

# The argument from evil

Last time we discussed Collins' version of the teleological argument -- the argument from the fine-tuning of the universe.

Our main topic today is the central argument *against* the existence of God: the argument from evil.

But before turning to this topic, which will occupy us for the next few classes, let's finish our discussion of some possible objections to the fine-tuning argument.

### *The fine-tuning argument*

1. If theism is true, then a fine-tuned universe is not at all improbable.
2. If atheism is true, then a fine-tuned universe is very improbable.
3. If we are comparing two theories, T1 and T2, a fact F favors T1 over T2 if F would be more likely to obtain if T1 is true than if T2 is true. (The prime principle of confirmation)

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C. The fine-tuning of the universe favors theism over atheism. (1,2,3)

Let's consider some objections to this argument. Most serious objections to this argument are objections to premise (2); these include the following:

- The universe had to be some way --- the cosmological constant had to have *some* value --- and none of these values are more probable than any other. So there's nothing especially improbable about the value that it actually has.
- If the universe were not fine-tuned, we would not be here to observe it. So it is hardly surprising that we observe fine-tuning in the universe!
- Ours is just one of very, very many universes. Given the vast number of universes that there are or have been, it is not improbable at all that one should satisfy the conditions necessary for the emergence of life.

It's worthwhile noting a few things about the limitations of this argument, even if the foregoing objections are overcome.

First, as Collins notes, it is not a *proof* of the existence of God. It is an argument that the fine-tuning of the universe supports the theory that God exists as against the theory that God does not exist.

Second, the argument does not, strictly speaking, show that the existence of God is very probable. What it shows, if successful, is that whatever probability you assigned to the existence of God before encountering these facts about the fine-tuning of the universe, you should raise your probability assignment significantly.

An analogy here might help. Suppose you observe that I begin class every day at 2:01. Now consider the theory that an alien controls my brain and that this alien desires very strongly that this particular class should begin every day at 2:01. How likely is it that class would begin every day at 2:01 if this theory is true? Does this mean that you should think that this theory is likely to be true?

What this kind of case shows is that an observation might count in favor of a certain theory, but that, because the theory was antecedently so improbable, the theory remains quite improbable, even given the observation.

Some atheists might take this attitude to the fine-tuning argument: that it significantly raises the probability that God exists, but that theism is still quite improbable, all things considered. They might think this because they think that there are good arguments against the existence of God; we'll begin discussion of the most important of these next time.

But despite these limitations, if the objections we discussed to this argument can be overcome, it seems plausible that the fine-tuning argument might accomplish one aim that one might have for arguments for the existence of God: it might make it rational for an agnostic to believe that God exists.

Now let's turn to the argument from evil. This is certainly the most significant and challenging argument against the existence of God.

The aim of at least the simplest form of this argument is to show that the existence of evil in the world shows that God does not exist. In this sense, the argument from evil is the opposite of the design argument. That argument tried to pick out a feature of the world which showed the existence of God; this one tries to pick out a feature of the world which shows that God does not exist.

Many philosophers have discussed versions of the argument from evil. The version of the argument that we'll be discussing is from a 1955 article by John Mackie, an Australian philosopher.

Mackie says that his aim is to show

“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.”

What does ‘inconsistent’ mean here?

This should tell you to expect an argument by *reductio ad absurdum* --- an attempt to construct an argument which has premises that the believer in God’s existence will accept, but a clearly false conclusion. (We discussed an argument of this form in connection with Parfit’s discussion of the psychological theory of personal identity.)

But what parts of the ‘essential theological doctrine’ does Mackie think are inconsistent with one another? Here’s how he describes the relevant doctrines:

“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.”

However, it is not obvious that these three propositions really are inconsistent. What we need to do is unpack the reasoning which leads Mackie to think that they are.

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 construct the sort of argument Mackie has in mind 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. God eliminates as much evil as God can. (1,4)
6. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
7. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
8. If God exists, then God can eliminate all evil. (6,7)
9. God can eliminate all evil. (1,8)
10. God eliminates all evil. (5,9)

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C. There is no evil. (10)

This argument appears to be valid, and its conclusion appears to be false. If this is right, then one of the premises of the argument must be false, since no sound argument can have a false conclusion. Mackie's challenge to the believer in the existence of God is: which one is false?

Mackie thinks that (2) and (6) are indispensable components of our conception of God, and (3) and (7) are just explanations of what "wholly good" and "omnipotent" mean. But if these are all true this leaves only (1); and if premise (1) is false, then, of course, God does not exist.



An obvious initial strategy is to give up the idea that God is wholly good, or the idea that God is omnipotent. According to this strategy, God fails to prevent evil either out of weakness or out of moral failure. Most religious believers find this difficult to believe; many would say that a being who fails to prevent evil either out of weakness or out of moral failure simply could not be God.

But if we think that God exists and is both wholly good and omnipotent, then as long as we think that there is some evil in the world, we have to deny one of the following two premises of Mackie's argument:

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

But is it plausible to deny either of these premises?

Let's consider the second one first:

7. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.

Here is natural reply to this premise: not even an omnipotent being can do something which is *impossible*. For example, no one thinks that God could create a four-sided three-angled plane closed figure, and no one thinks that God could make an object which is both bright red and bright green all over.

Can you see how Mackie might restate premise (7) of his argument in order to avoid this sort of objection?

A more promising and popular line of objection to Mackie's argument is to object to premise (3):

3. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

However, it must be conceded that premise (3) looks pretty plausible, at least at first; if we are going to reject it, we need a good reason for doing so.

Mackie considers, and rejects, three main reasons for denying premise (3):

- 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.
- 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.
- God allows evil for the sake of our free will. It is impossible for us to have free will and always act rightly; so it is impossible for God to create a world in which we have free will and there is no evil. So, God creates a world with evil because it is the only way to make a world which contains free beings, like us.

Mackie gives the following objection to this third response to his premise (3):

“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.”