

The Problem of Evil

Last time we considered the ontological argument for the existence of God. If the argument is cogent, then we have reason to be *rational theists*, i.e., to maintain that there are *justifying reasons* for belief in God's existence. Today we're going to consider an argument for *atheism* which purports to show that theism is incoherent, i.e., that theism entails a contradiction. If the argument works, then the only option available to the theist would be *irrational theism*: belief in God's existence in spite of justifying reasons supporting atheism.

I. Contradictions

Not having a good argument in support of something you believe is uncomfortable, but we live with this condition all the time. Sometimes our beliefs are a matter of wishful thinking; when there is no compelling evidence one way or the other, we just make the best guess we can. What is more difficult to live with is having a convincing argument against your belief, for this commits you to a contradiction.

What is a contradiction and why is it more problematic than just believing without conclusive evidence? *A set of beliefs is contradictory if and only if it is not possible for all of them to be true together*, that is, if at least one of them must be false. Consider a simple example:

- a) All birds can fly.
- b) Penguins are birds.
- c) Penguins can't fly.

Not all of (a-c) can be true together (one must be false). To recognize this and still believe all three (say, on faith) would **not** just be a matter of believing something without reason (like believing without evidence that your parents will send you more money at the end of the month); if you persist in believing all of (a-c) you can be sure that that you are accepting at least one falsehood. It's similar to maintaining both that today is Wednesday and that it is not the case that today is Wednesday. Not both of those can be true: to believe both is to believe something impossible is the case. Moreover, it would leave you without a guide to action. If it both is and isn't Wednesday, should you attend lecture or not? Irrationality is not easy to live with.

II. The Problem of Evil

Remember, we're considering the existence of a certain kind of God, a God who is perfect in every way. By hypothesis, this God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good (I'll abbreviate these characteristics as "OOG").

- 1) **If God exists, she'd be OOG.** [By hypothesis]

Now surely if an OOG God exists, there ought to be no evil in the world. Here's why: Since God *knows everything*, she knows when there is going to be an hurricane, or terrorist attack, or a lynching. Since she is *all-powerful*, she could prevent it if she tried. But since she is *wholly good*, she *does* try. Thus the hurricane, terrorist attack, lynching, etc. is prevented. So:

- 2) **If an OOG being exists, there would be no evil.** [from 1]

Suppose, then, that:

- 3) **God exists.**

You should conclude that:

4) **There is no evil.** [From 1-3]

But the truth is that (as the Dostoevsky reading and current events make vividly clear):

5) **There is evil.**

But note that (4) and (5) are contradictory. You can't reasonably believe both that there is and there is not evil in the world. As a result, even many religious people have felt compelled to conclude:

6) **[An OOG] God does not exist.**

This is the problem of evil for theism. Unless there is a way around the problem, theists have reason to give up their belief, on pain of irrationality.

Note that the argument, as presented, has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. A *reductio* is an argument which begins by assuming a claim that is in question--we can call this the target claim--and demonstrates that it entails a contradiction. Because we have reason to avoid contradiction, the fact that it entails a contradiction casts doubt on the target claim.

However, usually the target claim only entails a contradiction when combined with other (often implicit) assumptions. So it is open to critics to make the additional assumptions explicit and call them into question instead. For example, the following premises seem to be implicit in the argument just sketched¹:

EE) A (wholly) good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.

NL) There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

One might also reject an explicit assumption in the argument, viz., (5) there is evil. But this last strategy is not easy to sustain in the face of the pain and suffering around us. Consider the example found in the Johnson reading "God and the Problem of Evil": "a house catches fire and a six-month-old baby is painfully burned to death." (85). How can a theist explain or excuse this?

III. Responses

A. Greater Good Response

Evils such as the baby's death will have good results in the long run, so are justified.

- i. The baby will go to heaven.
- ii. The parents and friends will have their egos appropriately deflated and will develop important virtues such as sympathy, courage, and strength of character (87 re "building virtue).
- iii. Others will develop a commitment to "make things right," not only by helping this family, but by enforcing fire codes more consistently so that such a tragedy doesn't happen again. (pp. 86-87 re "moral urgency")

Reply: In order for this objection to be compelling, we need to be sure that:

The good results in question will occur,
and that:

¹ Discussion of this argument and the implicit premises mentioned here can be found in J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," In *Reason and Responsibility*, 11th edition.

The evil is *necessary* in order for the good to occur; if the good could occur without the evil, then the evil is not justified by the results.

So, for example, because there is no reason to think that the painful death and related suffering of the survivors of the fire was necessary in order for the baby to go to heaven, the baby's (supposed) heavenly fate does not justify God's allowing the painful death to occur. God had other (better) options.

Is it plausible that in every case of apparent evil, there are good results that outweigh it? Surely in some cases the grieving family members and despairing firefighters do not develop strength and courage, but become bitter, resentful, hopeless, or self-doubting. In some cases the community does not rise to the occasion and develop "moral urgency". It may be tempting for a theist to assume that if something bad happens, then it must ultimately be for the good. However, this assumption begs the question at issue. We are asking: is all apparent evil ultimately for the good? We are not entitled in this context to assume that it is.

Developing the Greater Good Response: However, there seems to be something right about the idea that the world is a better place with *some* evil than it would be without any evil at all. The idea is that if there were certain very *special* and *important* goods that depended on the existence of evil, then in order for God to create the *best* world, there must be some evil. (Note: there could be *good* without evil, but not *best* without evil.)

OK, let's suppose that certain goods presuppose or demand the existence of evil. Which ones? Pleasure, excitement, satisfaction: these things don't presuppose evil. But then, these things, while very nice, don't seem like the best we as humans are capable of. Sympathy, charity, heroism, kindness, all seem to depend for their very possibility on the existence of evil. There can be no sympathy if no one is suffering, or heroism if there is no danger. Yet sympathy, heroism, etc. are much more important goods than mere animal pleasure. So naturally God will put a little pain and misery in the world so as to create the possibility of these higher goods. By doing this he makes the world *better* overall than it would be if he left them out.

So, the view is that God creates first-order evil only to set the stage for a second-order good which more than offsets it; we might say that first-order evil is *redeemed* by the second-order good that it makes possible. So, deprivation is redeemed by the kindness it makes possible. Of course, this leaves it unexplained why there is also second order *evil*, e.g., mockery.

	<u>goods</u>	<u>evils</u>
3rd order:	forgiveness/piety	cynicism
2nd order:	compassion/heroism	mockery/cruelty
1st order:	laughter/pleasure	deprivation/starvation/pain

Can you see how the theist is going to answer? He can try to run the same argument at a higher level: this second order evil is only there in the service of some third order good which more than offsets it.

Overall the picture is that there are different *orders* of good and evil. First order good is happiness, pleasure, and the like; first order evil is pain, misery, and so on. Second order good is good that presupposes first order evil; and second order evil is evil that presupposes first order good. Likewise, third order good presupposes second order evil, etc. And in general *n*th order evil exists only to make possible an (*n*+1) order good that offsets it and makes the world overall better.

Further reply: But this sets up the question: how can it be maintained that the world contains just that amount of n th order evil requisite for the corresponding $(n+1)$ order good? In fact this is almost never the case. Sad but true, people grown old and die desperate and broken-hearted without anyone showing them the kindness that might conceivably redeem their pain. All in all, it appears that there is far more higher order evil than could be justified in terms of higher order goods. To assume that *somehow* this appearance is misleading and there *must* be more good than evil is, again, to beg the question.

B. Free Will Response

Evil is not due to God but to human free will.

Historically, the most important response to the problem of evil is the freewill defense. One interpretation of the freewill defense extends the line of reasoning just sketched. The idea is that the real evil in the world is caused by human action not by God, and it is better *on the whole* that people should act freely even granted the disastrous use we sometimes make of our freedom. Free will is a *higher* good that more than makes up for whatever trouble it causes. One might claim, e.g., that at any level n (>1 ?), the amount of n -level evil is always redeemed by the fact that the choice between good and evil at n is free: although cruelty is evil, its evil is redeemed by the fact that when it occurs it is freely chosen.

Reply: Here again, one might question whether freewill is sufficiently good to redeem the evil it causes. A further problem is that there seems to be evil in the world that is not caused by human action. Consider the destruction of whole villages by earthquakes and hurricanes.

Moreover, Johnson asks, why doesn't God intervene to prevent the bad consequences of our free action? (86) Is it reasonable to maintain that if God intervenes that she has compromised our free will? Suppose an arsonist sets a fire in order to destroy a school. The school is evacuated, firefighters stop the blaze, and no one is hurt. It would be ridiculous to claim that the intervention of school officials and firefighters prevented the arsonist from exercising free will; the arsonist's willing the destruction of the school was untouched by their actions. Further, we would morally condemn a bystander who watched the arsonist at work and made no move to prevent the disaster. Why is God not subject to the same condemnation?

C. "It's a Mystery" Response

God's ways are mysterious; God works according to a "higher morality".

The theist might at this point reply that of course we cannot hold God accountable in the same way we hold each other accountable. We condemn both the arsonist and the passive bystander, but that is "our" morality, not God's.

Reply: What do we mean when we say that God is "wholly good"? Don't we mean that God is good by standards that make sense to us? Don't we mean to be saying that God is morally perfect, that he has none of our failings? If not, then we are just playing with words in saying that God is wholly good. If so, then God is wrong to act as a bystander, allowing evil to occur that could be easily prevented. So either God is not wholly good, or not omniscient, or not omnipotent.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT:

Concerning the Ontological Argument:

- Are there compelling reasons to believe that God exists? What are they? If you had to argue for the existence of God, what reasons would you provide?
- Is existence a perfection? Is it better to exist than to not exist? Is it better for a perfect being to exist than not exist?
- Is God an absolutely perfect being? Is this your conception of God?
- What do we mean when we say that something exists (or doesn't exist)?
- Are there any things that necessarily exist (or necessarily don't exist)? Are there any things that we can prove exist (or prove don't exist)? What are they?

Concerning the Problem of Evil:

- What is the best possible world like? Is ours it? What, if anything, does it lack?
- If ours is not the best possible world, is it possible for there nonetheless to be an OOG God?
- How much pain is legitimized by higher goods? Is all the pain and suffering we see around us really necessary for the world to be the best place it could be?
- What is really required in order to give humans freewill? Could we be predisposed to be good and still be free? Could we have perfect characters and still be free? Why did God create some of us with bad characters, i.e., with predispositions to do evil?
- How does a theist accommodate the fact of natural disasters and the pain and suffering they cause?