

# **ASSESSING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD**

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary news coverage bombards us with stories about enormous casualties and prodigious sufferings that occur in the world. Anyone can simply look to their neighbor or their own lives and see the presence of misfortune running rampant in one manifestation or another. This problem has impinged upon the issue of God's existence in religious philosophical discussions. Philosophers question whether or not there can be a wholly good God that would create such a world where evil exists. Thus arguments against the existence of God generally surface in two ways. Either the existence of God is *logically incompatible* with the evil in the world or the existence of God is *improbable* with respect to the *amount* of evil in the world.

For centuries, many have tried to dismiss the existence of God on the basis of the existence of evil. This particular pursuit is appropriately known as *the problem of evil* because of the implications produced by its presence. Theists who have disputed such arguments are said to be engaged in a *theodicy*, which is a scheme designed to disclose the compatibility between God and evil. There is no doubt that this is one of the most perplexing problems theists have to face. Therefore, I shall defend the contention that evil is not logically incompatible or improbable with God's existence.

## II. NATURAL VS. MORAL EVIL

As with any discussion, a clear understanding about the categorization of a topic needs to be conveyed. Generally, philosophers have divided the definition of evil into two camps: *natural evil* and *moral evil*. Natural evil occurs when natural disasters or causes inflict suffering.<sup>(1)</sup> This particular definition denotes suffering caused by such things as earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, floods, diseases, crashes, and other destructive events. The English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, calls God's existence into question simply because of such evils:

Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.<sup>(2)</sup>

For Mill, the problem of natural evil is so intense that associating the "government of Nature" with creation by a good and all-powerful God is unthinkable. In other cases evil is addressed in the context of poor moral decision-

making. That is, we have a basic awareness that one can and does act in a *morally evil* manner. Moral evil is differentiated from natural evil because it is generally understood as "evil that springs from the human will."<sup>(3)</sup> This is an interesting variable in the role of evil. If we have the presence of "will" then we have as a *necessary* condition the presence of decision. Thus each person who acts morally evil is said to be a moral agent by instigating acts generally regarded as such.

We must now inquire as to whether or not there are any stipulations or exceptions with which to be aware. Objections to the existence of God from evil concentrate on the attributes of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent deity (typically modeled by the Christian perspective). Thus the logical incompatibility thesis goes something like this:

p1: God is omnipotent and wholly good.

p2: If evil exists then God does not exist.

p3: Evil exists.

C: Therefore, God does not exist.

A modification of this argument that attacks God's omnipotence as well as His omnibenevolence may be called the *Epicurean argument from evil* which is echoed here by empiricist philosopher David Hume:

Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able?

then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able

and willing? whence then is evil?<sup>(4)</sup>

The non-theist suspects that given the presence of evil (a fact none of us tend to deny) then God either *willfully* permits evil, *unwillingly* permits evil, or *woefully* permits evil with some sort of capricious tendencies in mind. But God is supposed to be omnibenevolent. Thus we would expect God would create a world in which evil did not exist. If God created a world in which initial conditions were perfect and free from corruption then, given such a possible world, we as human beings would be able to freely live the life in such a state. After all, if it's God's world then why didn't He create all of us with inclinations toward perfectly good actions?

Non-theists have typically abandoned the idea that God is directly responsible for creating evil. And the logical

incompatibility thesis merely attacks the concepts of God and evil and promotes their incompatibility regardless of how evil came about. If there is any doubt as to the nature of evil, the medieval Christian philosopher Augustine suggests that:

For such evil is not a substance; the wound or the disease is a defect of the bodily substance which, as a substance, is good. Evil, then, is an accident, i.e., a privation of that good which is called health. Thus whatever defects there are in a soul are privations of a natural good. (5)

Any gainsaying of theism based on a positive ontology for evil could be dismissed based on this definition. Evil, therefore, is not a substance created by God but a deficiency that free creatures display when immoral decisions occur. But some contend that on a Christian understanding all of creation is subject to the providence of God. So there should not be any presence of evil because God must preclude its existence by virtue of His omnibenevolent nature, so the argument goes.

The inferential (or probabilistic) problem of evil manifests in a different route. Instead of making the strong thesis that God's existence and evil's existence are mutually exclusive, other philosophers suggest the more modest proposal that God's existence is *unlikely* given the presence of evil. The argument can be stated as follows:

p1: God is omnipotent and wholly good.

p2: There is a possible world where there is less evil than the actual world.

p3: God would want to bring about a possible world with the least amount of evil

[from p1].

p4: God created the actual world instead of one in which evil could be reduced.

C: Therefore, a God that is omnipotent and wholly good probably does not exist.

Although premise 4 is dubious, the crucial premise of this argument is premise 3 because it assumes that God has no overriding desire other than reducing the evil in the world. Other than this, the fact that premise 2 is logically possible means that premise 4 is quite possible. If God could have reduced the evil that this actual world contains then this would render the notion of an all-good God as questionable. For example, the notable atheist William Rowe suggests that there are rational grounds to think that instances of seemingly pointless evil can be reduced. He says that "It seems quite unlikely that *all* the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are

ultimately related to the occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad."<sup>(6)</sup>

### III. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The force of the logical argument from evil is given much weight upon one main presupposition: the presence of goodness logically excludes the possibility of the presence of evil. In many ways this seems to make sense. For example, the presence of light excludes the possibility that there is the presence of darkness at the same time. In this section I shall deal with the Epicurean/Humean argument against God's existence from the perspective that God and evil are somehow logically incompatible.

The first premise suggesting that "God is omnipotent and wholly good" is not logically incompatible on the surface with the premise acknowledging "Evil exists." When we speak of *logical compatibility* we mean the ability of two isolated claims to be non-contradictory when true simultaneously. For example, if we give two statements and consider them to both be true then we do not consider that a contradiction can arise between them. Consider this example:

(P) Sam runs faster than a cheetah.

(Q) A cheetah runs faster than Sam.

At first glance it appears that both statements cannot both be true at the same time and become, hence, logically incompatible. If we suggest that Sam runs faster than a cheetah then it follows that the reverse cannot be true.

$$C(s) > S(s)$$

This formula symbolizes the speed (s) of the cheetah (C) as being greater than the speed of Sam (S) But is this a clear example of logical incompatibility? Not by necessity. Notice that statements P and Q refer to *a* cheetah and not to any one *particular* cheetah. Let's say that Sam can run faster than a cheetah with a limp, but that a cheetah without a limp can run faster than Sam. Here we have a reconciliation with statements P and Q. Therefore, if we can at least *imagine* or *stipulate* that the cheetah in (P) is not the same cheetah in (Q) then we cannot say that the two statements are logically incompatible. In order for a statement to be logically incompatible it must be *mutually exclusive*. This means that "A" and "~A" cannot both be true. "God exists" and "God does not exist" are mutually exclusive and logically incompatible statements since both cannot be true about the world at the same time. The incompatibility thesis is just as evasive as the cheetah example. So there must be some hidden statements or principles that could connect "Evil exists" with "an omnipotent and wholly God exists" and bring out their contradiction. The late atheist of Oxford University, J. L. Mackie, says that

These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. <sup>(7)</sup>

Is Mackie correct to think that there exists a logical contradiction between the goodness of God and the existence of evil entailed by the logical problem of evil? Similar to the cheetah example, if we posit that it is at least *feasible* or *imaginable* that both evil and God could exist then there is no logical incompatibility. Thus it is sufficient to simply imagine a way to provide coexistence for God and evil. If such a scenario can at least be imagined then there is no logical contradiction. First, it must be understood that God either created evil or permitted it to exist, so we at least affirm:

(1) God permits evil.

As we have seen evil is not an object of God's creation so that evil exists by permission. But there must also be a context for the permission of evil itself. Perhaps it is true that:

(2) God uses evil to maximize the amount of good in the universe.

Now we have a possible coexistence for evil and God. For example, natural disasters are physically necessary for sustaining the living conditions of earth. Earthquakes, presumably naturally evil occurrences, cause many people to die. However, earthquakes are necessary in plate tectonics in order to keep our continents from eroding into the ocean. The stress builds up in the rocks causing a release through fracturing at the seismic focus. <sup>(8)</sup> But if this did not occur then we would surely not be here at all to discuss it. Again, this does not need to be *true*, it only needs to be *feasible* or *possible*. But what about moral evil? Suppose that demonic beings are the creators and instigators of all moral evil. This means that evil is created by agents other than God. Moreover, perhaps God permits this because every world in which it is feasible for God to create (where there exists an optimal balance of good over evil) such demonic agents always cause moral evil. Now, this is probably more akin to Greek Mythology than to organized religious systems today and nobody really believes that demons cause all evil. However, it is only sufficient to suggest a *possibility* for the concurrence of evil and God. Since it is feasible then it follows that evil does not logically preclude the existence of God and, thus, God's existence is

preserved. Therefore, given the presence of evil, we must at least in thought (as long as they are not logically incompatible) suppose that God and evil can coexist.<sup>(9)</sup> So much for the logical problem of evil.

#### IV. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE INFERENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

Unlike the logical problem of evil, the advocate of the inferential or probabilistic problem of evil only suggests that evil would be reduced more than what the actual world contains. Since the world does not contain minimized evil (for one can think of situations in which suffering is short-lived or reduced) then God probably does not exist. There are three main responses that philosophers have utilized in addressing this problem.

1. *Since God's methodology in permitting evil is inscrutable, then one cannot object to God's existence in the presence of evil.* Many have taken the position that the world we live in is far too complex and delicately balanced for it to be any other way. If one event were to be altered, then such a disturbed consequence may preclude this world from having the same amount of good in it with a minimum amount of evil. So suggesting why God would allow evil is viewed as similar to suggesting why God would choose to part the Red Sea for Moses instead of simply evaporating it. Both accomplish the same task of allowing the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea. But if God were to fulfill another part of His plan by destroying the Egyptian pursuers in the collapse of the parted Red Sea waters, then evaporation would not be the preferred choice. Thus God's decision to choose parting the Red Sea instead of evaporating would be considered *inscrutable*. God is said to be *inscrutable* when no direct knowledge is ascertained as to why God would permit or cause a specific event.<sup>(10)</sup> When considering a scenario that such inscrutability envisages, it seems as though one really cannot begin to find a way in which a possible world, one with the same amount of good in it but with no or little evil, is even feasible. Now this seems to show that the non-theist goes beyond what is known or can be known in order to reject the existence of God on the basis of evil. Consider the claim that non-theists usually make when they say that God could create the same effects that exist in our world currently but with good causes in place of evil ones. I do not think that we can make this sort of conjecture for reasons exemplified in our physical laws. Our universe is interwoven with a delicate balance of interrelated causal chains. If we were to disturb one link in any causal chain, whether it be through time, space, or both, then serious repercussions would result. For example, *chaos theory* suggests that if a butterfly were to flutter its wings then certain weather conditions may be altered in another part of the world. This is called the *butterfly effect*.<sup>(11)</sup> Given such a sensitive and delicate relation between two (or more) events, perhaps the causal chains that exist are far too complex to hypothesize an alternate world in which evil events do not contribute to good ones. Since no one can speculate how to have a better world than the actual one then the inferential problem of evil loses its probability.

2. *The presence of evil may actually contribute to the goodness of the whole of creation.* Although this was capitalized on in addressing the logical problem of evil above, there are further reasons to consider *evil* as a possible link in the chain of maximally good events. And the only reason why God would want to allow evil in His plan of creation is if He had an overriding desire. Typically, theists affirm that God has such an overriding desire, namely that people are brought to a point of spiritual well-being or salvation. With respect to *this* as God's primary motivation, the existence of evil is not so problematic. In fact, it seems to be quite instrumental given that there seems to be a correlation between immense suffering and pain and belief in God. If suffering yields up more believers in God for their spiritual well-being then it should not at all seem dubious that God would permit evil. Moreover, the presence of evil may actually have a spiritually therapeutic effect. Certainly

everyone has said or has heard a parent say to a child, "I spanked you because I love you." In the same way evil may be seen as an instrument of God to "correct, purify, and instruct."<sup>(12)</sup> Thus God may use evil as a way to advance someone's ability to do good. If a child is disciplined then perhaps she will refrain from committing the same "evil" again. Likewise, a morally irresponsible person develops moral responsibility through the evil inflicted as a consequence of doing morally irresponsible things. Such notable theists as Irenaeus and contemporary philosopher of religion, John Hick, utilize this particular theodicy. Hick says that "in removing all occurrences of pain and suffering, and hence all challenge and all need for mutual care, we should have converted the world from a person-making into a static environment, which could not elicit moral growth."<sup>(13)</sup>

The usual comeback by critics generally revolves around a possible world in which a causally linked chain of events does not include evil ones. After all, if God is omniscient (all-knowing) then He would know how to construct a world in which the same good events occur but without the evil antecedents. This leads us to the final objection to the inferential problem of evil we have to consider.

3. *A world without evil may not be a feasible world for individuals who possess free will (the Free Will Defense).* Perhaps the most debated issue on the question of evil is whether or not evil is a necessary precondition for individuals who possess free will. Such notable figures as St. Augustine have taken such an approach to the problem of evil.<sup>(14)</sup> Others have taken a more effective approach. Professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, Alvin Plantinga, suggests that "there may be a very different kind of good that God can't bring about without permitting evil. These are good states of affairs that do not include evil . . . nonetheless God Himself can't bring them about without permitting evil."<sup>(15)</sup> This is called the Free Will Defense. Critics suggest that perhaps God could have created a possible world without evil *and* without infringing upon free will by constituting people to always freely choose the good. After all, this is a possible world. But is this a feasible world for God to create? Consider what this suggests:

- (3) Everyone always freely chooses to do good acts.
- (4) God constitutes everyone to freely choose good acts.
- (5) Free will exists.
- (6) God exists.

But surely there is something wrong with statement (4) for it entails that no one can do otherwise but to always choose the good. But if no one *can* choose otherwise then no ability to choose really exists. Therefore, free will does not exist here. True freedom of the will in regard to moral decision-making entails that the agent must be able to choose otherwise. If God constitutes everyone to always choose the good then the act is ultimately brought about by God *directly*. The second problem of eliminating evil in the equation of moral decision-making is that *justice* is not being served. Would it make sense to send a Jeffrey Dahmer to prison if his acts were orchestrated by a mind chip? It seems that the faculty of free will is required. But with free will comes the possibility of bad choices (evil ones). This ultimately leads to a full freedom of the agent to genuinely decide between two palpable options: good and evil. Moreover,

(7) It is possible that God could not have actualized a world containing moral good without one that also contained moral evil.<sup>(16)</sup>

The theist could rightly argue that because statement (7) is possible then there is no reason to think that God could create a world such that all persons freely choose to do only good.

Therefore, it may not be feasible for God to create a possible world where only good actions exist. It may be that every time God chooses to create a possible world where only good exists, the free creatures rebel and introduce evil into the world. It is surely not the answer to suggest that God *make* all persons *freely* choose the good. Such a world eliminates what it truly means to be *free* to choose.<sup>(17)</sup> Thus the theist has a reasonable defense against the inferential problem of evil.

## V. CONCLUSION

The problem of evil has been a plaguing issue for theists ever since the concept of God became an object of academic discourse. However, we have seen how two versions of the problem of evil do not sufficiently render theism either impossible or improbable. First, the logical problem of evil sought to diminish the possibility of God's existence via logical incompatibility. But it is possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil. So the existence of God and the existence of evil are not logically incompatible after all. Secondly, the inferential/probabilistic problem of evil is more modest because it denies the probable existence of God given that there may be better solutions to the amount of evil in the actual world. However, there is no reason to think that God does not have overriding desires surpassing the protection of free creatures from harm. Therefore, the problem of evil remains to be an emotional issue because it is the impact of pain and suffering in each of our lives that truly casts doubt on the existence of God. I submit that upon closer inspection the existence of God fares well against the problems evinced by evil.

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## END NOTES

1. Ed. L. Miller, *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992), p. 350.
2. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874), p. 38. Quoted in Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 350.
3. Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 350.



4. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. 64. Hume's essay with which this quote belongs is also cited in M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach, and D. Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 260.
5. Augustine, "Evil is Privation of Good," *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, p. 253.
6. W. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, p. 319.
7. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Ibid.*, p. 264.
8. See *A Dictionary of Physics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Alan Isaacs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 108-109.
9. It must also be noted that one need not see the immediate benevolent consequences of evil in order for the two statements to be logically compatible. If it is at least *possible* or *feasible* that the current presence of evil may result in *future* benevolent consequences then the logical compatibility of God and evil are sustained *despite the absence of the presence of current benevolent consequences*.
10. Biblical passages are even cited to support the inscrutability of God (Job 38:1-11; Isaiah 55:8-9).
11. Isaacs, *A Dictionary of Physics*, p. 59.
12. Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 365.
13. J. Hick, "Soul Making-Theodicy," *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, p.312.
14. See St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, tr. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1964). Also see Augustine, "Evil is Privation of Good", *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, pp. 251-54.
15. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 287.
16. This is Alvin Plantinga's response to this issue and must be acknowledged as being a logical possibility. See his "The Free Will Defense," *Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger, p.288.
17. Sometimes non-theists object by denying that God could not make a possible world where evil does not exist since He supposedly created heaven. But heaven is not a possible world, rather it is the *outcome* of a possible world where every human being is subjected to the decision to choose between good and evil.

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