the problem of evil vanishes. (p. 29; emphasis added)

I will argue two points. First, Schlesinger's reasoning is fallacious: it does not follow from God's having infinite power that he can never be faulted for creating any possible world. And therefore this theodicy fails to defend traditional theism against the problem of evil. Second, I will argue that if Schlesinger's argument were *not* fallacious, its consequences would destroy perhaps the most attractive element of the very theistic doctrine it is meant to defend, namely, the claim that God merits worship because of his perfect moral goodness.

II.

To begin, Schlesinger does seem correct in saying that an infinitely powerful God could always create a better world than any world he does create; for, even if there were no evil whatsoever, there could always be more enjoyment, more accomplishment, or indeed more of any good one can think of. But it does not follow that we cannot fault God whatever he does.

The key here is Schlesinger's point that the same moral criteria must be used for God as are used for humans. (p. 27) It is true that in evaluating human acts morally we *sometimes* invoke the limits of an agent's ability: we may defend or exonerate her by saying she did her best. If she did, she cannot be blamed for not having done better, since she could not. This judgment does indeed make a neces-

sary reference to the agent's total capacity for good, thus employing Schlesinger's moral principle to increase desirability as much as possible.

But Schlesinger has not shown that this is the *only* moral principle used in judging human actions. Indeed, in the passages quoted above there is an unsupported and unwarranted transition from saying this is "one of" the universal principles of ethics to saying it is "the" principle. We commonly do use other principles in judging human actions. We often distinguish between greater or lesser good without reference to the maximum good it is possible for the agent to achieve. We sometimes say she was nicer to her sister than to her mother, because she was patient toward her sister, but short with her mother. We say that she was kinder yesterday than today, because then she spoke gently, but today angrily. We make such judgments by comparing the acts themselves, not by whether they are the best the agent could do.

We can judge an act wrong if we know the agent could have done *better*. We rightly fault her (in varying degrees) if she acted less well than she was able. Thus we can, contrary to Schlesinger's claim, assign blame or praise to an agent without regard to limits or the lack of them on the agent's power. Human acts are often judged in this way; divine acts may be also. So we can say that God's acts in causing or permitting a more evil situation are less good than they would be if he caused or permitted a better one.

Schlesinger considers this objection;

The problem of evil may thus be stated not as the problem of why things are not so good that they could not be better, but why things are not better than they actually are. (p. 29)

In response, he says,

... one is justified in complaining about an existing state of affairs only if what one is complaining about is *not logically inherent in every state of affairs*, that is, if the situation could be changed into another in which the reason for complaint would be removed. If, however, it is clear now that no matter what changes are introduced, in any new situation there is *exactly as much* reason to complain as before, then there is no right to demand that the old situation be replaced by another ... no matter by how much the degree of desirability of the state of an individual be increased, it would still be *just as short as it is now of being so large that larger it could not be*. (pp. 29-30; emphasis added)

This is simply an incorrect analysis of moral judgment. What Schlesinger is

saying is that, since absolute perfection is impossible, every state of affairs is equally meritorious for God to produce; and thus that no one has a right to "complain" about any one that he produces. And this is quite obviously false, whether the agent is divine or human. One can justly complain if an agent did not act as well as she could.

Schlesinger says that one is justified in complaining only if the reason for the complaint could be removed. But if there is an infinitely powerful God, *any* reason for complaint can *always* be removed. If my legs are paralyzed, *that* reason for complaint could be removed if the paralysis were cured. And so I can rightly complain if God does not cure it. So Schlesinger's claim that "... there is ... no objective justification for demanding any changes" is therefore false, even on the terms he himself states. And therefore false also is Schlesinger's conclusion that no one ever has a right to complain about God's acts, since he could always do better.

If judgments about God are analogous to those about humans, what we must conclude is that God can *never* be exonerated by having done his best, since nothing would *be* his best. Therefore, if God's acts are to be judged in the same way as humans', Schlesinger's argument is exactly backward: the conclusion that follows is that God's acts are *always* grounds for complaint. God *always* deserves criticism, rather than *never* deserving it.

Moreover, if divine acts are to be assessed by the same criteria as human ones, matters are worse still for theism. For, on the human level, an agent can rightly be criticized to the extent that her acts fall short of her capabilities: the more she is capable of, the more we expect of her. But, as Schlesinger has been arguing, any act whatever performed by an infinitely powerful God would fall infinitely short of his capabilities. It follows that God is infinitely at fault.

This may seem odd to those accustomed to conventionally pious doctrines about God's goodness. But the oddity follows from Schlesinger's argument about infinite power. That reasoning leads inexorably to the conclusion: by Schlesinger's arguments, an infinitely powerful God, judged by the standards used for human acts, would be blameworthy no matter what he does. Therefore Schlesinger's argument has not made the problem of evil "vanish" at all; it stands stronger than ever as an obstacle to belief in the existence of the theistic God.

III.

Let us then pursue the opposite tack. Schlesinger's argument is that, *because he is infinitely powerful, God cannot be said to be blameworthy, no matter what he does.* Let us see where this reasoning leads us. In this case, the conclusion for theism is more disastrous still. For if we follow Schlesinger this far, we can never say that God is *either* morally good *or* morally bad. And so the traditional claim that God is infinitely good is false: not only is he not infinitely

good; he is simply not good at all.

This is because, if Schlesinger's argument successfully shows that God could never be *blameworthy*, whatever he does, a parallel argument must show equally that God could never be *praiseworthy*, whatever he does. Since he is infinitely powerful, nothing he could do would be the worst act he is capable of performing; he would always be able to do something worse. Therefore, by Schlesinger's reasoning, there would never be grounds to praise God for not performing a worse act. And so God could never be praised for whatever he did: we could never say that *any* act of God's is morally good.

To make this point clearer, consider an analogy suggested by Schlesinger's words. He says,

... no matter by how much the degree of desirability of the state of an individual be increased, *it would still be just as short as it is now of being so large that larger it could not be.* (p. 30; emphasis added)

This suggests that we should imagine the goodness of an act as falling on a geometric line which extends infinitely toward greater desirability. The line is infinite; no point is objectively closer to the end than any other, for there *is* no end. But geometric lines extend in both directions, and Schlesinger's argument requires that this line must likewise go both ways. So any act, whatever its nature, must fall infinitely short of either perfect good or perfect evil. Thus, by Schlesinger's reasoning, God can never be either blamed *or* praised – can never be said to be either good *or* bad.

Now, if we cannot, for logical reasons, ever say that God is good *or* evil, no matter what he does, then we cannot ascribe to God any moral predicates *at all*. Therefore it must be logically impossible to predicate moral goodness of God; and so it is necessarily false that God is good at all, much less infinitely good.

It is widely held, and rightly, that one of the greatest merits of Judaeo-Christian-Islamic theism is that its God is held to be morally perfect. It is this concept of God that allows theists to say their worship of him is based on morality, rather than simply fear of his power. But Schlesinger's reasoning, carried to its inescapable conclusion, denies to theism the possibility of that claim. If God's power is infinite, he cannot be good. If God were nevertheless to be worshiped, it could only be because of his raw power. Many theists regard such a position as morally distasteful; so do I.

Notes

1. E.g., "Our 'solution,' then, to this baffling problem of excessive and undeserved suffering is a frank appeal to the positive value of mystery." John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Collins, 1974), p. 371. But if mystery has a *positive* value in understanding God's purpose, one might wonder why an appeal to this value is made only after 370 pages of detailed argument aimed at making evil intelligible – i.e., *unmysterious*!

Just prior to this passage Hick offers an argument similar to that which is the main topic of this paper. He says, "... evils are exceptional only in relation to other evils which are routine. And therefore unless God eliminated all evils whatsoever there would always be relatively outstanding ones of which it would be said that He should have secretly prevented them." (*ibid.*, p. 363)

2. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974); Chap. (. Plantinga, it is true, only aims at the limited objective of arguing that evil is not *formally inconsistent* with God's existence. But this task seems worthwhile for a theist only in a context where the more desirable goal of Justifying evil morally seems impossible.

3. James F. Ross, *Philosophical Theology*. New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. esp. pp. 244-268.

4. "Evil and Suffering," in Stephen Cahn and David Shatz, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; pp. 25-31. (Further references to this article will be given as page numbers in parentheses in the text.) This line of thought is not entirely original with Schlesinger, but the present paper will concentrate almost wholly on his presentation of it. Many of the criticisms directed against Schlesinger will, however, apply to other formulations of his theodicy.

5. I have argued these latter points in "Evil and Analogy," *The Personalist*, v. 38, no. 4 (October, 1977).

6. Schlesinger's point here is rendered obscure by sentence construction. He says that "... one of the universal rules of ethics is not, 'if everything else is equal increase the state of happiness of A,' but rather, 'if everything is equal increase the degree of desirability of the state of A by as much as possible.'" This might be interpreted to mean that the principle, "if everything else is equal increase the state of happiness of A" is *not* "one of the universal rules of ethics." But Schlesinger has given no basis for this statement; he has shown only that "increase happiness" is not the ultimate, or at least not the sole, rule of ethics, since other considerations besides happiness are sometimes more important. Still less has he given any basis for claiming that "increase desirability as much as possible" is the *only* ethical principle. But it is this last that his argument actually requires, since his program is to exonerate God by showing that God cannot be blamed according to this specific moral principle.