

# The problem of evil

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## 1 The problem of evil

Mackie begins the article by saying that he thinks that all the arguments for God’s existence have been shown by philosophers to be faulty. But he notes that this need not convince someone that there is no reason for believing in God:

“...the theologian can, if he wishes, accept this criticism. He can admit that no rational proof of God’s existence is possible. And he can still retain all that is essential to his position, by holding that God’s existence is known in some other, non-rational way.”

Mackie’s aim is to show that philosophy is not only capable of criticizing arguments for God’s existence, but also of showing that God does not exist, thus closing off the position of the theologian described above:

“I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not only that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another ...”

The first thing to do, then, is to be clear on what this ‘problem of evil’ is, and why Mackie thinks that it shows that belief in God not only lacks rational support, but is also, in a very strong sense, irrational.

Mackie states the problem as follows:

“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. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.”

What we need to do is unpack this reasoning. Mackie is claiming that the following three propositions cannot all be true:

- God is omnipotent.
- God is wholly good.
- Some evil exists.

As Mackie says, though, these three are not formally contradictory; that is, we cannot generate a paradox using just these assumptions. To show that they are inconsistent, we have to add some further principles. Mackie gives us two:

- If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
- If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

Mackie thinks that these two principles are plausible. Using these, we can deduce a contradiction from the three principles with which we began. One way to set up the argument is as follows:

1. God exists.
  2. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
  3. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
  4. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (2,3)
  5. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
  6. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
  7. If God exists, then God can eliminate all evil. (5,6)
  8. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (4,7)
  9. God eliminates all evil. (1,8)
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- C. There is no evil. (9)

It seems that the conclusion is clearly false; since the argument appears to be valid, at least one of the premises must be false. For the believer in God, who will likely find each of the premises to be at least initially plausible, this amounts to a kind of paradox.

## 2 Some possible responses to the argument

If the conclusion is false and the argument valid, at least one of the premises must be false. The important question is: which one(s)? Mackie spends most of the article considering various responses to this question.

### 2.1 Give up one of the initial trio

One obvious solution is to give up one of the initial trio of claims used to generate the problem:

- God is omnipotent.
- God is wholly good.
- Some evil exists.

Can we plausibly deny any of these claims?

### 2.2 Good cannot exist without evil, since evil is necessary as a counterpart to good

The basic idea here is that God could not have made a world which had any good without allowing some evil, since it is impossible for goodness to exist without evil.

Two examples that Mackie raises:

- Would it be possible for everything to be red, and nothing to be non-red?
- Would it be possible for everything to be large, and nothing to be small?

Can the large/small distinction provide a good analogy for the good/evil distinction?

Two objections to the view that every quality requires for its existence that something lack the quality: (i) the principle does not seem generally true; there is no reason to think that it could not be the case that everything had a given property; (ii) even if the principle were true, it would explain much less evil than we actually observe.

A related idea is that evil is necessary as a means to bringing about goodness. The basic idea here is that God uses evil to bring about goodness, in much the way that we find that we often have to do something painful, like going to the dentist, to bring about some desirable end, like fixing a cavity.

Why does Mackie think that this, as an answer to the problem of evil, implies an objectionable restriction on God's omniscience?

### 2.3 *A universe with some evil is better than a universe with none*

The basic idea here is that certain kinds of evil are necessary for certain kinds of good; e.g. without disease and pain, it would be logically impossible to have medical advances and feelings of sympathy. The distinction of first and second order goods and evils. The problem posed by second order evil.

In general, a solution of this kind seems to require some level  $n$  such that there are  $n$ th level goods, there are not  $n$ th level evils, and the  $n$ th level goods are important enough to justify all of the  $m$ th level evils, for any  $m < n$ . But Mackie does not think that it is plausible that there are any goods which satisfy this requirement.

### 2.4 *The free will defense*

Many people immediately respond to the problem of evil, as stated above, by saying that the problem with the argument is that it ignores free will. The basic idea here is that at least many kinds of evil are not the result of God's actions, but of the free actions of human beings.

Let's think more carefully about this. In what sense does this argument ignore free will? If you took free will into account, would you reject one of the premises of the argument? If so, which one?

For free will to be relevant to the problem, it seems that free will must have each of the following characteristics: (i) free will is a great good, such that it would be worse to lack free will than it is to have the various evils with which we are confronted; and (ii) it is impossible, even for God, to create a being which has free will and to ensure that it never brings about evil. Why both (i) and (ii) are required to solve the problem.

Mackie's main objection is that there is no sense of 'free will' which satisfies both (i) and (ii):

“if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.

If it is replied that this objection is absurd, that the making of some wrong choices is logically necessary for freedom, it would seem that 'freedom' must here mean complete randomness or indeterminacy . . . But then . . . how can it be the most important good?”

Mackie's argument here is closely related to our distinction last time between libertarian and compatibilist views of free will. Suppose that free will and determinism are compatible. If this is true, then presumably God could have determined all human beings to act freely and always act for the best. If libertarian views of free will are true, then arguments of this sort are not so straightforward; in that case, Mackie says, he can't see how free will amounts to anything more than randomness.

But suppose that you were convinced that the libertarian view of free will makes sense, and that free will is not a kind of randomness, and so does have great value. There's still an objection from the quote from Mackie above which has to be dealt with. The objection can be stated like this:

1. It is possible for people to all act freely and never do any evil.
  2. For any way the world could possibly be, God could have made the world that way.
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- C. God could have made the world such that people all act freely and yet never do any evil.

But if this is possible for God, then why didn't God create a world of this sort?

How should the proponent of the free will defense reply? Does it make sense to say that the world could have been some way *and* that God could not have made the world that way, even though God is omnipotent? Could there be a world which was not in itself contradictory, but which was such that the proposition that God made the world that way *was* contradictory? These are questions to which we will return in our discussion of the paradoxes of omnipotence.

The proponent of the free will defense also faces another problem: the problem of explaining the existence of evil which is apparently not due to human free actions. Consider, for example, the following cases:

- The suffering caused by natural disasters.
- Small but tragic accidents; e.g., some rocks give way, and a rock climber falls to his death.
- The suffering of animals in nature.

What should we say about these sorts of cases?