# The problem of evil

Jeff Speaks
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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 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."

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. 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.

We can state the argument against the existence of God that we get here as follows:

1. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
2. If God exists, then God can do anything. (1)
3. If God exists, then God is all good.
4. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (3)
5. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil. (2,4)
6. There is evil.

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C. God does not exist. (5,6)

## 2. Mackie's criticism of solutions to the problem of evil

Since it seems that the five above principles do imply a contradiction, and there are no true contradictions, at least one of them must be false. The important question is: which one(s)?

Mackie spends most of the article considering various responses to this question. He distinguishes two main kinds of solutions: adequate solutions, and fallacious ones.

### *2.1. 'Adequate solutions'*

Mackie agrees that the problem for the theologian can be solved by giving up one of the three principles with which we began: we can deny that God is omnipotent or all good, or we can deny that there is any evil in the world.

Does Mackie think that this is a promising position for the theologian? Why or why not?

### *2.2. 'Fallacious solutions'*

Fallacious solutions are solutions which, even though the may seem plausible at first, in fact do not amount to the rejection of any principle which gave rise to the contradiction. For this reason, Mackie does not think that they are of any help to the theologian trying to respond to the problem of evil. His discussion of each is intended to make clear the reasons for which they fail to address the real problem.

*1. 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.

The sense in which (relative) greatness requires (relative) smallness; why this is not a good way to understand the relationship between good and evil. The incoherence of trying to maximize relative greatness or relative smallness.

The view that every quality requires for its existence that something lack the quality. The example of redness. Two objections: (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.

*2. 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?

*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 nth level goods, there are not nth level evils, and the nth level goods are important enough to justify all of the mth level evils, for any m $<$ n. But Mackie does not think that it is plausible that there are any goods which satisfy this requirement.

*4. Evil is necessary for 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.

How can this count as a solution to the problem of evil, given that God created the free agents in question? The reply has to be something like this: (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 to this is to criticize assumption (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."

A second challenge to this view: the existence of evil which is not, at least apparently, due to human free will.

## 3. Swinburne's reply to Mackie

Swinburne's aim is to respond to the problem of evil by constructing "a theodicy, an explanation of why God would allow . . . evil to occur." (95) His main aim is to defend a version of the 'free will defense.' In order to do this, he divides evil into two different kinds: moral evil and natural evil. He deals with the two separately.

### *3.1. Moral evil*

Moral evil includes "all evil caused delibaerataly by human beings doing what they ought not to do . . . and also the evil constituted by such deliberate actions or negligent failure." (97)

Swinburne's first aim is to construct a theodicy which explains the presence of moral evil. Swinburne expresses his view as follows:

> "The central core of any theodicy must, I believe, be the 'free-will defence', which deals — to start with — with moral evil . . . The free-will defence claims that it is a great good that humans have a certain sort of free will which I shall call free and responsible choice, but that, if they do, then necessarily there will be the natural possibility of moral evil. . . . A God who gives humans such free will necessarily brings about the possibility, and puts outside his own control whether or not that evil occurs. It is not logically possible . . . that God could give us such free will and yet ensure that we always use it in the right way."

We now need to consider a number of objections to this proposal.

*Objection 1: God could have given human beings free choice, and ensured that they always did the right thing. (Mackie)*

Swinburne does not discuss this important objection to the free-will defence of moral evil. What should the theist say in response to it?

A possible reply: a more limited view of God's omnipotence.

*Objection 2: Even if God had to allow human beings the possibility of choosing wrongly, God could have made the consequences of wrong choices much less bad than they actually are.*

Swinburne gives the following reply:

> "A world in which agents can benefit each other but not do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. . . . A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details. . . . A good God . . . will delegate responsibility. In order to allow creatures to share in creation, he will allow them the choice of hurting and maiming, or frustrating the divine plan."

Why would this explain the fact that we have the capacity to do harm with our free choices?

*Objection 3: A good God would not make me suffer for the benefit of your freedom.*

The analogy between God and the evil doctor. Two replies: (i) God is more like a parent than a doctor, and I can justifiably let one of my children suffer for the good of the other, and (ii) the impossibility of God's asking us to choose which world — the world without evil or the world without free will — we would choose.

### *3.2. Natural evil*

Natural evil includes "all evil which is not allowed by human beings to occur as a result of their negligence." (97)

Swinburne also thinks that free-will plays a role in explaining natural evil, though not as direct a role as in the case of moral evil:

> "Natural evil is not to be accounted for along the same lines as moral evil. Its main role rather, I suggest, is to make it possible for humans to have the kind of choice which the free-will defence extols.
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> There are two ways in which natural evil operates to give humans those choices. First, the operation of natural laws producing evils gives humans knowledge ...of how to bring about such evils themselves. ... Natural processes alone give humans knowledge of the effects of their actions without inhibiting their freedom, and if evil is to be a possibility for them they must know how to allow it to occur.
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> The other way in which natural evil operates to give humans their freedom is that it makes possible certain kinds of action towards it between which agents can choose. ...A particular natural evil, such as physical pain, gives to the sufferer a choice — whether to endure it with patience, or bemoan his lot. ...The pain makes possible these choices, which would not otherwise exist."

Now we consider some objections to this view of natural evil:

*Objection 1. Mackie on higher-order evils.*

Swinburne tries to justify natural evil partly in terms of the good which it makes possible. But isn't this just like Mackie's discussion of the justification of first-order evils in terms of the possibility of second-order goods? And didn't Mackie show this kind of justification to be a nonstarter?

Mackie's objection does seem to undercut the second part of Swinburne's response. But how about the first?

An obvious problem here: the amount of natural evil that we find in the world.

*Objection 2. Animals do not have free will; so the suffering of animals cannot be explained in terms of the free choices of animals in response to such suffering. So why would God create a world in which animals suffer?*

Swinburne briefly discusses value in the lives of animals. It is very hard to see how anything he says there could help explain the suffering of animals as a result of natural events, like forest fires.

Can you think of any other objections to Mackie's treatment of natural evil?

Some other treatments of natural evil:

- Natural evil is the result of the free choices of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels.
- Natural evil exists as the result of the free choice of human beings to leave the Garden of Eden.

A remaining version of the problem of evil: the problem of individual horrors. Consider any individual terrible event. The world would have been better if it did not contain that event. So why did God not prevent it?

A possible solution: God does prevent some horrors (perhaps), and there is no non-arbitrary stopping point for the prevention of horrors. The analogy with deciding prison sentence lengths.