Boethius on the Problem of Evil

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Abstract:
The problem of evil is one the most important challenges presented to the belief in the existence of an Omnipotent, Omniscient and All-Benevolent God. The toughest side of this problem is that there seems to be an inconsistency between these attributes and the existence of evil. The aforementioned inconsistency is not straightforward, but rather it requires to be supplemented by additional premises so as to connote “what an Omnipotent being would be able to do and what an All-Good being would be motivated to do”. The latter statement implicitly indicates the logical side of the problem but there are alternative articulations of the problem which challenge the believers and ask them to give intelligible answers.

This essay is an effort to explicate Boethius's point of view on this issue. As a fifth century Christian thinker, he has addressed the problem in a different manner. During the time he was awaiting execution by Theodoric -the king of the Ostrogoths- Boethius penned one of the most renowned works of philosophy ever, The Consolation of Philosophy. In a dialogue with the goddess of Philosophy, he reflects on his being betrayed by the colleagues and friends and wonders why an innocent man like him should be jailed and punished and wait for his execution. He pays much attention to the problem of evil and says: the heart-rending cause of my depression is that despite the existence of a good-natured ruler in this world, evil still exists and the evil-minded people even pass unpunished . . . Whereas the wickedness holds the helm and is thriving, the virtue not only does not face any reward, but rather it is being crushed underfoot by criminals and she pays the penalty of crimes herself. The fact that in spite of the rule of an Omnipotent and Omniscient God whose will is merely disposed to goodness such terrible things happen, strikes me with wonder and unending regret.” These quoted words of Boethius suggest that he approaches the problem of evil from two respects, firstly, why in a world ruled by an Omnipotent, Omniscient and All-Benevolent God evils occur, secondly, why the world affairs proceed reversely and the upper hand is always for the evil and goods fall underfoot and defeated?

Trying to prepare the necessary premises to answer these objections, Boethius turns to the nature of happiness. He distinguishes between two kinds of happiness: genuine happiness and ingenuine happiness. The goddess of philosophy invites Boethius to make the most of his imprisonment as an opportunity due to which he could meditate on truth and recognize that worldly and carnal interests do not lead to true happiness. The occurrence of evils can open the eyes of Boethius to higher truths. Now that he has lost all his material interests and possessions and ended up behind bars and does not have anything around, he understands that it is only God who can lead man to happiness in its genuine sense. In these conditions, he is delivered from all bondages and can easily pursue happiness via focusing on virtues, meditation and contemplation. He strongly asserts that when he got pleased by material interests he could not think about genuine happiness and understand it. Thanks to the conditions he faces in prison, Boethius has found that superficial ease does not imply genuine happiness and the pains which strike him pave the way for the disclosure of a higher good to him. God prescribed the imprisonment of Boethius so that the necessary ground to be prepared for the higher good to emerge which is the Christian philosopher's acquaintance with genuine happiness. In modern times, this is called promotion of justice based on higher goods. Then the answer Boethius gives to the objection he propounded at first is that pure goodness of God does not necessarily imply that he has to remove all evils once forever
particularly when an evil gets things ready for the rise of a higher good. The knowledge gained by Boethius was indeed a higher good which made possible through his imprisonment and this is why God prescribed his imprisonment.

The second problem which occupies this thinker's mind is that the world appears in a way as if it works reversely and evils always get the helm and have the upper hand and goods are invariably defeated and crushed underfoot. Then if God is merciful and benevolent he should not allow the goods to be suppressed by wicked fiends. One of the answers which Boethius has given to this problem is that God has conferred the primordial sense of goodness upon all human individuals. In Consolations of Philosophy, the goddess of philosophy states: all human beings have been equipped with the primordial sense of goodness but sometimes man fails to choose the path which ends up in good. Consequently, the world does not work in a reversed direction. Then there is goodness in the world whether the man recognizes it correctly or not. Particularly man is after her/his happiness and "since the genuine happiness is the highest of all goods, it is clear that human beings are essentially pro-goodness, the highest good is equally meant by the good and evil people though the former pursue it through natural practice of virtues but the latter seek to obtain it following their whims and carnal desires." Although all human individuals are after good (happiness), but it is only good-natured individuals who reach it. Then wicked people do not touch genuine good and this is why the life of good people has priority over evil people.

On the other hand, Boethius believes that man has been created freely. And since this is the case, everyone is responsible before his/her own actions and moral evils can be explained resorting to free will. Though man is better to follow divine ordinances but s/he has been created as a free agent and can intentionally choose other ways to tread say devote himself to his own personal interests or make the evils his destination. Boethius sees human disposition toward evils a deviation from his/her primordial nature and believes this wrong turn leads to no more than human misery. Thus conceived, all worldly prosperities fade away in the face of eternal happiness resulted from adherence to goodness. Chasing evil intentions distances man from this eternal happiness and this is the greatest loss one would undergo. By promotion of evils man gradually gets metamorphosed and loses his/her power of discretion and ceases to be a thinking being.

References
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