

Barriers to meaning

Two issues contribute heavily to a sense of the meaninglessness of life.

- Scientific naturalism
- The pervasiveness of evil and suffering in the world.

Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship”

Concerning scientific naturalism, Bertrand Russell writes:

[P]urposeless ... [and] void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship”

In response, Russell suggests that we should worship ideals of our own creation:

Brief and powerless is Man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; ... to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; ... proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge, and his condemnation, to sustain alone ... the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.

But is this really satisfactory given that those ideals exist only in our minds?

At any rate, the picture Russell paints is nowhere nearly forced upon us by science. (And if it were, there would be no longer be any compelling reason to take science seriously in practice.)

The problem of evil

The problem of evil has been used at least since Epicurus to suggest that the universe is, if not hostile, then at least indifferent to human existence.

As Epicurus famously put it:

If God is willing to prevent evil, but is not able to

Then He is not omnipotent.

If He is able, but not willing

Then He is malevolent.

If He is both able and willing

Then whence cometh evil?

If He is neither able nor willing

Then why call Him God?

The problem of evil

Today, formulations of the problem usually center around the notion of “gratuitous evil.”

Gratuitous evils are evils that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God could have no sufficiently good reason for permitting.

The problem can be formulated as follows:

1. There occur evils for which we cannot think of any sufficiently good reason for God’s permitting them.
2. If we cannot think of any sufficiently good reason for God’s permitting an evil, then probably there is no such reason.
3. Therefore, probably, gratuitous evils exist.
4. If gratuitous evils exist then God does not exist.
5. Therefore, probably, God does not exist.

The crucial premises here are (1) and (2). Neither is unassailable, but the issues are very complex.

The problem of evil

Roughly, (1) can be challenged by giving *theodicies*, that is, plausible accounts of good reasons God *might* have had for permitting various types of evils.

And even if we can't come up with plausible theodicies for *all* evils, (2) can be challenged on grounds of epistemic modesty. After all, how much should finite beings like us expect to understand about God's purposes in permitting this or that evil to occur?

As before, the conclusion that we live in a hostile or indifferent cosmos seems hardly forced upon us by the evidence. While the problem of evil is a formidable problem, and one that arguably refutes certain *versions* of theism, it does not appear to refute theism *per se*.