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## Some Considerations on Mistakes in Understanding the Problem of Evil

Abdullah Pakoğlu \*

### Abstract

In this article, we aim to reveal the common mistakes made in the evaluation of the problem of evil from our perspective. Briefly, the problem of evil, which can be defined as “how evil can coexist with the existence of a good and almighty God”, is a problem that both theists and atheists might relate. The subject is important for theists because it is one of their existential questions and problems, and, perhaps, most of the time, it is the subject of criticism of their beliefs. It is important for atheists as it is one of the most important intellectual grounds against theism. In this problem, the theism has been criticized from many points and many different answers have been given to these criticisms in this article, we will try to respond to these general criticisms from our perspective by showing the errors. considering the vast scope of the evil problem, this research is no means conclusive on the matter. It is our hope to contribute to the debate to make the problem of evil clearer for those who are interested in the topic.

### Keywords

Philosophy of Religion, Problem of Evil, David Hume, Reason, Anthropomorphism

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## Kötülük Problemini Anlamada Yapılan Hatalar Üzerine Bazı Mülahazalar

### Öz

Bu makalede, kötülük probleminin değerlendirilmesinde yapılan başlıca hataları kendi bakış açımıza göre ortaya koyabilmeyi amaçlıyoruz. Kısaca; “âlemde kötülüğün, iyi ve kudretli bir Tanrının varlığı ile beraber nasıl olup ta bir arada bulunabildiğini” sorgulama düşüncesi olarak tanımlayabileceğimiz kötülük problemi gerek teistlerin gerekse ateistlerin çokça üzerinde durdukları bir sorundur. Konu teistler açısından; hem kendi varoluşsal soru(n)larından birisi olduğu için, hem de –belki de çoğu zaman- inancına yönelik bu noktadan çokça eleştiriye muhatap olduğu için önemli olduğu gibi, ateistler açısından da teizmin karşısındaki en önemli fikri dayanaklarından birisi olması hasebiyle önemlidir. Bu problemde teizm birçok noktadan eleştirilmiş ve bu eleştirilere de birçok farklı cevaplar verilmiştir. Biz de bu makalede, kendi bakış açımızdan bu genel eleştirilere, yaptıklarını düşündüğümüz hataları göstererek bir cevap verme çabası sergileyeceğiz. Konunun, tabiatı itibarıyla tüketilmesi ve sonlandırılması mümkün gözükmediği için, elbette ki bizim de ona son noktayı koyma gibi bir iddiamız yoktur. Bu çalışmamızın naçizane bir anlama gayreti olduğunu belirtmek isteriz.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Din Felsefesi, Kötülük Problemi, David Hume, Akıl, Antropomorfizm

### Introduction

One of the concepts that cannot be allied in its definition is the “evil” concept. The concept assumes relatively different meanings. For example, “bad” for X may be “good” for Y. Even for ourselves, what is bad at time A may be good at time B and vice versa. This makes it difficult to make a clear definition of the concept.

Despite this relative situation in the structure of the concept, the boundaries of the problem of evil have somehow become apparent in the minds of those who are interested in the matter, as the philosophy is concerned, thanks to the major philosophers who have had discussions on the subject. In other words, when we use the concept in a philosophical sense, it is clear what we are talking about: “The situation, formation, or thing that comes from nature or is the result of conscious human action and harms human existence in this world life is called evil within a more general framework.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, simple measures are suggested to understand the evilness of something. For example, the phrase “every time we believe this should not have happened, we take a path leading directly to the problem of evil”<sup>2</sup> reveals our first notice of evil.

In the problem of evil, the concept is categorized under three headings, as Leibniz (d. 1716) has done, namely, a) moral evil as a result of people's actions, b) natural events, or, more generally, evil that comes

<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Cevizci, *Paradigma Felsefe Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Paradigma Yayınları, 2000), 574.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.

without human intervention and c) metaphysical evil, which expresses the lack of finite beings away from deficiency<sup>3</sup>. However, the problem is largely related to moral evil, and according to many, the evil is divided into two, namely, moral and natural evil.

Although it is a very basic subject, many papers have been written on its history until today, and we will give a short history both to prepare a ground for our research and to introduce the subject to the readers who are unfamiliar with philosophy.

## 1. Historical Background

Religion and philosophy, the two pioneer subjects in searching for the truth, deal with the concept of “evil” in their ways. It is a known fact that the religion has existed long before philosophy<sup>4</sup>, looking at the information that the religion has provided for us on this subject, it can be seen that the beginning of the problem of evil has begun with the first human, Adam. Since killing a person without a crime is considered one of the greatest evils, we understand from the story of Adam and his children<sup>5</sup>, Cain and Abel, that the history of evil goes back to the first period.

In the philosophy, the history of the subject goes back to Plato (347 BC), but the name that has made it famous is David Hume<sup>6</sup> (d. 1776) with his well-known dilemma. However, he expresses in the mouth of Philo, one of the heroes of Hume, that it is actually Epicurus (280 BC), an ancient philosopher who has formulated the problem as follows:

*“Epicurus's old questions are still unanswered:*

*- Is he (God) willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent.*

*- Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.*

*- Is he both able and willing? Then whence evil?”*

Apart from Hume, of course, many people have been interested in this issue and still are interested. But when talking about the problem of evil, mostly Epicurus' questions are repeated directly under the name of Hume, and the problem is referred to by him. For this reason, we will consider the issue through these dilemmas.

After briefly describing the problem, we shall now consider efforts to understand the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Rafiz Manafov, *John Hick'in Din Felsefesinde Kötülük Problemi ve Teodise* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2007), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Weber, *Felsefe Tarihi*, trans. H. Vehbi Eralp (İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınları, 1993), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Kitâb-ı Mukaddes (Access Date 18 May 2020), Genesis 4/2-9; *Kur'ân-ı Kerim ve Türkçe Anlamı* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1990), al-Mâide 5/27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Epicurus' conception of religion/God and the conception of religion/God during the Hume period were not the same. However, even if its nature was different, the highlighted point was common. For detailed information, see. Aydın Topaloğlu, “Kötülük Problemi,” *Din Felsefesi*, ed. Latif Tokat (Ankara: Bilay, 2018), 236.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *Din Üstüne*, trans. Mete Tunçay (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları, 1995), 209.

## 2. Ways of Understanding the Problem

In the studies related to the problem, the subject is discussed under two main aspects. In the former, the concept of “evil” has been tried to be defined, and then the harmony or incompatibility of this definition with the idea of God has been tried to be proved. Generally, the phenomenon of evil as it is aforementioned, has been discussed under three headings, namely, metaphysical, physical/natural and moral, and ideas about their relevance or irrelevance to God have been argued. Theists have made great efforts to understand the relevance of evil to God in a way that does not contradict with His justice. They have used the term “theodicy”, which is formed by the combination of the Greek words “God” and “justice” to express the idea that He is fair, and therefore, will not persecute anything. The name that has made the concept famous in the history of philosophy is Leibniz. Leibniz has advocated the idea of al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who lived six centuries before him, that “the best of all possible worlds”, which coincides with Plato’s (348 BC) “the job of the best is also the best” statement. However, philosophers like Voltaire (d.1788) has not found Leibniz’s idea satisfying, but they have not offered a solution, either.<sup>8</sup>

Another method of interpreting is built on the idea of understanding the perpetrator, not the actual action. Here, it is aimed to save the perpetrator from responsibility by reducing the effect of the perpetrator on the action. In other words, they have found an outlet from the questions asked by Hume in solving the problem by accepting a limited power, a restriction that could be suitable for God. The process philosophy pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead is the best-known example of this idea.<sup>9</sup>

Now that we have outlined the problem, then we shall head to our main topic.

## 3. Mistakes in Understanding the Problem of Evil

Those who deal with the problem of evil make some logical mistakes, in our opinion, when revealing the issue. Due to these errors, an issue which is not easy to understand and interpret by its nature<sup>10</sup> becomes even more intricate. The aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the subject by drawing attention to the mistakes made while evaluating the most problematic part of the problem, moral evil and natural evil.

Now, let us try to explain the aspects which we perceive as wrong of the problem that David Hume has revealed in the words of Epicurus:

When we examine the problem, the following points stand out.

- a) Anthropomorphist understanding of God
- b) Inconsistency in the belief in God
- c) The illusion of seeing the reason as an unlimited and unique opportunity
- d) Man's inability to fully understand his existence or lack of belief in afterlife
- e) The double standard on free will

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<sup>8</sup> Nurten Kiriş, “Tarihsel Olarak Kötülük Problemi ve Çözüm Yolu Olarak Teodise,” *FLSF Felsefe ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 5 (2008), 91.

<sup>9</sup> Mehmet S. Aydın, *Din Felsefesi* (Ankara: Selçuk Yayınları, 1992), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Since the problem is based on evaluating God's acts, it has a character that goes beyond the limits of man.

The following of the article will try to address and explain these problems one by one.

**a) Anthropomorphist Understanding of God**

It is a well-known fact that human’s ability to understand is limited. Therefore, one will understand the issues in proportion to one’s possibilities and there is no other possibility. In other words, one will look at the problems with a “humanly” view because one cannot speak of something one does not know. There is no problem so far. The problem here lies in perceiving this limited possibility as unlimited and reducing everything to this limit. Contrary to this understanding, which is concretely embodied in the mythological gods of Helen, apophatic theology (negative theology) limits the possibility of talking about God as much as possible and develops within the culture of Helen because it occurs as a result of the reaction.<sup>11</sup> As can be seen, both represent endpoints.

We can illustrate the anthropomorphism we see in the problem with the following example. I witness an event in which a man severely beats a small child, and this man is someone who I can stand up against. However, I do not save the child from this man, I do not prevent this evil. In this case, it is reasonable to say that although I claim that I am strong, either I am not strong enough to save this child, or I am bad enough to let a child get hurt! Yes, someone can easily say these words for me, because my possibilities and impossibilities are very similar to his, in what situations I can behave. Therefore, one can guess what I can or cannot do.

However, we do not have the opportunity to know what God does, when He does it, and how it will work. Therefore, it is a logical error to consider the actions of God as if they were a human’s actions. Although there are studies on David Hume's opposition to anthropomorphism<sup>12</sup>, there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that the problem he has expressed is of an anthropomorphic nature. It is not difficult to observe that Western thinkers have experienced this problem in many issues, especially due to the belief in human god (Jesus) and inherited Hellenic culture’s influence on theologies.<sup>13</sup> However, since this is an issue outside the scope of the subject of this article, expressing this much will be enough.

**b) Inconsistency in the Belief in God**

Another issue which is related to our claim in the previous point and will confirm our view is inconsistency in the belief in God. What is meant by the inconsistency here is that the person who says one believes in God, he admits that God is absolute strong, absolute knowledgeable, absolute good/merciful. This is the true meaning of faith. Faith does not coexist with the idea of “I believe but I am not sure.” What is meant here is not to prevent researching events and trying to understand their wisdom. The objection is to have an ambivalent thought. This situation can be explained with the following example. I have a friend who I consider as my “best friend”. I see him in a situation that may seem against my point of view. As a result, I end up ending my relationship with him. Here, I either do not know the true meaning of the concept of “best friend”, that I end my relationship with him immediately, or I think wrong about him and attribute

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<sup>11</sup> Hasan Özalp, “Tanrı Hakkında Konuşa(ma)mak: Plotinus’da Negatif Teoloji,” *Turkish Studies* 10/2 (2015), 740.

<sup>12</sup> Habib Şener, “David Hume’un Tanrı Anlayışı ve Antropomorfizm Eleştirisi,” *Iğdır Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 11 (2017), 266.

<sup>13</sup> Ruhattin Yazoğlu, “Antropomorfizm ve Hıristiyanlık,” *Ekev Akademi Dergisi* 1/2 (1998), 273.

to him an adjective that he is not worthy of. Therefore, I have to eliminate this contradiction regarding the concept of best friend. To eliminate this, I either have to behave in accordance with the belief in friendliness, or express that person is not my best friend.

### c) The Illusion of Seeing the Mind as an Unlimited and Unique Opportunity

The mind is defined as the capacity and ability of a person to grasp things, evaluate them, link them and become aware of their similarities and differences. It is also possible to find various definitions and divisions. There are different classifications that emphasize different powers and abilities of mind, such as, intuitive mind, deductive mind and practical mind.<sup>14</sup>

The mind that considers evil as a problem and has a hard time to understand is outside the intuitive mind and wants to bring together the causes and consequences of events and come to a direct conclusion. People who have trusted the intuitive form of mind since Plato<sup>15</sup> have not considered events that seem bad as other intellectuals. Both the history of Islamic Sufism and mysticism are filled with stories of people who think so, and it has not been possible to prove that they are wrong.

The mistake here is to substitute the mind, which is abstracted from faith and intuition as the core of modernization<sup>16</sup>, itself as a unique measure in place of all the abilities of mind and to forget that mind is an ability, and any ability is eternal. Therefore, it is a logical mistake to see things that cannot be grasped by mind, which has a limited ability, meaningless and wrong. The phrase “It is beyond me” expresses the limitedness of the mind to a certain extent.

After expressing that the mind is a skill, we will also need to remember that our abilities are of different degrees to everyone. It is evident that not everyone has the same capacity in mind. The expression that everyone uses in their daily lives “I have never thought like that” is a reflection one comes across a new idea that convinces himself/herself. situation. Therefore, seeing the actions of God, who has absolute intelligence, as bad because we cannot make sense, expresses that we either do not have a mind that is capable of evaluating this situation, or a false thought that that our mind is an unlimited ability. The following example will try to explain this situation. People of all ages with good mental health have a mind. A 3-year old child is vaccinated. Her 30-year-old mother gets to decide this. Her mother gets to do this by holding her child’s arms, if necessary. While this is not a good thing for the child, it is a very good thing for the mother, who considers it reasonable for her to endure this pain so that her child will not suffer in the future. Since the child's mind is not at a level that will grasp the information about the vaccine, but only at the level of evaluating the things that give pleasure and pain, it may seem normal for her to evaluate this situation poorly. However, this is not the case for the mother, which we can call the upper mind. An objection can be made to the example: “Is it not normal for the child to evaluate this event like this, is the child guilty here?” Of course, it is not a crime or a mistake to think like that for a child of this age. However, no one who can argue this problem will claim that the child at this age has a “mind level”.

<sup>14</sup> Cevizci, *Paradigma Felsefe Sözlüğü*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Plato divides the mind into two as intuitive mind that grasps ideas directly and discursive mind, which leads to the mathematical ideas, and thus becomes crystallize by mathematical proof. Cevizci, *Paradigma Felsefe Sözlüğü*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Cevizci, *Paradigma Felsefe Sözlüğü*, 29.

**d) Man’s Inability to Fully Understand His Existence or Lack of Belief in Afterlife**

Another issue that will complement our previous point is about death and afterlife, which are directly related to making sense of our existence in the earth. Here, the part about our example above is the point where we are talking about a level of mind that may be aware of the benefit the vaccine will provide to her in the future. “The future” related to this problem is after death.

Every person who is aware of their existence has more or less a thought about the existence. The question that completes the questions like “what am I, where I came from” is “where am I going?”. Existence cannot be completed without any answer to this question because human is a whole with his/her beginning and end. The point we consider here as a mistake is that although people say that they believe in a life after death, they evaluate the events that happened during their lives cannot happen in afterlife, and treat the pleasures and pains as if they were limited to this world. This is an attitude that clearly contradicts with the belief that “those who are patient with troubles are heralded with heaven”.<sup>17</sup> In addition, we would like to remind that Kant's fact<sup>18</sup> that people are overly eager about worldly pleasure, personal pleasure and interests disturb the purity of moral principles and cause a collective pollution in society is in line with the point that religions draw attention to.

**e) The Double Standard on Free Will**

The mistake we will consider in this point will be more related to the attitudes of atheists. Of course, while accepting the existence of God, there are also theist and deist people who agree with atheism on free will. However, this issue may not occupy as much an important place in their thinking as atheists. Atheism claims that man has to create his own essence and man’s existence depends on his freedom. As a requirement of this thought, they do not accept the idea of a decisive God. Because if there is a God, he will determine a man’s life, and man will be unable to create his own essence. This is one of the reasons for rejecting God.<sup>19</sup>

The evils, which are considered as problems, are mostly related to moral evil, that is, the events that occur as a result of human actions.<sup>20</sup> It is one of the most ancient issues that whether a man is free in his actions or not, and to what extent he is free is a problem that cannot be solved either now or in the future because, as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (d. 1037) expresses, “the most general word cannot be defined by the words below it”. In this vein, we, who are limited, cannot understand the actions of the limitless God at the level of our limited actions. However, we cannot stay away from the effort to understand as much as possible. The most common opinions about this subject are as follows; a) man is a free being, he determines his actions b) a man, as a created being, cannot go beyond what the absolute will determines c) God is the main determiner but there are things that a man can also determine. As aforementioned, many of the atheists, who use the problem of evil as their most serious intellectual basis, stand out for the freedom of man at the

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<sup>17</sup> Kur’ân-ı Kerim ve Türkçe Anlamı (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1990), al-Bakara 2/155.

<sup>18</sup> Peter-Andre Alt, *Karanlık Ruhun Arkeolojisi: İçimizdeki Kötülük*, trans. Sabir Yücesoy (İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2016), 61.

<sup>19</sup> Aydın, *Din Felsefesi*, 218–219.

<sup>20</sup> Cafer Sadık Yaran, *Kötülük ve Theodise* (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 1997), 30–31.



point of justifying atheism, but they hold God responsible for the moral evil that occurs as a result of the actions of the free man. This is a clear inconsistency. Atheists, who are aware of this inconsistency, have refrained from making an atheism foundation based on the problem of evil, and they have stated that the provision of “there is no God” cannot be a conclusion, and they have wanted to keep what they want to do in the context of a religious criticism.<sup>21</sup>

Here, both anthropomorphism and free will confusion are intertwined because it is expected that one hand will reach out from the sky to prevent the evil. Thus, as a person, who has witnessed an evil, is expected to prevent it, the same is expected from God. However, it will conflict with the free will. The strange thing in here is that supporting the idea of “no God” for man to be free.

After these evaluations about moral evil, it is time to talk about the natural evil that is happening outside of human will. Natural disasters, physical defects, beings that damage the environment, environmental conditions that make life difficult are mentioned as natural evil.<sup>22</sup> There are different opinions about natural evil. There are those who argue that evil cannot come from non-emotional beings, and those who hold this framework much broader.<sup>23</sup>

What is often wrong with these points, which are referred to as evil, is the inability to determine whether the evil is really natural evil or moral evil. For example, everyone knows that what needs to be discussed about people's death in an earthquake is not about the earthquake, but about the buildings that are not built in accordance with the legislation. Considering the earthquake as the problem is not the right attitude since the individual who creates a moral problem by not acting in accordance with the legislation for the sake of his simple interests is the problem. Likewise, it is the same situation to make God responsible for the damage that is caused by the flood, not the one who is responsible for the damage by destroying the work ethic by building a house in the stream beds. Of course, there are more examples related to this problem.

Of course, every objection about natural evil does not contain easily understandable mistakes such as earthquake and flood examples. For example, in spite of all kinds of measures, a child may be born with a physical disability. Behaving like we have the knowledge of the upper mind, even though we do not, and forgetting that the point where scientific knowledge has come today is not the ultimate point where we have the knowledge of everything are difficult to notice compared to aforementioned problems. While the meaning of earthquakes for our world used to be an incomprehensible subject for the people of the past, it has become understandable today with the development of science. In this vein, it is evident that the things we see as “evil” today will not become obstacles in the future thanks to the science that continues to evolve itself.

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<sup>21</sup> Topaloğlu, “Kötülük Problemi,” 242.

<sup>22</sup> Metin Yasa, *Tanrı ve Kötülük* (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2016), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Manafov, *John Hick'in Din Felsefesinde Kötülük Problemi ve Teodise*, 38–41.

Finally, remembering that we should question the source of goodness as we questioned the source of evil, it would be useful to understand the issue. In the words of Boethius (d. 524), “If there be no God, from whence cometh any good?”<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

In this world where there is pain, the idea of a world without evil will not go beyond a wish that cannot be realized. If so, the attitude we should take should be to understand these facts and events correctly and to determine an attitude accordingly. The way to understand correctly is to have the right methods. The principles of logic, which express the principles of correct use of mind, are the principles that will shed light on us.

By passing the things we perceive through the mind filter, we reach the judgment of “right” or “wrong”. However, mind is not a one-dimensional skill. If we consider the events with a holistic approach without neglecting their intuitions, we can reach more inclusive and accurate results. In order to understand the problem of evil, in which the principle “the piece cannot contain the whole”, which is a basic principle of mind, is frequently violated, we need to adhere to this principle along with other principles such as consistency.

The main point that makes the problem complicated is that the divine knowledge issue is one of the basic elements in this problem. The answer to the question “why is this happening” lies in the in divine knowledge. However, it is not possible for us to be fully aware of this. As the problem we have talked about is not only based on knowledge, since it contains a dimension which is related to the faith, expecting a result which is in scientific level will be another mistake.

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<sup>24</sup> Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, trans. H. F. Stewart (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 151.

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