

The Problem of Evil

We have seen two arguments for God's existence: the *cosmological* argument and the *teleological* argument. These are both *metaphysical* arguments. They aim to show that, given the way things are in the world, a creator must exist.

Cosmological: Stuff exists. It must have been caused by something. That something has to be an uncaused cause. (Else infinite regress, something from nothing, absurdity.)

Teleological: Some stuff that exists in nature looks like it was made for a *purpose*—like it was designed. Can't have design without a designer. (That would be absurd.) This stuff is pretty complex so the designer must be pretty smart. So intelligent designer exists.

Neither argument aims to establish the existence of an all powerful (omnipotent) and all good (omnibenevolent) God. They are thus relatively modest.

But the popular God is an OOG (omnipotent, omnibenevolent God). Why? Perhaps because the Bible says so. But also perhaps because that is the sort of being that could ease our difficulties and assuage our worries. The kind that could guarantee that, in the end, good triumphs over evil, justice is done, and we die happily ever after. We don't just cease to exist.

Problem: It is hard to square an OOG with suffering in the world.

The argument:

1. Suppose that God (an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being) exists. [A for *reductio*]
2. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power to eliminate suffering. [A]
3. If God is omnibenevolent, then God wants to eliminate suffering. [A]
4. The world is full of suffering. [A]
5. If the world is full of suffering, then either (a) God doesn't have the power to eliminate suffering, (b) God does not want to eliminate the suffering. [2,3]
6. Either God is not omnipotent or not omnibenevolent. [4,5]
7. God (an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being) does not exist. [1,7]

Don't get fooled by the conclusion: if the argument works, it only eliminates an OOG. It doesn't eliminate an intelligent designer, unmoved mover, independent being, etc.

This reconstruction of the argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*: it assumes that an OOG exists and shows that a contradiction follows.

Mackie thinks this argument is sound. He thinks that it shows that religious belief isn't just *lacking in rational support* (because the arguments for the existence of God are no good), but that it is *irrational* (because several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent).

A set of statements is **consistent** iff it is possible for all of the statements to be true simultaneously. (Notice: we only need the *possibility* of simultaneous truth.)

Mackie says that the problem of evil is a *logical* one: it is a problem about consistency—a problem of clarifying and reconciling beliefs. It is not a *scientific* problem to be solved by further observation or a *practical* problem to be solved by action or decision.

Two main ways out:

First option: We can deny one of the inconsistent statements: omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omniscience, or the existence of evil.

Mackie calls these solutions *adequate*. We will, less tendentiously, call them *unorthodox* because they deny essential parts of theological doctrine. From Sandra LaFave's notes on the problem of evil:¹

Many of you know the word "orthodontia" because you've had your teeth straightened. The "ortho" in "orthodontia" means "straight" or "going the right way." The "ortho" in "orthodox" also means "straight" or "going the right way." If your opinions (*doxa*) are *orthodox*, they are along the right lines; they are on the straight path and will not lead you astray. Many Christian sects enforce doctrinal orthodoxy; that is, in order to be a member in good standing, you must profess belief in certain articles of faith, and if you don't profess belief, you can't be a member of the church in good standing (you become a heretic or an apostate). Among these articles of faith – or presupposed by them – are the claims that God is totally good, God is omnipotent, and evil is real. There's no problem of evil if you're willing to deny any of these claims. So ...

"God is not omnipotent" solves the problem. Evil and suffering are no longer *problems*; God would like to make them go away, and he would if he could, ('cuz he's good), but he's just not powerful enough.

"God is not totally good" solves the problem. Evil and suffering are now perfectly understandable. They happen because God is cruel and mean.

"Evil and suffering don't exist" solves the problem. TNon-Western religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism also take this view, so the problem of evil arises in Western religions only. According to non-Western religions, if you think something is bad, that's your ego projecting itself pridefully out at the universe. But if you are enlightened, you realize that God is in the cancer as much as he's in you, and besides, there's really no "you" anyway.

Things are a bit more subtle than LaFave suggests here: a God that was not wholly OOG may still have a problem with evil. From the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:²

Given a deity who falls considerably short of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection, but who could intervene in our world to prevent many evils, and who knows of those evils, it would seem that an argument rather similar to the above could be formulated by focusing not on the mere existence of evil, but upon the existence of evils that such a deity could have prevented.

Second option: We can maintain all three premises but try to reconcile an OOG and suffering.

¹ http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/problem_of_evil.htm

² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/>

Mackey calls these solutions *fallacious*; we will, again less tendentiously, call them *orthodox* because they maintain religious orthodoxy.

Mackie's treatment of all of these arguments has this basic form: theist says *p*, Mackie says *p* assumes not-OOG.

Consider two of these.

1. "God cannot exist without evil" or "Evil is a necessary counterpart to good"

Immediately we see that this solution limits God's omnipotence: God cannot create good without creating evil.

But maybe the claim is that it is logically impossible to have good without evil: so the only limit to God's omnipotence are the laws of logic.

Plantinga³ argues that omnipotence is just the power to do anything that is logically possible. The fact that God cannot do the logically impossible is not a genuine limitation of God's power.

According to orthodox theism, all of the following statements (and many more like them) are true.⁴

- God is not able to *lie*.
- God is not able to *cheat*.
- God is not able to *steal*.
- God is not able to *be unjust*.
- God is not able to *be envious*.
- God is not able to *fail to know what is right*.
- God is not able to *fail to do what he knows to be right*.
- God is not able to *have false beliefs about anything*.
- God is not able to *be ignorant*.
- God is not able to *be unwise*.
- God is not able to *cease to exist*.
- God is not able to *make a mistake of any kind*.

According to classical theism, the fact that God cannot do any of these things is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, theists claim, it is an indication of his supremacy and uniqueness. These facts reveal that God is, in St. Anselm's (1033-1109 A.D.) words, "that

³ Plantinga, Alvin. [1974] *The Nature of Necessary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press and [1977] *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

⁴ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/>

being than which none greater can be conceived.” Plantinga adds the following two items to the list of things God cannot do.

(36) God is not able to *contradict himself*.

(37) God is not able to *make significantly free creatures and to causally determine that they will always choose what is right and avoid what is wrong*.

These inability follow not from God’s omnipotence alone but from his omnipotence in combination with his omniscience, moral perfection and the other divine perfections God possesses.

But then we need to say something about free will and the paradox of omnipotence.

2. “Evil is due to human free will.”

God gave humans free will. Evil results from free human action. Free will is so valuable that the evil in the world is worth it.

First problem: Is it really worth it?

Second problem: what about natural evil? (Earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.)

(Plantinga suggests: maybe Satan’s fault? He quickly makes clear that credibility and plausibility isn’t necessary; just logical possibility. But there are problems with this too: God does not have a morally sufficient reason to let demons run amok upon the earth and cause death and destruction, since the positive aspect of their free will is absent.)⁵

Third problem: This either undermines God’s omnipotence or his omnibenevolence.

Either God has the power to stop evil acts or he doesn’t.

If he doesn’t, he’s not omnipotent.

If he does, but chooses not to, he’s not omnibenevolent.

But maybe we’re asking too much of omnipotence, as Plantinga suggests.

The Paradox of Omnipotence:

Can an omnipotent being bind itself? Can it create what it cannot control?

If yes: eventually not omnipotent. If no: currently not omnipotent.

Can God create laws logical, natural or moral laws that God is subject to? Only if an omnipotent being can bind itself.

⁵ <http://www.existentialchristianity.net/problemofevil.html>

Sovereignty analogy: Can a government make a law that both forbids something and forbids repealing that law? If yes, then the government won't be sovereign after making the law. If no, then not sovereign now.

Mackie distinguishes between two kinds of sovereignty: (1) the kind with the power to create first order laws that govern people, (2) the kind with the power to create second order laws that govern governments. Mackie argues that "we cannot assign to any given institution sovereignty in an inclusive sense." I.e., we cannot attribute both sorts of sovereignty to any one institution.

Similarly, we can distinguish between O(1): unlimited power to act, and O(2): unlimited power to determine the way that other things act. Mackie concludes that we can never assign both kinds of omnipotence at the same time. God can't be both O(1) and O(2).

Goodness of OOG.

But do we really need to conceive of God as OO? Why not go with the more modest metaphysical conceptions "established" by the cosmological and teleological arguments?

[**SEP continued**]...what if God, rather than being characterized in terms of knowledge, power, and goodness, is defined in some **more metaphysical** way - for example, as the ground of being, or as being itself? The answer will depend on whether, having defined God in such purely metaphysical terms, one can go on to argue that such an entity will also possess at least very great power, knowledge, and moral goodness. If so, evil is once again a problem.

By contrast, if God is conceived of in a **purely metaphysical** way, and if no connection can be forged between the relevant metaphysical properties and the possession of significant power, knowledge, and goodness, then the problem of evil is irrelevant. But when that is the case, it would seem that God thereby ceases to be a being who is either an appropriate object of religious attitudes, or a ground for believing that fundamental human hopes are not in vain.