

Mackie on 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 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.

2 Solutions to the problem of evil

Since it seems that the five above principles do imply a contradiction, and there are no true contradictions, we have a reductio of this group of principles. This means that 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 they 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.

2.2.1 *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 view that this is a limitation on God's omnipotence; the reply that omnipotence does not extend to doing logically impossible things.

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.

2.2.2 *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?

2.2.3 *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.

(What is the difference between this reply to the problem of evil and the preceding one? Recall Leibniz's distinction between what is physically necessary and what is absolutely, or metaphysically, necessary. One reading of the former objection is that evil is physically necessary for some goods; the present objection is that evil is absolutely necessary for some goods. Why should this difference matter?)

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.

2.2.4 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.

(Could free will be the n th level good described above?)

Mackie's main objection is to question whether there is any coherent 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?”

We will return to the question of what free will might be later in the course.

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