

## Reflections on The Problem of Evil

In *Evil and Omnipotence*, J. L. Mackie summarizes the problem of evil to show that the theist's belief in the existence of God is irrational. Not only is reason unable to prove the existence of God, but the beliefs of the theist are in direct conflict with each other.

The problem of evil argues that, because of the nature of God and the existence of evil, God cannot exist. The main beliefs regarding God with respect to the problem of evil are that God is omnipotent and omni-benevolent. Though not explicitly stated by Mackie, it is generally accepted that God's omnipotence subsumes his omniscience; that is, there are no situations over which God could not have control due to his ignorance thereof. The conflict arises because, in spite of God's all-powerful and all-good nature, evil exists.

If God were omnipotent and omni-benevolent, he would prevent evil from occurring. Therefore, accepting the premise that evil does exist, either God does not exist, or God is either not as good or not as powerful as is commonly held.

Before digging deeper, we must address why the Problem of Evil is considered a problem. Mackie points out that the problem of evil is only a problem for people who believe that God exists, and that God is omnipotent and omni-benevolent. No such problem exists in the minds of brights (those with a naturalistic view of the world), polytheists who believe in gods with conflicting goals, nor monotheists who believe in a god which has limits to its power, knowledge, or goodness. For example, consider the following argument regarding a different supernatural being, the Flying Spaghetti Monster<sup>1</sup>:

1. If the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) exists, everyone would be a pirate.
2. Everyone is not a pirate.
3. The FSM does not exist.

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<sup>1</sup> The Flying Spaghetti Monster is god-like being invented in 2005 CE to parody the "Intelligent Design" advocates wishing to teach creationism in US schools. One of the defining characteristics of the FSM is its fondness for pirates. See [www.venganza.org](http://www.venganza.org) for more information.

Few objections would be raised to the conclusion above because, to paraphrase Richard Dawkins<sup>2</sup>, we are all Flying Spaghetti Monster atheists; there is no "problem of pirates" commonly discussed among philosophers.

So, when trying to clarify the problem of evil, it is theists that we are trying to convince, and when trying to refute the problem of evil, we do so wearing the theist's hat, with the presumption that God exists or, at least, that we have strong reason to believe that God exists.

There have been many attempts by theists to show that the Problem of Evil does not in fact disprove the existence of God. These attempts to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God with the presence of evil are known as theodicy.

B.C. Johnson, in his essay "Why Doesn't God Intervene to Prevent Evil," aims to refute some of these theodicy claims. He takes each claim and follows it to its logical conclusion, and in doing so shows that the original argument was unsound.

While Mackie shows that theologians beliefs cannot be reconciled rationally, Johnson shows that not even the idea of faith as a justification for a belief in God's goodness will stand up to scrutiny. Faith is a belief one holds despite a lack of evidence, or even in the face of contradictory evidence. Johnson points out that faith is the result of prolonged exposure, using the example of having faith in a friend's innocence even though there is evidence against him. This faith would only come after a long period of time, having witnessed the friend act morally in a number of situations. Johnson claims that it would be impossible to have such faith in God, having experienced so many situations in which he has allowed evil to occur.

Johnson explores a number of theodicy arguments as to why God may allow these evil events to occur. One such claim is that a greater good is served by an apparently evil act, or that in the long run good will result. He counters this with the example of a baby that was allowed by God to die a horrific

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2 Richard Dawkins states in "The Root of All Evil?", a television special for Channel 4 in the UK, that we are all teapot atheists with respect to Bertrand Russell's teapot in space. Russell's point was that if one is making unfalsifiable claims, it is the claimant's responsibility to prove their idea, not the skeptic's.

death in a fire, saying, "It is not enough to say that the baby's painful death would in the long run have good results and therefore should have happened...For if we know this to be true, then...every action successfully performed must in the end be good and therefore the right thing to do." One would be therefore be justified in attempting the most vicious acts, for if they were to succeed, they would know that the act was ultimately good, and would result in good in the end. Also, it is not clear what this eventual good might be so this nebulous concept of greater good cannot be used to argue that God is wholly good.

A second argument made by theologians is that it is necessary for people to deal with disasters without God's help lest they become dependent upon such help. That is, God is not intervening in disasters for our benefit. Johnson makes the analogy between help that might be supplied by God and help supplied by a firefighter or a physician. If receiving help from others were a bad idea, we would not want to receive the services from the firefighter or the physician. Johnson's argument is not as strong here. Johnson's use of these two occupations is telling. He is presuming some sort of altruism on the supplier of help. In fact, the firefighter offers his services in return for the physician's and those of the other members of the community. Abolishing medical or firefighting services would make as much sense as eliminating all trade between individuals. The professor is just as dependent on the farmer's "help" in the face of hunger as he is on the physician's in the face of disease. But there is a clear distinction between the help from another person and help from God. Every person who offers to trade his services with another is acting within the constraints of the resources and time that he has available to him. God would not suffer from such constraints; assisting in preventing one disaster would not preclude him from assisting in another. So, while there are natural limits to the assistance we can receive from others that might prevent too much dependency, no such limits would necessarily exist if God were to assist in the face of all disasters.

One other argument of theists that Johnson touches upon is that evil exists in order to provide contrast with good. We would be unable to appreciate good without experiencing evil. St. Augustine makes this point in his argument against the problem of evil: "...we enjoy and value the good more when

we compare it with the evil." Johnson points out, though, that a "very small amount of evil, such as a toothache" would be sufficient. "It is not necessary to destroy innocent human beings." Likewise, it is not necessary to eat dog feces to enjoy the delicious flavor of filet mignon.

Fortunately, Augustine's argument does not rest solely on the contrast between good and evil. Whereas Johnson tackles arguments for God allowing evil to exist, Augustine tries to show that evil does not exist. The core of his argument is that evil does not exist in any true sense for it is merely the absence of good. He compares evil to diseases and wounds which he says "mean nothing but the absence of health." We can excuse his lack of knowledge in epidemiology considering he made his argument around 420 CE, but the argument is still weak. Consider an individual born with a lame arm. It might be said that the arm lacks health, or that its condition is the absence of the usability of a normal limb. Contrast this with someone whose arm has been crushed in an accident. The latter condition is not merely an absence of health: it would be quite an understatement to say that the bone is lacking structurally soundness when, in fact, it has been crushed to pieces.

Augustine also emphasizes evil's lack of substance pointing out that when a disease is cured, the disease does not go elsewhere, but rather ceases to exist. Although Augustine's analogy is clearly not accurate in many cases when one understands the nature of bacteria and viruses, it does hold that evil does not transfer elsewhere when it ceases to exist within an individual.

It does not follow, though, that evil does not exist. Augustine takes as axiomatic that all things that exist are good to some extent. He acknowledges though that these things are not "supremely equally and unchangeably good." When considering people, it is clear that the absence of good is quite substantial. If we were almost fully good, we would only need to live for a short period, fill up on goodness, and then be left without reason to continue living. Once we achieve total goodness, we would have no more reason to act because "all action is an attempt to exchange a less satisfactory state of affairs for a more satisfactory one." (Murray Rothbard, Man, Economy, and State, ISBN 0945466323, p. 16) And if we have no reason to act, we have no reason to live. Therefore, this deficiency is fundamental to human existence. Is it fair to describe something so fundamental to existence solely in terms of its

absence in relation to its complement?

Nonetheless, Augustine is on to something. We can think of evil as being relative to good. Every act by a human could conceivably be better (more good) or worse (more evil). Likewise, any natural act that affects mankind could be better for mankind or worse. There is no concrete distinction between an evil act and a good one. There can only be judgments made between the relative goodness of two acts or events.

When we say that God is all-good, that means infinitely good. If there is an infinite scale of goodness in our world and all possible worlds, there is always the possibility of more goodness, for infinite means that there are no bounds. For example, a newborn puppy may be the cutest—where cuteness is a rough proxy for goodness when it comes to puppies—creature ever seen, but it is easy to imagine an even cuter one. In terms of the second puppy, the first one is not as good. It is illustrative to restate the problem of evil as the problem of imperfection:

1. If God exists, the world would be perfectly good.
2. The world is not perfectly good.
3. God does not exist.

Stated this way, it seems more logical to accept that God is omni-benevolent despite the fact that we can find evidence in the world of imperfection.

If we consider good and evil not as a duality, but rather a scale of goodness, it becomes clear that the case for saying that evil exists is not quite as strong. Instead, it might be better stated that the best scenario does not always occur. But this is a necessary condition of a world in which the possibilities for goodness are infinite. For any event perpetrated or allowed to occur by God could always be upstaged by an even better one, or in fact, even an infinitely better one.

Not only is the range of goodness in the world infinite, but so is the number of events. Because humans are not omniscient, they are often unable to appreciate an apparently evil act in its full context. Because there are an unlimited number of events occurring in the world, and an unlimited

number of interactions among natural events and living beings, both sentient and not, it is impossible to judge the totality of a single event's goodness. Often, different value judgments will be made upon an act viewed from different perspectives; that is, a single act may be placed at different points on the scale of goodness.

Consider the execution of a convicted murderer. The family of the murderer's victim might view the execution as the ultimate good act, while the murderer's family might view it as the most evil. Taking into account the values of the rest of society or humanity, the execution would be valued as somewhere in between the two extremes. The value of the act would be different still in the context of subsequent events that it influences.

(We should emphasize that we are not claiming that an act is evil from our perspective, but perhaps good from God's. As Johnson points out, to speak of a morality that is in direct conflict with our own is meaningless. If we were to accept that God's morality was both superior to and opposite of ours, we would be compelled to act in the exact opposite way from which our conscience compels us<sup>3</sup>.)

While it seems all too easy to find evil in the world, upon further contemplation, such evil can easily be redefined in terms of its relative position on a scale of goodness. And although an argument against the problem of evil does not prove the existence of God, it demonstrates a method of reconciling a belief in God with the apparent evil that surrounds us.

### **Additional Reading**

Murray, Michael, "Leibniz on the Problem of Evil", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2005 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2005/entries/leibniz-evil/>>.

Wikipedia Contributors, "Problem of evil", Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 7 February 2006, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Problem\\_of\\_evil&oldid=38547800](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Problem_of_evil&oldid=38547800)>.

Wikipedia Contributors, "Theodicy", Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 4 February 2006, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theodicy&oldid=38081634>>.

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3 In an Ethics course I took, one of my classmates wrote a paper in which they argued that George Costanza from the television series, Seinfeld, was the ultimate vicious character. Perhaps an alternative theory that in this episode Costanza was acting with God's bizarre-morality may explain why things worked out so well for him in the episode in which he decides to do the exact opposite of what he has done his entire life.