

The Problem of Evil

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Where We Are

You have considered some questions about the nature of God:

- What does it mean for God to be omnipotent?
- Does God's omniscience imply that we don't have free will?

While these were not explicitly presented as arguments for or against the existence of God, they could perhaps be the basis for such arguments. How this might be?

We will now consider a problem—the problem of evil—which more directly suggests an argument against the existence of God.

The Problem of Evil

“In its simplest form, the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false.... [T]he contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises... connecting the terms “good,” “evil,” and “omnipotent.” 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.” (Mackie, p. 119)

The Problem of Evil

The problem arises for those who believe all of the following claims:

- (i) God exists.
- (ii) God, if he exists, is omnipotent.
- (iii) God, if he exists, is wholly good.
- (iv) A wholly good being eliminates evil as far as it can.
- (v) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
- (vi) Evil exists.

This set of claims is inconsistent. The fourth and fifth claims entail that an omnipotent, wholly good being eliminates all evil. When combined with the first three claims, this entails that all evil has been eliminated by God. This contradicts the last claim: that evil exists. The problem of evil is the problem of deciding which of these claims is false.

The Problem of Evil

- (i) God exists.
- (ii) God, if he exists, is omnipotent.
- (iii) God, if he exists, is wholly good.

Any theist must accept (i), and any theist who conceives of God in the traditional, monotheistic way will also accept (ii) and (iii). After all, on that conception, God is by definition an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being.

The Problem of Evil

(vi) Evil exists.

Normally, we reserve the term “evil” to describe people with especially bad characters. Here, we are using it more broadly to refer to all *really bad things*. There are enormously many really bad things in the world: painful illnesses, deadly natural disasters, terrorist attacks, murders, evil people, etc. All such things count as evil, in our sense. So each of these things would, by itself, suffice to establish (vi).

The Problem of Evil

(iv) A wholly good being eliminates evil as far as it can.

This is plausible. Presumably, a good being must at least attempt to eliminate some evil: otherwise, it would not count as good. If a being is *wholly* or *perfectly* good, then it is plausible that it will eliminate as much evil as it can. Indeed, it is equally plausible that it will *prevent* as much evil as it can. We can strengthen this claim accordingly.

(v) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.

Something like this is surely correct, but as it stands, this claim may be too strong. Even an omnipotent being couldn't make $2 + 2 = 5$, or violate the laws of logic. To avoid this problem, we should appeal to a weaker variant on this principle: there is no limit to how much evil an omnipotent being can eliminate or prevent.

The Problem of Evil

The Problem of Evil, with (iv) and (v) modified:

- (i) God exists.
- (ii) God, if he exists, is omnipotent.
- (iii) God, if he exists, is wholly good.
- (iv) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can.
- (v) There are no limits to how much evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate.
- (vi) Evil exists.

This set of claims is inconsistent. If we were to remove any claim in the set, the resulting set would be consistent. Which claim should we reject? Many believe that (i) is the least credible claim in the set. In their view, the problem of evil suggests the following argument against the existence of God.

An Atheistic Argument from Evil

- (1) God, if he exists, is omnipotent. [*premise*]
- (2) God, if he exists, is wholly good. [*premise*]
- (3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can. [*premise*]
- (4) There are no limits to how much evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate. [*premise*]
- (5) If a wholly good and omnipotent being exists, then there is no evil. [*3, 4*]
- (6) If God exists, then there is no evil. [*1, 2, 5*]
- (7) There is evil. [*premise*]
- (8) God does not exist. [*6, 7*]

(3) and (4) seem like the only doubtful premises. Can you think of any objections to them?

A First Objection to (3) and/or (4)

“Evil is necessary as a *means* to good.”

- The idea here is that bringing about evil things is the only way to bring about good things—or, at least, that *some* good things are such that they can only be brought about by evil means.

Is this a good objection to (4)?

(4) There are no limits to how much evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate.

It seems not. Even if some good things can only be brought about by evil means, an omnipotent being could prevent or eliminate all evil by choosing not to bring about those good things. After all, an omnipotent being need not bring about any good things.

A First Objection to (3) and/or (4)

“Evil is necessary as a *means* to good.”

Is this a good objection to (3)?

(3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can.

This objection does have *some* potential against (3). Suppose it's true that some good things can only be brought about by evil means. Suppose that a wholly good being will always bring about those good things. Then the following will be true: although a wholly good being *can* prevent more evil by refraining from bringing about those good things, it *won't* do this. Thus, it won't prevent and eliminate evil *as far as it can*.

But this objection to (3) has serious problems:

- It's not clear that a wholly good being will always bring about good things whose necessary means are evil. Why not just bring about the good things whose necessary means *aren't* evil?
- It's not clear that any good things really do have evil necessary means. There may be good things that *we* can't bring about except by evil means, but that's because our power is limited. That doesn't mean that these things couldn't be brought about by *any* being (however powerful) without evil means.

A Second Objection to (3) and/or (4)

“Evil is necessary as a *counterpart* to good.”

- The idea here is that good and evil are essentially comparative notions (like “bigger than” and “smaller than”), so that nothing would count as good if nothing were evil, just as nothing can be bigger than anything unless something is smaller than it.

Is this a good objection to (4)?

(4) There are no limits to how much evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate.

It seems not. Once again, an omnipotent being need not create anything good. So even if evil is a necessary counterpart to goodness, an omnipotent being could prevent or eliminate all evil by refraining from creating anything good.

A Second Objection to (3) and/or (4)

“Evil is necessary as a *counterpart* to good.”

Is this a good objection to (3)?

(3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can.

As with the previous objection, there is at least some potential here. Perhaps a wholly good being will always create something good. If evil is necessary as a counterpart to good, then a wholly good being will thereby create something evil too—even though it *can* prevent this evil by refraining from creating anything good. Thus, a wholly good being will *not* prevent and eliminate as much evil as it can.

But this objection has a serious problem: it is *false* that evil is necessary as a counterpart to good. Good and evil are not essentially comparative notions. For example, kindness, friendship, and happiness would still be good even if there were no evil.

A Third Objection to (3)

“The universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil.”

- The idea here is that there are certain good things that logically require the existence of evil things, and are more good than these things are evil. Examples may include courage in the face of deadly danger, a desire to alleviate suffering, or bringing an evildoer to justice.

Is this a good objection to (3)?

(3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can.

Maybe. If it's true that the universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil, then perhaps (3) is false because a wholly good being will want the universe to be as good as it can be overall, and will therefore refrain from preventing or eliminating some evil that it can prevent or eliminate.

A Third Objection to (3)

Some responses to the objection:

- There are good things that logically require the existence of evil things (e.g., the bringing to justice of an evildoer), and it is true that these good things couldn't exist if there were no evil. But in order for the universe to be better overall on account of containing evil, these good things must be *more* good than the necessary evil things are evil. Is this plausible? Suppose that Smith commits a murder, and that he is then brought to justice. Is it plausible that the universe is better overall than it would be if Smith had not committed the murder?
- If you think that such *second-order* goods are better than the *first-order* evils that they require, then you have another problem: first-order evils make possible *second-order* evils (e.g., delight in someone's suffering), and these are surely as evil as the second-order goods are good. So, it is unclear that universe really is better overall on account of containing evil than it would be if it didn't contain evil.

The Free Will Defense

“Evil is due to human free will.”

- The idea here is that evil cannot be eliminated unless free will is eliminated. Since it is good that humans have free will, God grants them free will even though this means that there will be some evil.
- This is an objection to (3): since free will is so good, and since there must be some evil if there is free will, it's false that a wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can. Such a being refrains from preventing or eliminating evil as far as it can, because it would have to prevent or eliminate free will to do so, and a wholly good being wouldn't want to prevent or eliminate something as good as free will.
- This objection has its own name: the *free will defense*.

The Free Will Defense

A response to the free will defense:

- It's not true that evil cannot be eliminated unless free will is eliminated. God could have created people who never do anything evil, not because they aren't *free* to do so, but just because they don't *want* to do so. (Lots of people go through life without eating insects. That doesn't mean they weren't free to do so: they could have done so if they wanted to, but they just didn't want to.)
- “If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion.” (Mackie, p. 124)

The Free Will Defense

Van Inwagen's reply to that response:

- If God had ensured that no one ever does evil by ensuring that no one ever wants to do it, we would *not* have free will. We would be just like the lower class people in *Brave New World*, who do whatever they want but who only want what they've been programmed to want. And those people don't have free will. Thus, "the atheist's attempt to show that the story constitutes the free-will defense is false rests on a false theory about the nature of free will." (p. 131)
- Even if we can't be certain that the atheist's theory of free will *is* mistaken for these reasons, we should admit that it *might* be. So, *for all we know*, a wholly good being does *not* prevent or eliminate evil as far as it can because doing so would require preventing or eliminating free will.

The Free Will Defense

A reply to Van Inwagen:

- What about angels? Do they lack free will because they never desire to do anything evil? Indeed, what about God himself? If theists are to be believed, then God never does anything evil, and he never desires to. Surely this doesn't mean that God lacks free will. So, just as God and angels have free will even though they never want to do anything evil, human beings could have had free will without ever wanting to do anything evil (and without ever doing any evil). Thus, the existence of free will does not require the existence of evil.
- Maybe the people in *Brave New World* have free will; there's just something else that's bad about their situation. Or maybe there is some as-yet unidentified difference that explains why they don't have free will even though God and angels do.

The Free Will Defense

Another problem for the free will defense: even if it were true that free will cannot exist unless evil exists, we could run a variant on the argument against God's existence that focuses on the existence of *natural* evil (e.g., deadly natural disasters, natural diseases). After all, free will can exist even though natural evil doesn't exist.

The argument would replace (3) with the following claim:

- A wholly good being prevents and eliminates natural evil as far as it can.

And the rest of the argument would be modified accordingly.

An Atheistic Argument from Natural Evil

- (1) God, if he exists, is omnipotent. [*premise*]
- (2) God, if he exists, is wholly good. [*premise*]
- (3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates natural evil as far as it can. [*premise*]
- (4) There are no limits to how much natural evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate. [*premise*]
- (5) If a wholly good and omnipotent being exists, then there is no natural evil. [3, 4]
- (6) If God exists, then there is no natural evil. [1, 2, 5]
- (7) There is natural evil. [*premise*]
- (8) God does not exist. [6, 7]

An Atheistic Argument from Natural Evil

Van Inwagen suggests an elaboration on the free-will defense that may be able to account for the existence of natural evil. He says that perhaps the following is true:

- When humans were first created (or first evolved), they were mystically united with God in such a way that they had paranormal abilities that protected them from natural evils (e.g., wild beasts, disease, natural disasters). “But, somehow, in some way that must be mysterious to us, they were not content with this paradisaal state. They abused the gift of free will and separated themselves from their union with God. The result was horrific: ...they now faced destruction by the random forces of nature and were subject to old age and natural death.” (p. 133)
- God responded by setting in motion a rescue operation whose aim is “to bring it about that human beings once more love God.” For this to succeed, humans must know that “what it is to be separated by God is to live in a world of horrors.” This is why God doesn’t use miracles to eliminate all evil now. (p. 134)

An Atheistic Argument from Natural Evil

But even if Van Inwagen's story is true (and we have little reason to think that it is), does it answer the argument?

- The story assumes that when humans emerged, there already was natural evil (e.g., disease, natural disasters): it's just that humans were protected against them by the special powers they got from their mystical union with God. But why wouldn't God have already prevented all natural evil by then? If he's wholly good, why did he create a world in which there are diseases and earthquakes at all?
- If God just wants us to know that being separated from him is horrible, couldn't he achieve this aim simply by failing to eliminate the evil consequences of our free actions (e.g., murder, genocide, etc.)? Isn't it gratuitous for him to refrain from eliminating natural evil, which does not result in any way from free choices on our part?

An Atheistic Argument from Evil

- (1) God, if he exists, is omnipotent. [*premise*]
- (2) God, if he exists, is wholly good. [*premise*]
- (3) A wholly good being prevents and eliminates evil as far as it can. [*premise*]
- (4) There are no limits to how much evil an omnipotent being can prevent or eliminate. [*premise*]
- (5) If a wholly good and omnipotent being exists, then there is no evil. [3,4]
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