

# The Problem of Evil



*An Argument for Atheism*



# The Logical Problem of Evil

- ❖ The following three propositions form an inconsistent triad:
  - ❖ There is an omnipotent being.
  - ❖ There is an omnibenevolent being.
  - ❖ There is evil.
- ❖ How inconsistent?



# Some Adequate (Easy) Resolutions

- ❖ Give up one of the three constituent propositions.
  - ❖ Logic, by itself, gives us no reason to prefer one or the other among them.
- ❖ So, e.g., one might concede that any omnibenevolent being there may be is not also omnipotent. Or *vice versa*.
- ❖ Or, one might conclude that evil is an illusion—that is, that despite all indications to the contrary, there is no evil.



# Leibniz's Succinct Statement

- ❖ 'Whoever does not choose the best is lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.'
- ❖ God did not choose the best in creating this world
- ❖ Therefore, God has been lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.' (*IPCC* 89)



# Leibniz's First Answer

- ❖ Deny his minor (i.e. second) premiss: God *did* chooses to create the best of all possible worlds.
- ❖ That is, why suppose God did not create the best?
  - ❖ Well, 'God has made a world in which there is evil; a world, I say which could have been made without any evil, or the making of which could have been omitted altogether. Therefore, God has not chosen the best.'
- ❖ Response: '. . .it must be confessed that there is evil in this world which God made, and it was possible to make a world without evil, or even not to make a world at all, for its creation has depended on the free will of God. . . but. . .the best plan is not always that which seeks to avoid evil, since it may happen that *the evil is accompanied by a greater good.*'



# Expanded into an Atheistic Argument

1. If God exists, there is a being who is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent.
2. If a being is omniscient, it will know of all the evil in the universe.
3. If a being is omnibenevolent, it will want to eliminate evil whenever it is able to do so.
4. If a being is omnipotent, it will be able to eliminate evil wherever it resides.
5. So, if God exists, there is a being who wants to eliminate evil whenever it is able to do so, knows where evil resides, and is able to eliminate the evil of which it knows.
6. So, if God exists, there is no evil.
7. There is evil.
8. So, there is no God.



# The Free-will Defence I

- ❖ For instance, a world with freedom is better than a world without freedom.
  - ❖ Yes, there is evil, but it is not due to God: evil owes to non-divine agency.
  - ❖ A world with the *bona fide* possibility of evil is superior to a world in which all and only automata exist.
- ❖ Could not God have chosen a world in which everyone always freely chooses to do the good? Would not omniscience permit him to see the alternatives clearly?
  - ❖ The choice is not between beings endowed with free will and automata, but between beings who freely choose always to do the good and beings who sometimes choose the good and sometimes choose evil.



# The Free-will Defence II

- ❖ Would not God want to (prefer to) create a world with no evil?
  - ❖ Perhaps, but sometimes we have reasons not to do what we want to do, even though we know we can do them.
  - ❖ So, as far as the logic of the situation goes, evil is consistent with God's existence.
  - ❖ Perhaps the omnibenevolent being wants to eliminate evil and certainly could do so—
    - ❖ —but has reasons to avoid acting on those desires.



# An Implicit Premiss

1. If God exists, there is a being who is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent.
2. If a being is omniscient, it will know of all the evil in the universe.
3. If a being is omnibenevolent, it will want to eliminate evil whenever it is able to do so.
4. If a being is omnipotent, it will be able to eliminate evil wherever it resides.
5. So, if God exists, there is a being who wants to eliminate evil whenever it is able to do so, knows where evil resides, and is able to eliminate the evil of which it knows.
6. If  $S$  wants to do some action  $a$  and  $S$  can do  $a$ , then  $S$  will (must?) do  $a$ .
7. So, if God exists, there is no evil.
8. There is evil.
9. So, there is no God.



# A Further Challenge

- ❖ (6) is true only if God (or any other rational being) has reasons to avoid doing *a*.
- ❖ What might those reasons possibly be?
  - ❖ One might offer a theodicy—as Milton does.



# Milton's Purpose

- ❖ And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first  
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss  
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark  
Illumin, what is low raise and support;  
That to the highth of this great Argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And justifie the wayes of God to men. (*Paradise Lost*, i 17-26)



# What if God's Reasons are Unknown?

- ❖ Rather than offering a theodicy, one might reasonably offer a *defence*.
- ❖ What is a *defence* in this connection?
  - ❖ Let us say that a defence offers a likely story: a defence offers a *as possible*—as a *credible possibility*—a reason for S's forbearing from doing *a*, even though *S*, let us agree, wants to do *a* and could do *a*, were she so disposed.



# A Reminder

- ❖ This response is not introduced as a theodicy, but as a *defence*.
- ❖ It is meant to open up possibility space—a credible possibility space—for withholding the allegation of guilt.
- ❖ We are meant to see, then, that the existence of free will offers a credible reason for  $S$ 's (i.e. God's) forbearing from doing  $a$  (eliminating all the evil in the world), even though  $S$  (again, God) let us agree, wants to do  $a$  (wants to eliminate all the evil in the world) and could do  $a$  (could eliminate all the evil in the world) were she so disposed.



# A Query

- ❖ Is this defence successful?
- ❖ Does it provide a credible reason for believing that someone who wants to do *a* and who could do *a*, might nevertheless forbear from doing *a*?