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The Aspectual Shape of Value Experience and the Problem of Evil

Abstract

Traditional responses to the problem of evil may be classed as 'logical' responses, insofar as they aim to show that God's existence is logically compatible with evil and suffering. In this paper I discuss what might be called a non-logical or 'aporetic' response. According to the aporetic response, the problem of evil appears to us as intractable, but it does so only because of the limitedness of human minds. I argue on independent grounds that human minds are limited in a specific way: our experience of value is, in an important respect, aspectually shaped (aspectual shape is a term is used by Tim Crane, John Searle, and others in the philosophy of perception). This thesis is useful for understanding various syndromes in the way we relate to normative areas like ethics, aesthetics, politics or religion. It can also be used to provide the framework for a novel aporetic theodicy.

Keywords

evil, aspectual shape, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, aporia

Introduction

We can divide theodicies into different kinds. The free will response of Augustine; the privation response of Plotinus; the optimistic response of Leibniz. But these traditional responses to the problem of evil can all be classed as 'logical' responses, insofar as they aim to show that God's existence is logically compatible with evil and suffering. In this paper I discuss what might be called an aporetic response. According to the aporetic response, the problem of evil appears to us as intractable, but it does so only because of the limitedness of human minds. Examples of the aporetic response include Peter van Inwagen's sceptical theism, or Fr Paneloux's position in Camus' novel *The Plague* when he says of the suffering we behold:

"... it is outrageous because it is beyond us. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand." (Camus 2001: 169)

I begin by arguing on independent grounds that our experience of value is, in an important respect, aspectually shaped (a term used by Tim Crane, John Searle, and others in the philosophy of perception). This thesis is useful for understanding various syndromes in the way we relate to normative areas like ethics, aesthetics, politics or religion. It also accords a specific kind of limitation to human minds that can also be used to provide the framework for a novel aporetic theodicy.

Aporetic Theories

I call this the response to the problem of evil discussed here ‘aporetic’ because it is one that accepts our epistemic position as one of partial or total aporia – perplexity or lack of understanding. We’re familiar with this notion from Plato’s early dialogues which typically conclude in aporia. There also exist aporetic theories in other areas of philosophy, notably ‘mysterian’ positions in metaphysics. These include Colin McGinn’s claim that the mind must be physical though we cannot understand how, or Peter van Inwagen’s claim that free will must exist though we cannot make sense of it (McGinn 1989; van Inwagen 2000).

Aporetic theories have the general form ‘P but P is (in some sense) incomprehensible to us’. They are therefore easy to generate. Nonetheless specific aporetic theories are relatively rare. It is striking, for instance, that whilst there is a well-known aporetic physicalist position (McGinn’s) there is no equally well-known aporetic dualist position, despite the fact that this would surely be just as viable. One obvious reason for the rarity of aporetic theories is that they are likely to be seen as a copout. After all, if P is incomprehensible to us this is normally grounds for rejecting the thesis that P. Merely adding P’s incomprehensibility to one’s theory does not help the matter. But aporetic theories are legitimate where we have independent grounds for thinking that P, if true, will nonetheless be incomprehensible to us. I think this is the situation regarding the problem of evil.

Value Experience

There are different ways that things can be incomprehensible or aporetic. The aporia that results from the problem of evil has to do with what I’ll call our emotive experience of value, rather than our rational understanding of the problem. By ‘value’ we often mean moral value. We can also include aesthetic, epistemic, or religious value. Value is frequently defined in terms of the notions of good/bad or better/worse, and sometimes ought/oughtn’t. In philosophy we sometimes use the terms ‘normativity’ and ‘axiology’ to refer to this subject matter. Value is something we experience. Uncontroversially we feel admiration for good actions; we experience joy or wonder at beauty; horror at suffering and so on. There is an obvious sense in which these are all experiences of value.¹ In what follows I use ‘value experience’ instead of the longer phrase ‘experience of value’.

There is obviously a connection between value experience and emotion. This can be seen from language. To be admirable, wonderful, or horrible is to have a value-laden property (the former two good, the latter bad). But admiration, wonder, and horror are all typically classed as emotions. We can find precedent for the idea that we undergo emotive experience of value in numerous thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Hume and Kant. This is also supported by recent literature on emotion, with leading thinkers including Robert Solomon and Martha Nussbaum. On widely endorsed view emotions can be understood as comprising not just a sensation but also a judgement. For example, if I feel admiration for Richard I have a certain sensation/feeling, and I also make a certain judgement, e.g. that Richard is in some respect good or praiseworthy. This is supported by fact that we treat emotions as open to rational criticism. We say someone should not admire the Third Reich; should not laugh at the misfortune of others and so on. Having said this, we should not assume that the sensual and judgemental parts of emotions are distinct, separable phe-

nomena, rather than two aspects of a single unitary state. Although this may ignore some details, in the following I assume that value experiences just are emotions and vice versa.

Value Experience is Aspectually Shaped

We frequently run into interpersonal conflicts in the way we experience value. For example, one person views a work of art as beautiful, another as mediocre; one person admires chastity as praiseworthy, another despises it as puritanical. These conflicts have been given a lot of attention in metaethical literature. Less attention has been given to *intrapersonal* conflicts. But these are common too. This occurred to me about a decade ago on noticing that when I listen to Bach, I feel as though no music could equal Bach's beauty, but when I listen to Beethoven I feel that Beethoven exceeds all other composers. At different times I undergo value-experiences that appear to involve contradictory judgements. I think this is something we are all familiar with.

Interpersonal conflicts in value experience are traditionally used as an argument for anti-realism. For example, A. J. Ayer (1936) argues on these grounds that there are no moral or aesthetic truths, only personal preferences.² It was something like it that led the American Anthropological Association to issue a statement in 1947 declaring that moral values are relative to cultures, and that there is no way of showing that one culture's values are better than another's. The thought is that, since our experiences of value do not appear to converge on some common fact of the matter, value is really just a matter of opinion, or of liking and disliking.

I think there is an alternative picture available that explains the facts better without sacrificing realism about value. According to this picture, our experience of value is perfectly veridical (truthful), but it admits of the phenomenon I call 'aspectual shape'. The term 'aspectual shape' is used by Tim Crane, John Searle, and others in philosophy of perception. It is used to denote a range of phenomenon of varying familiarity. A classic example concerns vision. Objects appear larger when they are closer, and smaller when they are further away. A very close object fills the entire visual field. But these facts about the ways objects *appear* do not undermine the objective size and shape of the objects we perceive. This is analogous (though in important respects *merely* analogous) to what I claim happens with value experience.

According to the picture proposed here, our apprehension of value in one area has a tendency to block out, obscure, or minimize our apprehension of value in another area. As a result, our experience of value at one time contradicts our experience at another time. It is, as it were, simply a part of something seeming *very important* for it to also seem *more important* than the other things we are not focussing on. As such the extremes of value we encounter are too much for us to fully apprehend at once. When Bach seems greater than Beethoven, my sense of Bach's absolute value is veridical, but my sense of the relation of that value to Beethoven's is misleading.

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We can leave to one side whether such reactions can be mistaken – there is a sense in which I think they can.

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Ayer uses this to support the emotivist thesis that moral and aesthetic language functions

only to express emotion. As noted, it is now widely thought that emotions involve judgements. If so, emotivism may not have to be anti-realist as it was for Ayer. This line of argument is also familiar from areas outside academic philosophy.

The aspectual shape of our value experience has the potential to explain the prevalence not only of interpersonal, but also of intrapersonal conflicts in our experience of value. It does so without sacrificing realism about value. There is an enormous amount of detail to fill in concerning this idea which I hope to do elsewhere. Here I will briefly argue for the explanatory power of the thesis before applying it to the case under discussion – the problem of evil.

Explanatory Power

The thesis that value experience is aspectually shaped is phenomenologically compelling. Whilst I am not aware of a thinker who has argued for the thesis directly, something like it appears incidentally in many works of literature and philosophy. An early anticipation appears in Plato's *Protagoras*:

“Does not the same size appear larger to your sight when near, and smaller when distant? (...) And it is the same with thickness and number? And sounds of equal strength are greater when near, and smaller when distant? (...) Now if our welfare consisted in doing and choosing things of large dimensions, and avoiding and not doing those of small, what would be our salvation in life? Would it be the art of measurement, or the power of appearance? Is it not the latter that leads us astray, as we saw, and many a time causes us to take things topsy-turvy and to have to change our minds both in our conduct and in our choice of great or small?” (*Protagoras* 365c–d)

The same idea appears more or less clearly in Burke's claim that when apprehending the sublime in nature

“... the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.” (Burke 1757/1990: 53)

More recently Robert Solomon has gestured the same phenomenon when he observes that:

“In anger one looks only at the offense and fails to take account of the good humour of the antagonist. In jealousy we are aware only of the threat and not of the wit and charms of our rival. In love one celebrates the virtues and not the vices of the beloved, in envy we seek only the coveted object and remain indifferent to questions of general utility and the fairness of the desired redistribution.” (Solomon 1991: 12)

The fact that this idea can be found in diverse texts suggests that it deserves attention. I also think the thesis that value experience is aspectually shaped may have considerable explanatory power. Here is a mundane example of the kind of confusion the aspectual shape of value experience causes in everyday life.

A few years ago there was a global financial crisis. At the time Great Britain was planning to host the 2012 Olympics. But some suggested that the event should be cancelled. The journalist and comedian David Mitchell pointed out that the last time the Olympics were cancelled was during the second World War, and that surely things had not gotten that bad. Despite the obvious truth of his claim, the public responded to Mitchell with considerable venom – as though his words were an insult to all those harmed by the financial crisis. He wrote of this some years later:

“I wasn't saying things were fine; I was saying they were less serious than in 1940 (...). However, many online commentators considered (...) that any reference to our current problems in less than utterly superlative terms was a disgrace.” (Mitchell 2014: 9)

How can we analyse such confusion? The central point is that those attacking Mitchell were aware that, for some, the financial crisis had caused awful hardship. And so in one way, calling it less serious than WWII seemed unjust – *a*

kind of infidelity to the suffering people were undergoing. But in another way, Mitchell's critics were utterly wrong. How does this come about? Part of the answer, I think, is that when we think about the lesser case of suffering – *when we fully appreciate it* – there is, as it were, no room left for us to appreciate the greater. This is an example of aspectual shape.

The explanatory power of my thesis is increased when we combine it with distinction between description and expression. For our purposes 'description' means using language to state the facts by means of declarative sentences. 'Expression' means using language to occasion a value experience in another person. Thus the aspectual shape of value *experience* carries over into value *expression*. This follows logically from that thesis that value experience is aspectually shaped and from the definition of expression as using language to occasion value experience. The same holds if we allow other means of expression than language.

The claim that the financial crisis was not as serious as WWII is obviously descriptively true. But it is arguably expressively inept with respect to the harm caused by the financial crisis. It does nothing to give us the kind of emotive apprehension of that harm that it deserves. People were angry with Mitchell because they felt he was not being true to the suffering of those affected. In this case they were wrong to respond with anger, but we can understand why they did so. Likewise, when I listen to Bach, there is, as it were, no room left to appreciate the supremacy of Beethoven, and vice versa. Furthermore, when I've been listening to Bach and insist to a friend that he is the greatest composer, what I say may be a very good expression of Bach's brilliance. But even if it is descriptively true, it surely remains expressively inept with respect to Beethoven.

If what I have said is right, the aspectual shape of value experience represents a fundamental problem for communication. For we can't just cut off the expressive component of language – we cannot stop our language from occasioning value experience. And as John Cottingham points out in his paper "What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it at Risk?" the part of language we're concerned with here, its resonances of emotion and imagination, are as present when we do philosophy as at any other time (Cottingham 2009: 253).

Aspectual Shape and the Problem of Evil

The thesis that value-experience is aspectually shaped in the way I have indicated has the potential to illuminate our proceedings with value across many areas. Here I am interested in its importance for the problem of evil. Even in this area there are several ways in which the thesis might be important. One obvious result is that the problem of evil might be much worse than we usually suppose.³ For it follows from the aspectual shape of value-experience that our apprehension of the evil in the world is fundamentally limited. In general, where it comes to the valuable, whether positive or negative, there is more going on than any of us has fully realised. As George Elliot's puts it:

"That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had

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I think this is certainly the case.

a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity." (Eliot 2000: 124)

It is likely then, however awful the thought, that natural and moral evil go far beyond what we are able to feel in our everyday life, perhaps ever. If so it seems that the problem of evil is a much worse problem than we usually take it to be.

Even so, the news is not all bad (for those who hope that the world's existence should not be ultimately regrettable). For the aspectual shape of value experience can also provide the theoretical framework for an aporetic response to the problem of evil. It is notable that our reaction to theodicies often parallels closely the hostility with which Mitchell's readers responded to his comments about the 2012 Olympics were received. Here are two examples from Alvin Plantinga and Adrian Moore respectively (the latter referring specifically to Leibniz's theodicy):

"Most attempts to explain why God permits evil... strike me as tepid, shallow and ultimately frivolous." (Plantinga 1985: 35)

"His metaphysical story seems to be a repellent lie about what our actual lives are really like." (Moore 2014: 70)

This is also the kind of response we find exemplified in the greatest literary treatment of the problem of evil, Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where in the words of Rimvydas Silbajoris:

"God himself is called to account for the hopeless tears of even one small child. Ivan's dramatic confrontation of God with the pointless torture of the meekest of His creations has an emotional power which seems to mock all efforts to justify God's ways to man." (Silbajoris 1963: 26)

This is correct. And 'mock' is a fitting word. The unflinching detail of Ivan's discourse forces upon us the sense that any pretence that such suffering could be consistent with a just God must be in itself repugnant. I take it that we all share this feeling. And yet, when we turn our attention away from evil, to more exulted realities – beauty, goodness, truth – many of us feel a conflicting conviction that there exists, or could exist, a good that will vindicate all that has been and all that could possibly be.

The tension between these experiences is reflected at the intrapersonal level in Dostoyevsky's portrayal of Ivan. One thing that makes Dostoyevsky's portrayal of Ivan and Alyosha richer than Camus' of Richoux and Paneloux is that Ivan and Alyosha do not have their mind's made up. Ivan in particular seems to oscillate between the two views. At one stage he says:

"I understand of course, what a cataclysm of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and on earth blends into a hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for thy ways are revealed!' Then, indeed, the mother will embrace the torturer who had her child torn to pieces by his dogs, and all three will cry aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord!', and then, of course, the crown of knowledge will have been attained and everything will be explained." (Dostoyevsky 1982: 286)

But in an immediate reversal Ivan continues:

"The only trouble is that it's precisely that I cannot accept (...). And while I'm on earth, I hasten to take my own measures (...). I do not want the mother to embrace the torturer who tore her son to pieces with his dogs! (...) she has no right to forgive (...). It isn't God I don't accept, Alyosha, it's just his ticket that I most respectfully return to him." (Ibid.)

On the present interpretation Ivan's position may be best summed up in his assertion: "If I understand anything, I shall instantly be untrue to the facts, and I have decided to remain with the facts". Indeed, if value experience is aspectually shaped there may be a generally tension between understanding things, on the one hand and being 'true to them' on the other. The former has to do with descriptive truth, the latter expressive aptness.

Ivan's conflict has, I conjecture, played an immense role in the history of the problem of evil. I propose that we understand the situation in terms of the aspectual shape of value experience, and its correlate, the aspectual shape of expression. First, given the aspectual shape of value experience, it seems highly likely that human minds are simply incapable of apprehending simultaneously the abhorrent evil and suffering in the world, on the one hand, and the redeeming splendour of God on the other.⁴ Further, given the aspectual shape of expression, any theodicy is bound to be expressively inept with respect to the evil and suffering in the world. For any theodicy must affirm the conjunction of the thesis that the world is ultimately good with the thesis that it comprises immense viciousness and hardship.

If this is correct, it explains why attempts at theodicy strike many, including devout theists such as Plantinga, as repugnant. This explanation does not entail, however, that theodicy is impossible. On the contrary, it remains open to us to view the opponents of theodicy on the analogy of the critics who attacked Mitchell's comments on the 2012 Olympics. The aspectual shape of value experience allows us to understand why Mitchell's critics found his statements objectionable. But this doesn't mean that we will accept the claim that the financial crisis was as bad as WWII. Likewise, the aspectual shape of value experience allows us to understand why any theodicy will be expressively inept with respect to evil and suffering. But this does not mean that theodicy is a lost cause. This point can be summarised by saying that theodicy involves the affirmation of two theses that are, because of the way we experience value, psychologically incompatible. But they need not also be logically incompatible, and it is logical compatibility that is of metaphysical consequence.

Summary

To summarise: I think that the aspectual shape of value experience is a highly compelling independently motivated theory, and one that may be of use in understanding manifold phenomena including political disputes, aesthetic and cultural disagreements, and sociological occurrences such as the Mitchell example discussed. This theory can also be used to provide the framework for a novel aporetic theodicy. This is an aporetic theodicy because it says that the problem of evil will strike us as overwhelming, but only because of the limitedness of human minds. It thus accepts our epistemic position as one of partial aporia. It is a novel proposal because, where other aporetic theodicies focus on what we normally think of as cognitive limitations, the present suggestion appeals to limitations on our emotive capacity. In this respect I feel that it has a greater claim to getting at the heart of the issue.

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Or if not God, the Good, or whatever it takes to make the world ultimately acceptable.

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Aspektni oblik iskustva vrijednosti i problem zla

Sažetak

Tradicionalni odgovori na problem zla mogu se klasificirati kao »logički« odgovori utoliko ukoliko im je cilj pokazati da je postojanje Boga logički kompatibilno sa zlom i patnjom. U istraživanju raspravljam o odgovoru koji bi se mogao nazvati nelogičkim odnosno »aporetičkim«. Prema aporetičkom odgovoru, problem zla pojavljuje se kao teško uhvatljiv, ali takvim se pojavljuje isključivo zbog ograničenosti ljudskog uma. S nezavisnog stajališta argumentiram da je ljudski um ograničen na karakterističan način: naše je iskustvo vrijednosti u bitnom smislu aspektnog oblika (aspectual shape je termin koji koriste Tim Crane, John Searle i drugi iz područja filozofije percepcije). Hipoteza je korisna za razumijevanje različitih sindroma u odnosu spram toga kako se vežemo za normativna područja poput etike, estetike, politike i religije. Također, može se iskoristiti za oblikovanje okvira za novu aporetičku teodiceju.

Ključne riječi

zlo, aspektni oblik, Albert Camus, Fjodor Mihajlovič Dostojevski, aporija

Ralph Stefan Weir

Aspektgestalt der Werterfahrung und das Problem des Bösen

Zusammenfassung

Traditionelle Antworten auf das Problem des Bösen können insofern als „logische“ Antworten eingestuft werden, als es ihr Ziel ist darzutun, dass die Existenz Gottes mit dem Bösen und dem Leiden logisch kompatibel ist. In der Forschungsarbeit bespreche ich die Antwort, die man als unlogisch bzw. „aporetisch“ bezeichnen könnte. Der aporetischen Antwort zufolge erscheint das Problem des Bösen als schwer erfassbar, jedoch erscheint es als solches ausschließlich wegen der Beschränkung der menschlichen Vernunft. Vom eigenständigen Standpunkt aus argumentiere ich, dass die menschliche Vernunft in einer charakteristischen Weise begrenzt ist: Unsere Werterfahrung besitzt im wesentlichen Sinne die Aspektgestalt (aspectual shape ist ein Terminus, der von Tim Crane, John Searle und anderen aus dem Gebiet der Wahrnehmungsphilosophie verwendet wird). Die Hypothese ist nützlich für das Verständnis verschiedener Syndrome in Bezug auf die Art und Weise, wie wir uns an normative Bereiche wie Ethik, Ästhetik, Politik und Religion binden. Sie kann ebenfalls zur Gestaltung des Rahmens für eine neue aporetische Theodizee ausgenutzt werden.

Schlüsselwörter

Böses, Aspektgestalt, Albert Camus, Fjodor Michailowitsch Dostojewski, Aporie

Ralph Stefan Weir

La forme aspectuelle de l'expérience de la valeur et du problème du mal

Résumé

Les réponses traditionnelles au problème du mal peuvent être classées de réponses « logiques » dans la mesure où leur but est de montrer que l'existence de Dieu est logiquement compatible avec le mal et la souffrance. Dans cette recherche je discute de la réponse que l'on pourrait appeler non-logique, soit « aporétique ». Selon la réponse aporétique, le problème du mal apparaît comme difficile à saisir, mais il apparaît ainsi uniquement en raison des limites de la raison humaine. À partir d'une perspective indépendante, j'argumente que la raison humaine est limitée de façon caractéristique : notre expérience des valeurs présente en un sens premier une forme aspectuelle (aspectual shape est un terme qu'utilisent Tim Crane, John Searle et d'autres appartenant au domaine de la philosophie de la perception). L'hypothèse est utile pour la compréhension des divers syndromes en rapport avec comment l'on se lie aux sphères normatives telles que l'éthique, l'esthétique, la politique et la religion. De même, elle peut être utilisée pour la formation d'un cadre pour une nouvelle théodicée aporétique.

Mots-clés

mal, forme aspectuelle, Albert Camus, Fiodor Mikhaïlovitch Dostoïevski, aporie