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GOD, THE DEMON, AND THE STATUS OF THEODICIES

Edward Stein

THE problem of evil is an ancient one for theists. How is it possible for an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being to exist in a world which clearly contains evil? A major element of every theistic philosophy is a theodicy, an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Steven Cahn, Edward Madden and Peter Hare discuss a series of concepts isomorphic to the traditional theistic notions of God, the problem of evil, and theodicies with an eye towards raising problems for theism.¹ These concepts relate to a malevolent, rather than a benevolent, deity, not a god, but a demon. In this paper, I will argue that the notion of a demon is far more powerful than these three philosophers have suggested; in fact, arguments based on the demon create serious problems for the entire project of giving a rational defense of theism.

Atheists frequently raise the problem of evil as a challenge to proofs for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good supernatural being. The argument from evil asserts that it would be inconsistent for an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good god to exist in the same world as evil: if God is really all-powerful, then he *could* prevent evil; if God is really all-good, then he *would* prevent evil. In response to this argument, theists have developed theodicies, attempts to explain away this apparent inconsistency. Atheists try to find flaws in many of these theodicies, and thus the debate over the problem of evil persists, with no acknowledged victor.

Cahn, Madden and Hare have a strategy for expanding this debate. They ask us to consider the possibility of an omnimalevolent supernatural being, which I shall call the demon. I shall call someone who believes in the demon a demonist. How might someone who does *not* believe in the existence of the demon (an ademonist) argue that the demon does not exist? The ademonist could make an argument from *good* by offering illustrative examples of the

overwhelming goodness in the world, thereby challenging the demonist to explain how the existence of the demon is consistent with such goodness. The demonist can offer a variety of responses to the problem of good which I shall call demonodicies, dispensing with, for reasons of aesthetics and symmetry, Cahn's term "cacodaemonodicies." The demonist may say that good provides a necessary contrast to evil. Or she might offer a free will defense of demonism, arguing that the demon, in order to maximize the amount of evil in the world, gave people free will, knowing that although they would sometimes choose good acts, the evil acts which they committed would be worse than merely predetermined evil acts. Finally, the demonist could always fall back on the "last defense" that human beings, in their limited frame of reference, may think there is good in the world, but that the demon, who can see the entire picture, knows that in the long run, all apparently good things are, in fact, evil.

Cahn, Madden and Hare have argued that the demonist can construct a demonodicy which is isomorphic with any theodicy. I agree in general—this can be accomplished simply by substituting the word "good" for the word "evil" and the words "a demon" for the word "God." This inversion process will produce a demonodicy for every theodicy. Since the demonist can use inversion to create demonodicies which are analogous to theodicies, the problems of good and evil are isomorphic—both are either soluble or insoluble. This is the interesting point which Cahn, Madden and Hare make. I want, however, to take the notion of a demon and use it to make a deeper and stronger argument than one that merely establishes that every theodicy is in the same boat with its isomorphic demonodicy. My strategy is to move from a theodicy, which is an argument that God is consistent with the amount of evil in the world, to an

argument for the actual existence of a supernatural being with certain attributes. I want to argue that any theist who puts forth an argument for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god has three tasks before her: argue for the possible existence of God, argue for the consistency of God with the amount of evil in the world, and show that these arguments are not invertible into isomorphic arguments for the existence and consistency of a demon (a task which I think that no current theist has accomplished). In other words, I am emphasizing that arguments for the consistency and existence of God must include arguments against the existence and consistency of the demon.

To begin, I shall divide the arguments for the existence of God into two categories: ethical arguments and ontological arguments. Ethical arguments are those that attempt to prove the ethical nature (i.e., the goodness or badness) of an omniscient and omnipotent being. Ethical arguments (not to be confused with argument in ethics), to be successful, must explain away any apparent contradictions between the ethical nature of the relevant supernatural being and the perceived amount of good (in the case of the demon) or evil (in the case of God) in the world. In contrast, ontological arguments are those that attempt to prove that an omnipotent, omniscient being exists. The theist and the demonist may agree on ontological arguments, for they both believe in the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient being. They are, however, at odds with respect to ethical arguments. This is where the isomorphism enters the picture: *any ethical argument of the theist can be inverted into an ethical argument for the demonist*. Because of this isomorphism, no ethical argument for the existence of a benevolent supernatural being provides any reason for thinking that such a being exists rather than a malevolent one. Where there is isomorphism, there are no ethical arguments that successfully establish either the goodness of God or the badness of a demon. The theist wants to argue for the existence of God, but his ethical arguments are isomorphic with ethical arguments for a demon. This isomorphism in effect neutralizes the theist's (and, for that matter, the demonist's) ethical arguments. Without successful ethical arguments, the theist has no successful arguments for the existence of God. The theist's arguments will fail unless they

demonstrate not only that God is compatible with this world, but that the demon is not similarly compatible.

A possible response to this approach would be to deny that arguments about supernatural beings can be neatly divided between ethical and ontological arguments; there might be "hybrid" arguments which are both ethical and ontological. My response would be to distinguish between the ethical consequences of each premise of an argument and its ontological consequences. The theist and the demonist would argue for the same ontological consequences but they would argue for different (though isomorphic) ethical consequences. This would preserve the above result that the theist's arguments (even if they were "hybrid" arguments) would fail to accomplish the third task facing the theist, namely showing that theistic arguments are not invertible into isomorphic demonistic arguments.

While Cahn, Madden and Hare only conclude that the arguments from evil and good are of the same status, my conclusion amounts to a rejection of all current versions of theism on the grounds that they do not show that the demon is not similarly compatible with the amount of evil in the world; in other words, no current version of theism makes successful arguments about the ethical nature of the supernatural being that theists claim exists. For theism to succeed, there must be an argument that God is consistent with the amount of good and evil in the world, while the demon is not. In other words, theism requires a *non*-invertible ethical argument and an associated theodicy, something which no current version of it offers. This is not to say that a complete and strong version of theism is impossible; rather, it is a claim that no such version of theism has been suggested thus far and a challenge to theists to try to suggest one.

One objection to this strategy, similar to one made by John King-Farlow², is that a theistic answer to the problem of evil tries to establish the consistency of God with the amount of evil in the world, not that there is a high probability that God exists. The objection claims that Cahn, Madden and Hare pose no threat to theodicies because they show only that demonodicies are successful if theodicies are, not that theodicies are unsuccessful. Theodicies are designed to show that the existence of God and evil in the same world is consistent; showing that a

demon and good can also exist consistently in the same world does no damage to the force of theodicies. The objection is right that the isomorphism argument does not, by itself, disprove the existence of God, and that, as far as the conclusion reached by Cahn, Madden and Hare is concerned, the theist is safe. That is, their arguments show that if God's existence is consistent with the amount of good and evil in the world, then so is the demon's. The objection does not show, however, that nothing more can be accomplished by the isomorphism argument. In fact, I argued above that the isomorphism blocks both the theist and the demonist from making successful ethical arguments. This objection does, however, nicely show the difference between the conclusion of Cahn, Madden and Hare that theism and demonism are equally plausible and my conclusion that no currently espoused version of theism is adequate since none makes any successful ethical arguments.

A more specific objection concerns the invertibility of the free will theodicy. Cahn offers a sketch of the free will demonodicy, one of the demonist's possible responses to the problem of good. According to this inversion, in order to achieve the maximum amount of evil, the demon has given human beings free will so that they can choose to act evilly. A world containing only people who freely choose to do evil would be more evil than a world in which people were predetermined always to do evil. The world under the demon is thus "a place of 'soul-breaking,' in which free human beings, by grappling with the exhausting tasks and challenges of their existence [can] have their spirits broken" (Cahn, p. 72). In response to the demonist challenge that the evil in the world does not nullify all the good, the demonist, using the free will demonodicy, could respond by referring to future evil so great that all previous good used to set the stage for it would be nullified. Finally, if asked why the demon does not reveal himself to the world, the demonist can explain that the demon needs epistemic distance in order to trick us into believing there is hope for better times.

This account is, however, open to the objection that the free will theodicy cannot be successfully inverted. The structure of the free will demonodicy can be laid out as follows:

- (1) It is worse for people to choose to act evilly than it is if they are predetermined to act evilly.
- (2) Therefore, if the demon wants to maximize evil, he should give people free will.

But this demonodicy contains the following implicit assumption:

- (3) If any undesired good is generated by the demon giving people free will, it will be cancelled out by the evil generated when people act evilly.

While (2) follows from (1) and (3), it does not follow from (1) alone, because if (3) is false, the free will demonodicy will not work since if free will makes the world a better one, then the demon would not choose to give people free will. Thus, if (3) is false, then the apparent contradiction of having the demon and good existing in the same world is not explained.

Under what conditions might (3) be false? (3) might be false if:

- (4a) Free will is intrinsically good.

If (4a) is true, then the free will demonodicy will fail to be isomorphic with the free will theodicy, for the free will theodicy need not consider the possibility that the intrinsic goodness of free will might cancel out the evil caused by people who freely choose evil acts. There are two other possible situations which might hold with respect to free will, namely:

- (4b) Free will is intrinsically evil.
- (4c) Free will is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically evil, i.e., free will is neutral.

The intuitions of most people favor (4a); that is, most people believe that free will is good. Weighing all the respective merits of the (4)'s is beyond the scope of this article. I will therefore attempt only to examine the relevant consequences of (4a), (4b) and (4c), remaining agnostic about which is true.

If (4c) is true, then the isomorphism between the free will theodicy and the free will demonodicy holds. But, if (4a) is true, then the isomorphism may be threatened, because if free will is intrinsically good, then the free will demonodicy will have to show that the evil created by having people opt for evil is greater than the intrinsic good of just having free will. This is not to say that the free will

demonodicy would be unable to do so; the crucial point, however, is that the free will theodicy will *not* have this same problem, because the intrinsic good of free will (if (4a) is true) will not cancel out or take away from the good created by having people opt for good—quite the opposite, in fact.

An isomorphic problem will occur if (4b) is true. If free will is intrinsically evil, then the free will demonodicy and the free will theodicy will fail to be isomorphic for almost the same reasons they fail to be so if (4a) is true. Namely, the free will theodicy will have the problem that the good which people commit freely might be cancelled out by the intrinsic evil of free will, a problem the free will demonodicy will not have. By arguing for either (4a) or (4b), one could claim that the isomorphism fails between the free will theodicy and the free will demonodicy.

Despite this objection, I think there are two ways in which the isomorphism between the free will theodicy and the free will demonodicy can be preserved. First, the isomorphism is preserved if, for the same reason, both strategies fail to explain away the apparent contradictions which are pointed out by the arguments from evil and good. The free will theodicy might fail because God could have chosen to actualize a world (call it W_1) in which people have free will *and* they always choose to perform good actions. Being omniscient and thus being able to survey all possible worlds, God had the ability to choose any world from among an infinite number of possible worlds. Why should he have chosen the actual world, a world in which people freely choose to act evilly, when he could have actualized a world where people always choose to act good? If God is really all-good, then he would have chosen to actualize world W_1 . But clearly he did not (since people do choose to act evilly in this world), therefore the problem of evil remains. Similarly, the free will demonodicy might fail because the demon could have actualized the world in which people have free will and they always choose to act evilly (call it W_2). The demon also was able to choose among an infinite number of possible worlds. If he is really all-evil, he would have chosen to actualize world W_2 . But clearly he did not, (since people do perform good acts), and therefore the problem of good remains. If both strategies fail for

the reasons above, then the free will theodicy is invertible and the isomorphism is preserved despite the objection that the free will theodicy is not invertible. There are arguments, however, against this approach to the free will theodicy and settling this specific issue about free will and supernatural beings is beyond the scope of this paper.

Fortunately, I think that there is a better way to preserve the isomorphism. To review the present status of the argument, I am considering whether the free will demonodicy is really isomorphic with the free will theodicy. The particular issue under consideration is whether free will is intrinsically good. If free will is intrinsically good, then the isomorphism between the free will demonodicy and the free will theodicy will fail because the demonodicy will have to deal with the possibility that the good of having free will might cancel out the evil created by people choosing to act evilly. This failure threatens to break down the general isomorphism between theodicies and demonodicies.

Underlying this argument against the invertibility of the free will theodicy is the assumption that free will must be all or nothing. But I think this is false. We can certainly make sense of varying degrees of free will. For example, while we may be freely-choosing beings in some sense, clearly we cannot choose our biological parents and we cannot control our subconscious. But God or the demon could have given us such powers. We can imagine a world where agents have a much greater amount of free will and can control, for example, their subconscious. (The examples do not particularly matter—what does matter is that there can be varying degrees of free will.) Since there can be varying degrees of free will, I think the isomorphism can be saved, because while the demonist may have to explain why the demon granted people some amount of free will, the theist will have the opposite problem: why did God not grant people complete free will or at least make them freer than he actually did? If a person had more free will than he does in the actual world and he chose to do good, this would be an even greater good than a person with less free will choosing to do so. The general point is that the free will theodicy and the free will demonodicy, if they admit that there is evil and good in the world and if they use free will to explain

how evil and good can exist in the same world with God (or the demon), both have the additional burden of explaining why the creator gave people the particular amount of free will that he did. For this reason, the isomorphism is preserved.

In conclusion, I have argued, with Cahn, Madden and Hare, there is a demonodicy isomor-

phic to every theodicy and that the problems of good and evil are either both soluble or both insoluble. Further, I have argued that this isomorphism threatens all current versions of theism (and demonism) because it blocks all known arguments for the goodness of a supernatural being.³

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NOTES

1. See Steven Cahn, *Analysis*, vol. 37 (1977), pp. 69-73; Edward Madden and Peter Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1968).
2. John King-Farlow, "Cacodaemony and Devilish Isomorphism" *Analysis*, vol. 38 (1978), pp. 59-61.
3. Thanks to Timothy Bartel, Alyssa Bernstein, Philip Clayton, Peter Lipton, Eric Lormand and Eddy Zemach, among others, for their helpful comments and suggestions.