
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?

The Genesis of the Problem

- ❖ These three theses cannot be true together; so, at least one of them must go.
 - ❖ To see this, though, we need to accept two ancillary principles:
 - ❖ Good is opposed to evil in such a way that a good agent always eliminates evil when able to do so.
 - ❖ There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
- ❖ Thus, an altogether good being will seek to eliminate evil wherever it can; and if that being is also omnipotent, it will be able to eliminate evil wherever it is. Hence, if there is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being, there is no evil; or, conversely, if there is evil, there is no being who is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent.
- ❖ This is really a problem about the *inconsistency* of God and 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.' (Mackie, 119)

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.
- ❖ The theist, though, seems constrained to reject these approaches.
 - ❖ This recommends other, more difficult responses.

PE Expressed as 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

- ❖ Yes, there is evil, but it is not due to God: evil owes to non-divine agency.
- ❖ Further, a world with freedom is better than a world without freedom.
 - ❖ In that sense, this view extends and defends the last: 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.
- ❖ Further, there is a 'fundamental difficulty in the notion of an omnipotent God creating men with free will, for if men's wills are really free this must mean that even God cannot control them, that is, that God is no longer omnipotent.' —Mackie (RR, 125)

The Free-Will Defence II

- ❖ The place to begin "is with an examination of the word 'want'." —Van Inwagen (RR, 127)
 - ❖ First point: 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.
 - ❖ Query: which premiss of our argument does this show to be false?
 - ❖ Or is it supposed to be a point about invalidity?

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 justify 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.

Again, the Free-Will Defence

- ❖ In a nutshell, possibly (as a *credible possibility*): God fails to eliminate evil in the world because there are good reasons involving the desirable existence of free will to forbear from doing so.

Some Initial Contentions

- ❖ It would be intrinsically impossible to create a world populated by creatures with free will whose choices could be ensured to be good-directed.
- ❖ If so, then on the assumption of omniscience, God would have foreseen—would have known in advance, so to speak—that certain agents would choose to do evil things.
 - ❖ Even so, this would be consistent with their choosing freely—if, indeed, the notion of free will is explicable and defensible.
 - ❖ Hence, finally, it is worth noting that this defence makes sense only if the notion that human beings have free will makes sense, that is, that genuine freedom of the will is in fact possible.
 - ❖ (This will be an issue for us to explore separately.)

Some Remaining Concerns

- ❖ The *amount* of evil: even allowing that evil is logically consistent with God's existence, is there reason to suppose that the quantity of evil we perceive can be regarded as credible in a theistic universe?
- ❖ Natural evil: even if we simply grant the free-will defence, we seem confronted with which do no result in any way from human choices (natural disasters, epidemics, simple bad luck. . .).

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*?