

The Logical Problem of Evil

Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

— Philo, a fictional character in
David Hume's Dialogue on Natural Religion.

Defining "Evil"

What do philosophers mean by the word "evil"?

- Evil is often understood in terms of "pain" or "suffering".
- For example, C.S. Lewis's book *The Problem of Pain*
- "All the minuses of life" — Marilyn Adams
- Basically, evil refers to any bad state of affairs.

Moral Evil

- A bad state of affairs brought about by human moral failure.
- This can also include a bad state of affairs brought about by angelic moral failure.

Natural Evil

- A bad state of affairs **not** brought about by human moral failure.
- Anything from a natural disaster to a person stubbing her toe

Problem Summary

Christians (along with many other theists) believe:

1. God is omnipotent (all-powerful).
2. God is omniscient (all-knowing).
3. God is omnibenevolent (all-good).
4. Evil exists.

The **logical** problem of evil claims that beliefs 1–4 are logically inconsistent. This also makes theism internally inconsistent (because theists believe all four statements). Finally, if theism is internally inconsistent, then theism is impossible, and it is irrational to believe that God exists.

The Argument

(Based on the version proposed by J. L. Mackie)

1. God is omnipotent. (Theistic Claim)
2. God is omniscient. (Theistic Claim)
3. God is omnibenevolent. (Theistic Claim)
4. Evil exists. (Theistic Claim)
5. An omnibenevolent being will prevent all evil it is able to prevent. (Necessary Truth)
6. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do. (Necessary Truth)
7. There are no limits to what an omniscient being can know. (Necessary Truth)
8. God will prevent any evil he is able to prevent. (from 3 and 5)
9. God is able to prevent all evil. (from 1, 2, 6 and 7)
10. God prevents all evil—i.e., evil does not exist. (from 7 and 8)
11. Evil exists and evil does not exist. (from 4 and 9)

Responding to the Argument

The not-so-good answer:

Reject one of the theistic claims. So, deny that God is omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent. Or deny that evil exists.

A better answer:

Reject one or more of the alleged necessary truths. So, deny 5, 6, or 7.

An even better answer:

Reject one or more of the alleged necessary truths. So, deny 5, 6, or 7. Then, demonstrate that theism is consistent by putting forward one or more **possible** truths that, when added to 1–3, entail 4.

For Example: The Free Will Defense

Perhaps God wants to create morally free creatures but only do so by permitting evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

Summary

Evil is logically consistent with an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God, **but** the amount, distribution, and/or severity of evil in our world provide strong evidence against the existence of God.

There are many different versions of the evidential problem. In what follows, we will look at the problem of gratuitous (or pointless) evil.

Example: The Argument from Gratuitous Evil

(Based on the version proposed by William Rowe)

1. Gratuitous evils (probably) exist. (Evidential Claim)
2. If God exists, then no gratuitous evils exist. (Theological Claim)
- ∴ 3. God (probably) does not exist. (Conclusion)

Definition of Gratuitous Evil

An evil is gratuitous (or pointless) unless . . .

- (i) there is some greater good that God can obtain only if he permits the evil in question, or
- (ii) there is some greater good that God can obtain only if he permits the evil or some other equally bad or worse evil, or
- (iii) God can prevent the evil only if he permits some other evil equally bad or worse.

In other words, an evil is gratuitous unless it serves a “God-justifying purpose.”

Support for Premise 1:

- E1 A fawn is horribly burned in a forest fire caused by lightning. It lies on the forest floor suffering terribly for five days before death relieves it of its suffering.
- E2 A five-year-old girl is brutally beaten, raped, and strangled in Flint, Michigan, on New Year’s Day in 1986.

Furthermore, E1 and E2 appear to be but two examples of a great number and variety of ‘pointless’ evils.

Responding to the Argument

The Skeptical Theist Defense

Contents that there is no good reason to believe that premise 1 is true. Furthermore, any argument for premise 1 will be an argument from ignorance. Why? Since God’s mind infinitely transcends our own, we should not expect to understand why he permits these evils. We might call this the “God’s Ways Are Not Our Ways” approach.

Hick’s Paradox

According to John Hick, God was not interested in making a hedonist paradise. He is, however, interested in a world of real moral choices and the development of our moral character—a process Hick calls soul-building. Hick notes that if there are no gratuitous evils, all suffering is either deserved punishment for some injustice or else somehow good for the sufferer. Paradoxically, gratuitous evils (as a group) serve the purpose of inspiring us to relieve suffering and oppose injustice.

G. E. Moore Shift

Invert the argument by giving independent evidence for theism (e.g., the ontological, cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments and/or arguments from religious experience). If the conclusion is false, then one or both of the premises must be false too.

Build a Theodicy

See Theodicy vs. Defense Handout

Theodicy vs. Defense

Responses to the problem of evil (both the logical and the evidential problem) often fall into two major categories: *theodicy* and *defense*.

A *defense* attempts to show that a given version of the problem of evil fails without trying to appeal to God's actual reason(s) for allowing the evil in question.

A theodicy, on the other hand, goes further. A theodicy will attempt to offer some plausible account for why God allows suffering and evil.

Theodicy also differs from defense because theodicies are more likely to utilize themes and teachings from a particular theistic tradition.

Themes in Christian Theodicy

Free Will	The Afterlife: Heaven and Hell
Sin and the Fall of Man	Demonic Activity
Soul Making	Relational Risk
Natural Law (the need for regularity in nature)	Epistemic Distance / Divine Hiddenness
Final Judgment	

Augustinian Themes

God created a perfect world.

Human beings were created
righteous, yet sinned by their
misuse of free will.

Natural evil is often attributed to demonic activity.

Felix Culpa: God foresaw and allowed the Fall because it allows him to bring about even greater goods: the Incarnation and Atonement.

Irenaeus Themes

God created a very good world,
but it also included natural evil.

Human beings were created innocent but immature (not perfect/righteous).

Natural evil is a pre-requisite for making serious moral choices.

Epistemic Distance: Religious ambiguity and the silence of God serve to make room for genuine religious faith.

Notes

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