

The problem of evil &
the free will defense

Our topic today is the argument from evil against the existence of God, and some replies to that argument. But before starting on that discussion, I'd like to briefly discuss the midterm exam.

The midterm exam will be held in class two weeks from today. The exam will consist of four quotations from readings for the course. You will be asked to, with respect to three of these four quotations, do the following three things:

1. Identify the author of the quote.
2. Explain, clearly and in your own words, the argument of which the quote is a part.
3. State and briefly evaluate at least one objection to that argument. The objection may be one discussed in class, or something that you have come up with on your own.

An example of the sort of quote which you might find on the exam is the quote from Mackie which we discussed last time:

In its simplest form the problem is this : 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* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.

The quotes will be displayed on the screen in the classroom, just like the lectures, so bring your glasses/contact lenses to class.

The argument from evil

1. God exists.
 2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
 3. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
 4. If God exists, then God can do anything. (2,3)
 5. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
 6. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
 7. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (5,6)
 8. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (4,7)
 9. If God exists, then there is no evil. (8)
 10. There is no evil. (1,9)
 11. Some evil exists.
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- C. There is evil and there is no evil. (10,11)

Last time we presented this version of the argument from evil; this is a reductio argument, designed to show that one of the premises of the argument must be false.

I also suggested that since traditional theism involves 1, 2, and 5, it is difficult for the traditional religious believer to give up any of these premises. If this is right, then the religious believer is committed to rejecting one of 3, 6, and 11.

11 is pretty hard to reject; so let's focus on 3 and 6.

Mackie considers three main objections to this argument, all of which are best understood as objections to one of 3 or 6.

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Response 1: Evil is necessary for good.

Good cannot exist without evil; since evil is a necessary counterpart to goodness, even an omnipotent being could not make a world with goodness but no evil. So, God creates a world with evil because it is the only way to make a world which contains good.

Mackie distinguishes two different ways to understand this objection:

(1) Given the way the laws of nature are and the way human beings are constructed, it is impossible for there to be good without evil; evil is a means to good, as the pain you feel in the dentist's chair is a means to getting rid of a toothache.

(2) Good is logically impossible without evil; good and evil are related in the way that relative bigness and relative smallness are related.

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Response 2: A universe with some evil is better than a universe with none.

A universe with some evil will often be better than a universe with none, since certain kinds of goods logically require the existence of a certain sort of evil. For example, certain kinds of mercy are clearly goods, but these would be impossible without the existence of suffering.

The distinction between 1st and 2nd order goods, and the problem of higher order evils.

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This leads to the most important objection to Mackie's argument:

Response 3: The free will defense.

God allows evil for the sake of our free will. Free will is a great good, and it is impossible for God to give us free will without allowing evil. So, God allows evil to exist.

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Is this an objection to premise 3 or premise 6?

It is obviously a crucial part of this objection that it is impossible for God to both give us free will and prevent any evil from occurring. van Inwagen recognizes this in his explanation of the free will defense:

God made the world and it was very good. An indispensable part of its goodness was the existence of rational beings: self-aware beings capable of abstract thought and love and having the power of free choice between contemplated alternative courses of action. This last feature of rational beings, free choice or free will, is a good. But even an omnipotent being is unable to control the exercise of free choice, for a choice that was controlled would ipso facto not be free. In other words, if I have a free choice between x and y , even God cannot ensure that I choose x . To ask God to give me a free choice between x and y and to see to it that I choose x instead of y is to ask God to bring about the intrinsically impossible; it is like asking him to create a round square or a material body with no shape. Having this power of free choice, some or all human beings misused it and produced a certain amount of evil. But free will is a sufficiently great good that its existence outweighs the evils that have resulted and will result from its abuse; and God foresaw this.

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This is just the aspect of the free will defense to which Mackie objects:

“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.”

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One might think of Mackie as giving the following argument:

1. It is possible for all people to have free will and never cause evil.
 2. If it is possible for the world to be a certain way, then God could have made it that way.
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- C. God could have made the world such that all people have free will and never cause evil.

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Mackie's objection to the free will defense

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How should van Inwagen reply to this argument?

Does van Inwagen say that it is impossible for all people to have free will and yet never cause evil?

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This assumption -- that it is impossible for God to ensure that everyone freely chooses to avoid evil -- involves some substantial assumptions about the nature of free will. We will turn to those after we conclude our discussion of the problem of evil.

This also introduces some puzzles about the nature of omnipotence. Last time we discussed the idea that even an omnipotent being could not bring about an impossible state of affairs, like a round square. But now we are saying that there are some *possible* states of affairs that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. So what does omnipotence mean, anyway?

We now know that if we want to accept the free will defense, we must reject this definition:

A being is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any possible state of affairs.

This pushes towards a more complicated definition of the following sort:

A being, B, is omnipotent if and only if it can bring about any state of affairs such that it is not impossible for B to bring that state of affairs about.

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So it seems that, if we accept the assumptions about free will and omnipotence just sketched, the free will defense provides an adequate reply to Mackie's version of the argument from evil. (As we'll see, there are other versions to which we have not yet given an adequate reply.)

But one might think that the concept of omnipotence raises important problems of its own. Mackie alludes to this idea when he discusses the paradox of omnipotence. The idea behind this paradox is that the very idea of an omnipotent being is incoherent, or contradictory.

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One way to present this paradox is via the following question:

Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?

It seems that, however we answer this question, we end up denying God's omnipotence.

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Suppose we endorse some view of omnipotence like the one given in the above definition. Then how should we respond to the dilemma?

Suppose that one wants a less restricted notion of omnipotence, such that an omnipotent being can do absolutely anything -- including bringing about impossible states of affairs. Then how should we respond to the dilemma?

It seems that, whichever way we think of omnipotence, this dilemma is fairly easily resolved. So it does not seem to present a very serious problem for the view that there is an omnipotent being.

The same cannot be said for some further versions of the argument from evil.

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These versions of the argument grant that the existence of God is consistent with the existence of some evil -- and therefore grant that Mackie's argument to the contrary is unsuccessful -- but argue that the existence of God is inconsistent with the **amount** and **type** of evil that we find in the world.

One kind of evil we observe in the world which is immediately problematic from the point of view of the free will defense is *natural evil*: evil which is not directly caused by human free actions. The suffering which results from various natural disasters is an obvious and important example of evil of this kind.

It is worth noting that many of the examples on which we naturally focus are actually mixed cases: cases in which the evil in question is partly the result of human free action, and partly not. So, for example, though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc. But it is very implausible that we can explain all of the evil which results from natural disasters in this way.

So what should the proponent of the free will defense say about the problem of natural evil?

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So what should the proponent of the free will defense say about the problem of natural evil?

Here are some possibilities:

- Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid. (This is the sort of story than van Inwagen develops in much more detail.)
- It is important that the world be governed by laws of nature; otherwise, it would be impossible to know the effects of our actions, and hence impossible to take responsibility for the outcomes of those actions. However, it is impossible to create a world governed by laws of nature which does not also include some natural events which cause suffering; so even an omnipotent being could not have created a law-governed world which was free of natural disasters.
- Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.

One might also adopt some combination of these ideas.

Something you may want to think further about is this: suppose that we accept the free will defense as an explanation of the possibility of evil caused by human free action, and one of the above as an explanation of the possibility of evil not directly caused by human free action. Would this suffice to explain the fact that God does not, in the case of an individual instance of terrible evil, intervene to stop it? (See van Inwagen's discussion of the problem posed by particular horrors.)