

Humor Against Theodicy

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*The problem of Evil in the face of an omnibenevolent God is simple: how can such an almighty being allow for suffering and injustice? In the past millennia, many thinkers tried to solve that issue: Building a theodicy, a defense of God's perfection, they aimed at exonerating the Supreme Being from causing evil. To counter these attempts, this paper offers a new argument, "from humor," which disproves the perfection of God, and therefore, undermines any foundation for belief in such an entity. Its sole requirement is the very existence of a joke, a laughter, or even a pun. Using the Incongruity Theory of humor, Wittgenstein's aesthetics, the Irenaean theodicy, and even *The Name of the Rose*, this paper thus presents an original and definitive objection to any defense of God's perfection in the light of evil in the world. The argument depends on two premises: the perfection of any world created by a perfect God, and the assertion that humor arises from subverted expectations. With these premises in mind, I demonstrate that humor, by showing the failure of our suppositions, reveals a world that often does not fit our needs, does not match our hopes, does not fit human purposes, and thus, fails to earn the designation of "perfect." In a perfect world, humor would be impossible, for all expectations would be correct; no imperfection, no incoherence, no failure would give rise to our humor, because none of these phenomena would exist! Humor reveals an abyss, separating our human conjectures from reality's punchlines. This abyss is an imperfection, often unfit for humanity's needs; and the imperfect God creating a world with such imperfection is unworthy of a capital letter. The argument, which might end fruitless theological battles, will at least bring around the joyful company of our most philosophical ally...humor.*

1. Introduction

One of the most common arguments against a theistic worldview is often called the problem of evil (which I will later simplify as the problem of imperfection): How can a perfect and benevolent individual create an imperfect world where evil exists? Theologians of all eras have tried to answer this question by creating a theodicy (a term invented by Gottfried Leibniz, literally a “vindication of God”), an explanation justifying the existence of evil while exonerating God from the blame. To examine these theodicies is crucial to decide whether a perfect God exists or not, whether his nature is good or not, and whether our lives’ purpose relies on him or not.

Starting with a discussion of the theodicy proposed by British philosopher of religion John Hick, my aim is to provide a small, yet original help in undermining the belief in a perfect being, that is, in theism. This contribution takes the form of an “Argument from Humor”, an anti-theodicy argument of my own invention. I shall now explain the reasoning, the relevance, and the philosophical implications of the argument in question.

2. What is a Theodicy?

Regarding the imperfection of the world, thinkers such as Augustine, in the *City of God*⁹², have initially attempted to deny its actuality by considering evil as a degeneration of God’s perfect world. However, this Augustinian approach is strongly problematic, since it challenges the omniscience and omnipotence of God: an all-knowing and all-powerful entity would have foreseen, and been able to prevent, this degeneration into evil. There are many alternative

⁹² Augustine, *The City of God*.

theodicies, made by various intellectuals (Leibniz, Origen, Ibn Sina...), but one of the most serious of these solutions, called the Irenaean theodicy, claims instead that God did create evil, purposefully. To analyze this alternative sort of theodicy, I shall bring up Christian philosopher John Hick, and the version he believed in.

For Hick, in accordance with the Bible, evil is real, and can be divided into two categories: moral evil, that God seems to allow, and non-moral evil, that occurs because of the world created by God.⁹³ To Hick, moral evil is a consequence of the divine gift of free will, so that humans would be able to make a moral choice between good and evil. Hick considers a free decision of that kind, by definition, as causally unexplainable: “The origin of moral evil lies forever concealed within the mystery of human freedom.”⁹⁴ On this picture, the justification for moral evil is that God, to test humans, must offer two actual alternatives (good and evil), with parallel consequences (heaven & hell, blissful rest & tragic scourges, etc.), for humans to freely choose. Moral evil allows for freedom, and thus, for deliberately good actions.

Concerning non-moral evil, Hick tries to prove that all the natural disasters, coincidences and accidents which constitute this type of evil are, in fact, serving the purpose of the universe, which he designates as “soul-making.”⁹⁵ He argues that these difficult conditions give us the best opportunities to become good, and therefore, to become worthy of God’s love and rewards. Supposedly, a world with a different amount of non-moral evils would thus make our virtues

⁹³ Found in Pojman, Louis P., et al., “There Is a Reason Why God Allows Evil,” 130.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 131.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 132-3.

useless: Why need courage if there is no danger? Or why need generosity if no one needs anything? At this point, Hick joins Leibniz's quote: "our world is the best possible world,"⁹⁶ if we take it to be the best for "soul-making." Therefore, Hick considers the existence of evil in general, even non-moral evil, as a necessary condition for human morality.

3. The Problem of Imperfection

Many objections have been raised against theodicies, reaffirming the relevance of the problem of evil. Most of them tackle the problem in its narrowest sense, affirming the unnecessary nature of some harmful events, in order to show that God is not excused from such evil. But these objections are problematic: They still follow theistic (usually, Christian) assumptions about "good" and "evil," about moral actions and moral responsibility. The issue is that a critic of theism, such as Spinoza, would in fact dismiss the argument from evil, because it claims the very existence of an inherent, metaphysical "evil" that he did not consider real.⁹⁷ The morally Christian framework of the problem of evil, thus mired in trivial moral considerations, is leading the debate astray from the metaphysical discussion of God. This is why the so-called "problem of evil" deserves to be expanded into a "problem of imperfection" in general, which bears the advantage of showing how any imperfect thing, regardless of its morality, is an objection to the existence of God.

Indeed, for every theodicy, it is logically argued that an almighty, all-benevolent and all-

⁹⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*.

⁹⁷ De Spinoza, *Ethics*. See Preface of Part 4 for his opinion on good and evil.

knowing being would create a perfect world. Even in Hick's Irenaean view, evil remains created by God and therefore, a perfect part of God's perfect plan. God could neither have done otherwise, nor better. If the world is a perfect mechanism, then all its complex parts (even evil) are in their respective, perfect places. Meanwhile, an imperfect god (with an immense, yet finite amount of power, knowledge, or benevolence), such as the members of the pagan pantheons, would be unworthy of our trust, being either unable or unwilling to truly help us.

With the latter assertion, it becomes important to examine the perfection of God in greater detail. God is often defined through perfection, and Anselm's famous ontological proof, for instance, is grounded in such a definition. However, some believers will argue that God does not have to be perfect, that a most powerful, yet imperfect entity would suffice instead. If it were true, then the argument from humor would only disprove the existence of a perfect God, not the veracity of theism itself. However, this line of thought creates an unsuspected, bigger problem for the worshiper of an imperfect God.

Let us suppose that God is, indeed, the most powerful being, despite not having unlimited power (i.e., not being perfect). He therefore has a certain degree of power. But in that case, there could theoretically be an entity (possibly undiscovered yet) reaching a degree of power that is just above God's. Such an entity would thus be more powerful than God; but a God that is not the most powerful entity becomes unworthy of the divine title, being nothing more than "a very powerful entity," and not God. On the other hand, this new, more powerful entity would now deserve the title of God, yet would then fall victim to the very same paradox, *ad infinitum*...

Thus, the only way for any entity to be considered as God (i.e., as the most powerful entity) is to be infinitely powerful. And since the same problem applies to all of God's usual attributes (power, but also benevolence, and knowledge), then the only possible solution for monotheistic believers is to commit themselves to the perfection of God.

In the face of such reasoning, believers are bound to believe in God's perfection; and this perfect maker, both infinitely capable and infinitely good, would always make the most perfect choices in the creation of his world. If God exists, then the world must be perfect; and here comes the problem of imperfection.

Before we go further, we must also keep in mind that a perfect God implies a perfect world: Anyone claiming that God could have unwillingly created an imperfect world would find themselves denying God's perfect power⁹⁸; on the other hand, anyone claiming that God could have willingly created an imperfect world would simply be denying God's perfect benevolence.⁹⁹ Thus, it is inevitable to realize that an imperfect world is incompatible with an almighty, all-knowing, and benevolent (i.e., theistic) God, and that imperfection would indeed disprove the God hypothesis.

⁹⁸ An example of such a defense is Augustine's theodicy, where God simply could not prevent the birth of Evil. It appears that even a conception of God as incapable of logical impossibilities (but still omnipotent within the realm of logical possibilities) will not be sufficient to save that theodicy, since nothing in the existence of the Good logically implies the existence of Evil. It would not be a logical contradiction to have Good without Evil, just like there could be light without shadows (if there was light everywhere, for instance). Therefore, any sort of almighty God, logic-bound or not, would have the power to counter the existence of involuntary.

⁹⁹The Theodicy designed by Malebranche falls under that category, arguing that God could have created a perfect world but voluntarily did not do so, to preserve simplicity. A simple reply (along the lines of the above counterargument) would be to point at the contradiction between God's omnibenevolence and this strange concern for simplicity...

4. Humor and Perfection

Yet to do so, one needs to show the existence of imperfections. This is where the existence of humor might constitute a refreshing, decisive argument against theism.

Barely noticeable in the western philosophical tradition, the analysis of humor was often confined to insignificant footnotes in the pages of the classics, until Bergson put the topic forward in his 1900 book on laughter.¹⁰⁰ Since then, philosophers and psychologists alike started wondering about the nature of humor, its place in the human psyche or even its ontological implications; Bergson, for instance, found a way to connect his metaphysical dualism with the mechanisms of humor. At the same time, specialists of all horizons started looking back at the works of older philosophers, tracing the discussion of humor back to Plato and his disdain for laughter (Republic, 388e). Several philosophical theories on the functioning of humor have been held by various thinkers from the past; yet among them, according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, only the Incongruity Theory remains “the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology.”¹⁰¹

This theory, which states that humor arises from the perception of “something incongruous — something that violates our mental patterns and expectations”¹⁰² — will be the basis for my argument “from humor.” There are incongruous situations that lead to more dramatic feelings, depending on personal sensibility and context, yet humor does seem to arise,

¹⁰⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*.

¹⁰¹ Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

in every occurrence where it is felt, from subverted expectations. Therefore, this theory will serve as a basic framework to understand the process of humor: On the one hand, there is an expectation, rooted in psychological assumptions, that tries to predict the outcome of a situation; on the other hand, there is an actual, different outcome, a punchline that breaks this expectation and causes laughter. Humor thus lies in the failure of the perceiver to correctly predict the outcome.

But as we delve further into how humor proves anything about the world, a working definition of perfection needs to be drawn from Wittgenstein's Lectures on aesthetics.¹⁰³

Although he never explicitly speaks of "perfection," the Austrian thinker finds himself explaining how aesthetic judgments come to be made. When talking about musical criticism, he tells his students that "The words [a critic uses] are more akin to 'right' and 'correct' (as these words are used in ordinary speech) than to 'beautiful' and 'lovely.'"¹⁰⁴ He later gives a concrete example: "What does a person who knows a good suit say when trying on a suit at the tailor's? 'That's the right length,' 'That's too short,' 'That's too narrow.'"¹⁰⁵

Now, is there anything in the notion of "perfection" that is not completely summed up with this illustration? The move from aesthetic appreciation to the judgment of perfection is smooth: What is the "perfect" meal, if not the one correctly fitting the extent of our needs? In archery, what is the "perfect shot" if not the one reaching the center of its target? Perfection is all

¹⁰³ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 1.8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 1.13.

about the “right” amount, the “correct” length, something Wittgenstein considered our real aim in aesthetics. Perfection is thus relative to a purpose, to an ensemble of criteria, to a certain perspective: What might be a perfect movie, to me, might not fit the precise needs of another member of the audience. Brought back to metaphysics, the notion of perfection is thus applicable to anything that is justly and rightly fitting its expected purpose.

With this definition in mind, it is time to realize that humor, by showing the failure of our expectations, reveals a world that often does not fit our needs, does not match our hopes, does not fit human purposes, and thus fails to earn the designation of “perfect.” In a perfect world, humor would be thoroughly impossible, for all our expectations would be correct; no imperfection, no incoherence, no failure would give rise to our humor, since none of these phenomena could be observed. Humor reveals a gap, separating our human conjectures from reality’s punchline. This gap is an imperfection, often unfit for humanity’s needs; and a world containing such an imperfection is unavoidably imperfect.

One predictable counterargument against this thesis would be a denial of the human perspective about perfection: What if the world was objectively perfect, fitting God’s purpose, and only called imperfect through the lens of our human biases? Two responses can be offered to such an objection. First, it merely transfers the imperfection to “our human biases,” which would still be a flaw in the world, and thus, an imperfection. Then, it remains the case that any flawed perspective is an imperfect thing within the world, fitting neither human purposes, nor God’s omnibenevolent designs, whatever they may be.

Therefore, it becomes clear that humor, showing the weaknesses of our expectations, proves the imperfect nature of the world. To be effective, the smallest pun, the slightest joke needs something wrong or out-of-touch in our processes of cognition; and given our propensity to humor, it appears that the perfection of the world has simply been disproved.

5. The Argument from Humor

With the imperfection of the world now assured, it becomes possible — perhaps, obligatory — to use that knowledge to disprove the existence of God. Thus, the complete argument from humor proceeds as follows:

1. A theistic God cannot have created an imperfect world.
2. Humor shows that the world is imperfect.
3. Therefore, the world cannot have been created by a theistic God.

Premise (1) originates from the incompatibility between an imperfect world and the theistic God, who must be perfect for him to be God at all.

Premise (2), as explained above, is the empirical turning point of the argument. It is based on the inherent imperfection of our understanding of the world, revealed by our mistaken expectations. By extension, this imperfection strips the whole universe from a global, absolute perfection, and leaves that notion to Wittgenstein's realm of relative aesthetics, in which perfection is merely the "right" measure for a certain context. Perfection can apply relatively to certain objects or situations, but not to the entire world, which contains our imperfect cognition. The claims of worldly perfection implied by theodicies (Hick's, Augustine's, Leibniz's) are thus

undermined by the presence of imperfection. And furthermore, this devastating problem of imperfection, revealed by humor, has the benefit of surpassing the problem of Evil through its avoidance of inessential moral considerations.

Therefore, from both premises derives the conclusion (3) that the world, imperfect as it is, cannot have been created by the perfect, theistic God. Indeed, if at least one thing is imperfect (which humor demonstrates), then it implies that imperfection does exist. And since no imperfect thing could ever be created by a perfect God, we can assume that this maker cannot be perfect; and an imperfect God does not deserve a capital letter, let alone our faith.

Thus, the undeniable existence of humor, jokes, puns, laughs, and irony is a constant argument against all theodicies, which are doomed by their implied assertion of God's perfection. And if theodicies are all wrong, then it is safe to assume that there is no benevolent demiurge in our interest to worship.

6. Humor as a Tool

With humor directly undermining theism, Abrahamic religions have often struggled against comedy, considering it as a dangerous weapon of evil itself.¹⁰⁶ The devil remains, after all, the one who ridicules God and his plans. The etymology of the word, "devil," happens to mean "the one who divides, who slanders," just as humor reveals the distinction between what reality is, and what our expectations make us project. It is often implied that the works of God deserve

¹⁰⁶ For literary meditations on the theological significance of laughter, one can only recommend Eco, *The Name of the Rose*.

seriousness and solemnity, while critics and laughs are categorized as blasphemies.¹⁰⁷

The value of humor as a means to reveal any truth about the world might be doubted by the partisans of seriousness. But as a matter of fact, it has always been one of mankind's best ways to understand the actual nature of things. Socrates himself used irony to bring out a constructed, dialectical opinion. The humor of Diogenes the Cynic made his doctrine as remarkable and memorable as Plato's Academy. Through comedy, playwrights such as Aristophanes were able to assert their moral views, just as, two millennia later, Friedrich Nietzsche preferred wordplays and amusing aphorisms because he knew humor to be a valuable means to share philosophical findings. Furthermore, if humor also encompasses the absurd, then Camus's Absurdism is the recognition that value in life cannot be found anywhere else than in the humorous acceptance of meaningless imperfection.

In fact, if we assume the emotional, pathological value of humor (in the Aristotelian sense of pathos), we unveil the reasons why it is such a good guide: It pleases us, by initiating a positive, healthy reaction from the organism; it makes us think, by broadening our intellectual horizons; it allows us to encounter the unsettling chaos of the world while putting it at an emotional distance; it sharpens our critical sense by showing the weaknesses of everything around us. Humor, with all these virtues, appears to be a legitimate philosophical tool, casting a

¹⁰⁷ The few cases where humor (such as Jewish humor) is tolerated by the religious authorities are only made possible by cultural reasons (reaction against oppression, strong reasons to believe in the world's imperfection), and lead either to incoherent, compartmentalized beliefs in both God and cultural humor, or to non-theism (where one abandons the belief in God to fully accept the humor of the culture). The Coen brothers' *A Serious Man* (2009), for instance, offers a tender (but very lucid) account of the difficulties that arise from the former solution.

fresh and elevated perspective upon the walls against which our seriousness stumbles. Given these insights, if this humorous tool does indicate the impossibility for a theistic account of reality to be true, then we find ourselves choosing between the existence of God and the existence of humor. And since the existence of humor does not need to be proved, then shall we use our old, shiny Occam's Razor and wipe the hypothesis of that God from the picture.

In the end, it appears that theodicies about an almighty, all-benevolent supreme being are defeated by the slightest bit of humor. Maybe is this why the Monty Pythons, in their 1979 masterpiece *Life of Brian*¹⁰⁸ (widely banned throughout the Christian countries when it came out), chose to end their movie with the actual martyr of religious thinking: humor, personified as the miserable Brian Cohen, who gets crucified by mistake while Jesus himself has previously escaped his execution, thanks to a misunderstanding. Just like humor, nobody intervenes to save Brian, who dies an unfortunate witness of religious mistake. In the end, the only respect we can pay both of them is to cheer up, and laugh...

¹⁰⁸ Jones, Terry, director. *Life of Brian*. Handmade Films, 1979.

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