

God, Freedom, and Evil

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The existence of evil and suffering¹ presents one of the largest obstacles to belief in God²--for both the theist and the atheist alike. The incalculable amount of human suffering and pain has led many to conclude that it is unbelievable that there is an all-powerful and all-loving God who would allow such misery and pain. In this paper I will present the problem of evil in its two most popular forms, the logical and external problems, show how the problems may be satisfactorily answered, and then show how the existence of evil rather than being a defeater for belief may be used as a pointer to the existence of God.³

§1 The Logical Problem of Evil

The logical problem of evil is most poignantly presented in J.L. Mackie's treatise "Evil and Omnipotence"⁴ where he charges the theist with contradictory beliefs. He argues that religious belief, rather than lacking rational support, is "positively irrational, that several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another."⁵ What are these doctrines? The theist is committed to the following set of beliefs, which we will refer to as set A:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God is omnipotent.
- (3) God is omniscient.
- (4) God is omni-benevolent.
- (5) Evil exists.

The atheologian charges the theist with self-contradictory beliefs, however these five propositions do not *themselves* formally entail a contradiction. The atheologian must present an additional proposition that is either necessarily true, essential to theism, or a logical consequence of the other propositions in set A for the logical consequences of the sum to be contradictory. So what propositions does the atheologian provide? These are the propositions provided by Mackie⁶

- (6) A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
- (7) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.

Proposition (6) not only fails to be necessarily true but fails to be contingently true as well. For example, suppose you are at home with your friend John. Your friend John is a clumsy fellow and proceeds to bump his leg against the coffee table causing his leg to swell and inflict him with pain. Being a kind friend you rush to the medicine cabinet to get him pain reliever; however to your dismay, the cabinet is empty. Due to your limited knowledge of first aid the only thing you can think of to help your friend's pain is to saw his leg off. Now at this point you would be willing to eliminate the evil, his throbbing shin, as far as you can. This solution is not considered morally justified although it satisfies proposition (6). But why? The key to the moral culpability lies in the ability to eliminate the evil in question, namely the pain in his shin, without eliminating a greater good, namely that of your friend's ability to use his leg, or bringing about a greater evil. So a more sophisticated version of proposition (6) can be restated as

- (6a) A good being eliminates every evil that it knows about and that it can eliminate without either bringing about a greater evil or eliminating a good state of affairs that outweighs the evil.

It is in response to this proposition that the Free Will Theodicy of G. W. Leibniz applies⁷. God, valuing man's freedom, decided to provide him with a will that was free to choose good over evil, rather than constraining his will, allowing him to choose only good. Mackie objects to this theological framework claiming that "this is utterly opposed to what theists say about sin in other contexts."⁸ Mackie leaves this notion rather vague and fails to expound upon it throughout his treatise.⁹ The theist needs only to provide a *possible* solution to proposition (6a) to escape contradiction. The question of how probable this and other solutions will be raised in the second section when confronting the external version of the problem. A popular objection to the free will defense asks why God did not create a world full of free creatures that would freely choose good over evil. If he is omnipotent, should not he be able to create any possible world? The answer to these questions can be found in response to proposition (7).

A qualification needs to be made to Mackie's proposition (7); what we must say is that there are no *non-logical* limits to what an omnipotent being can do. God is omnipotent only if he can perform actions that are logically possible for him to perform. For example, God cannot create square circles or married bachelors in any possible world.¹⁰ So if God is a logical entity, do we have reason to believe that he could create a world of free creatures who always choose good over evil? In the same manner that God cannot create a square circle, he cannot make someone freely choose to do something. Thus, if God grants people genuine freedom, then it is impossible for him to determine what they will do. All that God can do is create the circumstances in which a person can make free choices and then stand back and let them make the choices. According to Leibniz's theodicy, our actual world is the best of all possible worlds, the world with the greatest amount of good and the least amount of evil. God, being omnipotent, had many possible worlds to choose from at the time of creation. Of those possible worlds, he chose to actualize the best one based on his omni-benevolent nature. Leibniz would argue that the world which the atheologian is arguing he could have created, namely one where all free creatures freely choose only good, was not a logical possibility for God to create and that every possible world that God had to choose from had evil and sin.¹¹ Some have argued that this is a limit on God's power, rendering his omnipotence void, commonly referred to as the Paradox of Omnipotence. However, it must be noted that omnipotence, defined as the attribute of being *all-powerful*, does not imply the ability to do *anything*, but rather omnipotence implies that God can do whatever *power* can do. Within that scope, we see that power does not provide a blank check for performing contradictions.¹²

A further assumption made by the atheologian is that if God is omni-benevolent that he would prefer a world without evil over a world with evil. This assumption is dubious for two reasons. First, there are many cases where we allow evil and suffering to occur in a person's life in order to bring about a greater good. For example, parents recognize when discipline is needed to teach their children to become mature, responsible adults. Similarly, it is a noted fact that many people come to a knowledge of God through their pain and suffering.¹³ Second, if God were to intervene every time an evil act were about to occur (for instance turning terrorist bullets to rubber before it hits its target), all notions of moral responsibility and accountability would be shattered. The atheologian is therefore not in a position to charge the theist with contradictory beliefs; however he can choose to argue that the theories developed by the theist, although possible, are improbable.

§2 The External Problem of Evil

The external problem of evil claims that although the existence of evil is not a *prima facie* reason to charge the theist with contradictory beliefs, the apparently unnecessary and pointless evil in the world is however incompatible with the omni-conception of God. The theist will agree that some instances of evil appear to be gratuitous¹⁴; however, he will challenge the inference from *apparently* gratuitous evil to the *reality* of gratuitous evil. To examine whether the evil experienced is truly gratuitous it would be beneficial to examine both the quantity and nature of evil in the world.

In considering the quantity of evil in the world, we can also recognize that, although the world seems to be a terrible place, there is on balance more good than evil. People generally agree that life is worth living, and when things are looking bad people, have hope in looking to the future. If the evil were so overwhelming, everyone would have committed suicide.

In examining the nature of evil, the theist is free to use all the resources from his worldview in answering the objection. Here it seems that answering the problem is easier from the perspective of Christian theism than from the perspective of belief in the mere existence of God. There are four Christian doctrines which give us reason to regard *apparently* gratuitous evil as merely apparent. These four doctrines will be explored further below

First, the chief purpose of life is not happiness, but the knowledge of God. One reason we find the problem of evil to be so compelling is that we think that if God exists, he is obligated to create a warm comfortable environment for his human pets. However, on the Christian view, this is false. The purpose of life is not happiness *per se* but rather the knowledge of God which can bring everlasting fulfillment. Many evils may seem pointless with respect to producing human happiness yet may be fruitful in coming to a knowledge of God.

Second, mankind is in a state of rebellion against God and God's purposes. The terrible moral evils we witness in the world are a testimony to man's depravity and state of spiritual alienation from God. Rather than submitting to God, man rebelled and chose against him--leaving man to grope in spiritual darkness. The Christian is thus not surprised by the evils; he, on the contrary, expects them.

Third, God's purpose is not restricted to this life but spills over beyond the grave into eternity. According to Christianity, this life is but a flicker in comparison to the vastness of eternity. The temporality of life and the pains experienced therein will be but a "slight momentary affliction" preparing us for an eternal weight of glory that waits beyond all comparison.¹⁵

Fourth, the knowledge of God is an incommensurable good. God would be justified in asking us to bear extreme suffering to receive the gift of eternity in heaven. But God, by his grace and mercy, does not even ask us for that. Instead he fills our lives with peace, joy, meaning and purpose. But regardless of what he asks us to endure, it would be worth it to enter heaven.

A final point which deserves mention is that of our cognitive limitations regarding the assessment of probability with respect to the nature of evil. Certainly, many evils seem pointless; however, we are simply not in a position to judge whether they are pointless or not. The murder of one innocent man may send a ripple effect through history, where God's morally sufficient reason for allowing it may not be revealed until centuries later. When considering God's providence over the whole of history, seeing the end from the beginning, it becomes evident how hopeless it is for limited observers to speculate on the probability of God's having morally sufficient reasons for the evils that we see.

§3 The Argument for the Existence of God from Evil

If God does not exist, life is without objective moral values. For apart from God there is no ultimate standard of value. Rather, moral values are reduced to personal taste, social conventions, or linguistic anomalies.¹⁶ However, we do acknowledge that objective values exist; for example, it is morally wrong to torture a baby for fun. We may formalize this arguments as follows:

- (1) If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
- (2) Evil exists.
- (3) Therefore, objective moral values exist.
- (4) Therefore, God exists.

The first premise is one agreed upon by theist and atheists alike.¹⁷ The second premise is furnished by the atheist in posing the problem of evil. So the conclusion that both objective moral values and God exist follows logically.

In a similar fashion, when dealing with the external problem of evil we may implement the G.E. Moore shift and turn one man's *modus ponens* into another man's *modus tollens*. The atheologian presents the following argument with respect to the external problem of evil:

- (5) If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
- (6) Gratuitous evil exists.
- (7) Therefore, God does not exist.

However, as seen in the preceding section, due to our inherent cognitive limitations and inability to discern God's morally justified reasons for permitting various evils, we are not in a position reliably to judge the nature of evil. In asking the question of whether evil is really gratuitous, the most important question is, ironically, whether God exists. So the theist may argue thus:

- (5) If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
- (8) God exists.
- (9) Therefore, gratuitous evil does not exist.

As Daniel Howard Snyder points out, the problem of evil is a problem only for "the theist who finds all its premises and inferences compelling and who has lousy grounds for believing in theism"; but if one has more compelling grounds for theism, then the problem of evil "is not a problem."¹⁸

¹ In the realm of philosophical discussion, the existence of objective moral values is itself a claim worthy of investigation. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, it will be assumed that an objective notion of good and evil is true and present. This assumption can be made because it is the one raising the problem of evil who is citing evil as an objective problem present in the world, rather than a sociological or psychological phenomenon.

² For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the omni-conception of God familiar to the major monotheistic religions. This conception provides God the attributes of omniscience, omni-benevolence, and omnipotence.

³ I am much indebted to William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, and James Moreland for my thoughts on this topic. The works that developed my understanding of the issue include:

(i) Alvin Plantinga, God and Other Minds (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

(ii) Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

(iii) William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland, Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁴ J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," Mind 64, no. 254 (1955): 200 – 212.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 200 - 201

⁷ G. W. Leibniz, "Theodicy: A Defense of Theism," in Philosophy of Religion: Fourth Edition, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003), 146 – 151.

⁸ Mackie, 210.

⁹ It seems strange that Mackie would contest this issue, namely that freedom is valued greater than sin, when theologians such as Louis De Molina, Thomas Flint, Alfred Freddoso and William Lane Craig would agree with Leibniz on this issue regarding providence, free will, depravity, and redemption.

¹⁰ Most theologians hold to this conception of God as a logical entity. However, one may side with Descartes or Martin Luther, holding that God is unbound by the laws of logic. This rare view is, however, even more flawed because the contradiction made by the premises in set A will be of little interest. Why? Because the logically unbound God could bring it about that all the premises of set A are true even if the set is contradictory. So the theologian who holds to this view of God will be unimpressed by Mackie's argument and will not find any difficulty in the contradictions presented.

¹¹ The question of evil may also be raised with regard to natural evils. As will be explored further in section 2, in comparison to mere theism, the Christian theist has more explanatory power available for answering the problem of evil. Three points regarding natural evil should be mentioned. First, it is inscrutable how intertwined natural evils are with human moral evils. Imagine if there were no moral evils, only natural evils, and the entire human race followed the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. The damage caused by droughts, fires, famines, floods, and other disasters would be greatly reduced. The wealth of the world would be largely redistributed which, as a result, would greatly reduce disease, medical care would be more readily available, and people would live in decent housing rather than poorly constructed shacks which are prone to damage from disasters. Second, a world containing gratuitous natural evils may be necessary for people to come to a knowledge of God (See n13). God aims for us to seek him in a free, uncoerced manner. Perhaps it is only through pointless natural evil that people would turn to God. Finally, God may have created a physical world which operates according to certain natural laws which he, for the most part, does not intervene with. He may intervene to perform miracles; however, this would be an exception rather than a rule. Permitting natural evils would not be wrong if those who endure in faith through the afflictions are rewarded with incommensurable good in the afterlife. The fact that he does not intervene physically does not mean he is uninvolved--for he can strengthen and comfort the suffering by his Spirit.

¹² For more on the Paradox of Omnipotence see Alvin Plantinga, God and Other Minds (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 168-173.

¹³ The knowledge of God as an insurmountable good will be further explored in section 2.

¹⁴ Gratuitous evil can be understood evil that does not *appear* to be contributing to a greater good or helping prevent a greater evil, such as a fawn burning to death in a forest fire or a child suffering a long painful death caused by a genetic disorder. William Rowe argues in this fashion in his article "The Inductive Argument from Evil Against the Existence of God" (1979).

¹⁵ Quote from the apostle Paul in 2Cor. 4:16 – 18.

¹⁶ Due to the scope of this paper, I do not have the space required to defend my views on objective morality and the nature of value. So I will simply reference my thoughts to the chapter on moral obligation in Richard Swinburne's The Coherence of Theism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 184 – 216.

¹⁷ See n16.

¹⁸ Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Introduction" in The Evidential Argument from Evil, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996), xi.