The Argument from Evil

Why doesn’t God do something?
David Hume

- The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent; weakness, importance, distress attend each stage of that life, and it is, at last, finished in agony and horror. (p. 318)
Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs,
Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy,
And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence.
Dire was the tossing, deep the groans: Despair
Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch.
And over them triumphant Death his dart
Shook: but delay’d to strike, though oft invok’d
With vows, as their chief good and final hope.

(p. 319)
Hume’s Argument

... His power, we allow, is infinite; whatever he wills is executed; but neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite; he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; but the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity; therefore, it is not established for that purpose. ...

In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?

(p. 320)
• Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

• p. 320 (quoting Epicurus)
• The only method of supporting Divine benevolence—and it is what I willingly embrace—is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man. Your representations are exaggerated; your melancholy views mostly fictitious; your inferences contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments. (p. 280)

• Does this argument succeed at defusing the argument from evil?
• Is there a better “method”?
Darwin’s Argument from Evil

“With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.”

Charles Darwin, in a letter to Asa Gray, 1860.
J. L. Mackie: deductive argument

- The four propositions:
  - God exists
  - “God is perfectly good
  - God is omnipotent
  - Evil exists

are not *formally* contradictory. Extra premises are needed to create a formally deductive argument.
1. Logical argument of evil

1. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
2. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
3. Evil exists

4. *Suppose* that God exists, and is omnipotent and good.

5. God eliminates evil, as far as he can.  
6. God eliminates all evil
7. Evil does not exist
8. *Contradiction*

9. God is either not good, or limited, or non-existent
Responses to the logical argument

• Premises 1 and 2 are both questionable.

“1. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.”
   – What if some evils are needed to cause great goods? Or some great goods have evil side effects?
“2. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.”
   – There are *logical* limits, even to omnipotence.

• These flaws open the door to “soul-making theodicy”, “free will defense”, etc.
Theodicy vs defense

- **Theodicy** – Trying to give the actual, true explanation of why God allows evil to exist.

- **Defense** – Imagining *possible* scenarios in which a good, omnipotent God allows evil to exist.
  - These scenarios may not be true, but constructing them proves that theism is logically consistent with evil.
Responses to the logical problem

• So it’s very difficult to prove any *logical contradiction* between theism and evil.

• For this reason, most discussion has moved to the ‘evidential’ argument from evil.
2. Inductive/Evidential Version

• This uses *inference to the best explanation*.

• Theism is highly *improbable*, given the quantity and quality of evil in the world. Naturalism provides *a better explanation* for the evil in the world than theism does.

• We can grant that a good, omnipotent God might create a world with the possibility of evil, and when such evil appears he might allow some of it to persist. *But not this much evil!*

• Hence theism is a very poor explanation of this world.
2. Inductive/Evidential Version

• Can *naturalism* explain the evil we see?

• Sure. On this view, life is a product of evolutionary processes such as natural selection.

• *These processes do not care about us.* They eliminate unfit, infertile traits, but pain and suffering are irrelevant. Parasites make perfect biological sense, etc.
• Back to the logical version for now though, and Plantinga’s *free will defense* against it.
Limits to omnipotence

- Plantinga argues that even an omnipotent being has *some* limits, namely logical limits.

“Could he create square circles, for example, or married bachelors? … These theologians and philosophers may hold that there are no *nonlogical* limits to what an omnipotent being can do, but they concede that not even an omnipotent being can bring about logically impossible states of affairs.”
“Some theists, on the other hand—Martin Luther and Descartes, perhaps—have apparently thought that God’s power is unlimited even by the laws of logic. …”

“This view is not very popular, however, and for good reason; it is quite incoherent.”
• E.g. does every good thing eliminates every evil state of affairs that it can eliminate?
  — No, says Plantinga. Try to fix it.

• (19b) A good being eliminates every evil $E$ that it knows about and that it can eliminate without either bringing about a greater evil or eliminating a good state of affairs that outweighs $E$.

• (Even 19b is false, says Plantinga. It might be possible to ‘properly eliminate’ in this way either $E_1$ or $E_2$ but not both.)
The basic problem with deriving a contradiction from theism is that certain goods and evils might be logically tied together, in such a way that eliminating the evil would eliminate the good as well.
“Under what conditions would an omnipotent being be unable to eliminate a certain evil $E$ without eliminating an outweighing good? Well, suppose that $E$ is included in some good state of affairs that outweighs it.”

Good state of affairs $\Rightarrow$ (Smaller) evil state of affairs
“For example, there are people who display a sort of creative moral heroism in the face of suffering and adversity—a heroism that inspires others and creates a good situation out of a bad one. In a situation like this the evil, of course, remains evil; but the total state of affairs—someone’s bearing pain magnificently, for example—may be good.”
“our discussion thus far shows at the very least that it is no easy matter to find necessarily true propositions that yield a formally contradictory set”

• Yet, as Plantinga points out, this doesn’t show theism to be consistent. It just means it hasn’t (yet) been shown to be inconsistent.
Consistency proof?

“...to show that a set $S$ is consistent you think of a possible state of affairs (it needn’t actually obtain) which is such that if it were actual, then all of the members of $S$ would be true. This procedure is sometimes called giving a model of $S$.”
Why God allows evil

“Augustine tries to tell us what God’s reason is for permitting evil. At bottom, he says, it’s that God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil. A really top-notch universe requires the existence of free, rational, and moral agents; and some of the free creatures He created went wrong. But the universe with the free creatures it contains and the evil they commit is better than it would have been had it contained neither the free creatures nor this evil.”

(I.e. Augustine gave a free will theodicy.)
• (N.B. In this paper Plantinga doesn’t *endorse* this Augustinian view, but merely says it’s possible.)

• Note that it’s *only one way* of making certain goods and evils logically inseparable.

• Another is the “soul making” idea, that people only become truly great and good by overcoming evil.
Objection to soul making

• If we follow God’s example in this “soul-making” idea, then we’ll stand by and do nothing at all, when we see (apparently) pointless evils that we could easily prevent.

• No more medicine, police, lifeguards, lifeboats, railings, seatbelts, etc.
Swinburne response

• God’s *authority* over us permits him to allow us to suffer a lot. (Like a parent, not a babysitter.)
• Also, he sees far into the future, and may allow one person to suffer for the long-term benefit of that person, or even of another person.
• The same isn’t true of humans, who lack such authority and knowledge.
Problems with utilitarianism

• Our human *ignorance* imposes duties upon us. For humans, “the ends do not justify the means” because we cannot predict the ends with rational confidence.

• E.g. doctors deliberately spread cowpox, in order to fight smallpox. Predators, parasites, etc. are actually good!

• However, history is full of examples of “unintended consequences”, where evil is done to promote long-term good, yet that good never materialises.
Free Will Defense

• The free will defense require a particular kind of free will, called *libertarian* (indeterministic) free will.

• For this kind of freedom, it’s not enough that we make choices, based on our own beliefs and desires, and act on them. (For God could program robots to do that, and so ensure that they never commit evil acts.)
“If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won’t. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it.” (Plantinga, p. 306)
Free will and control

• The notion of control is crucial to libertarian free will. What is it for one system to control another? (E.g. a RC car is controlled by the controller.)

• Buttons/levers on the controller cause the car to move in predictable ways? (The car’s behavior is deterministically caused by the controller.)

• But then, if causal determinism is true, all our actions are completely controlled by events that occurred before we were born.
Free Will Defense

Obviously God cannot create *free* beings, in this libertarian sense, and at the same time cause them (deterministically) to do good all the time.

Creating free beings entails the *risk* (at least) of them going wrong.
Objections

1. Libertarian free will is unnecessary (pointless, a “bizarre metaphysical conceit”, etc.) -- Dennett

2. As long as we do what we want, we’re free.

3. To say that a person “could have done otherwise” in a given situation is just to say that they would have done otherwise, had they chosen to.
Plantinga’s response to #3

“One might as well claim that being in jail doesn't really limit one’s freedom on the grounds that if one were not in jail, he’d be free to come and go as he pleased. So I shall say no more about this objection here.”

(p. 307)
Objection 4 (Mackie)

“I should ask this: 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?”

It’s not logically impossible, after all, for a fair coin to land heads 1000 times in a row. So an omnipotent God can do that. (?)
• “… why could He not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?”
  – … such that they *might* always freely choose the good?
  – Or … such that that *must* always freely choose the good?
Evidential argument from evil

• We can grant that a good, omnipotent God might create a world with the possibility of evil, and that when such evil appears he might allow some of it to persist.

• *But not this much!* If you were creating a world, any world you wanted (within logical limits) would you create *this* world? Not likely.

• Hence theism is a very poor explanation of this world.
Is the actual suffering excessive?

• We cannot be *certain*, perhaps, that the suffering in the world is excessive in this way. But are we *justified* in believing that it is?

• If the purpose of suffering is that we develop compassion, generosity, perseverance, etc. then surely this could be achieved at a lower dose?
  – (With medicine, for example, the risk of side effects means that one generally prescribes at the lowest effective dose.)
Objections to the Evidential Argument

A. We are too ignorant to judge whether there’s “too much” evil in the world.

B. On the total evidence, God exists. “We can lose this battle (not too badly) but still win the war”

C. The case of (e.g.) the saved miners. Isn’t this evidence of a God who cares for us?

D. The quantity of evils means that God expects a lot of us. If evils were less, then he’d be treating us like children.
Argument from Ignorance

We cannot see why God would allow so much suffering, so probably there is no reason.

But, if God had a reason, would we be able to see what it was? Usually, for an argument from ignorance to work, we need to say that if the thing did exist then we would see it. E.g.

I don’t see any elephant in this room

:. There is no elephant in this room
The SETI program hasn’t found any evidence of ET intelligence.

There is no extra-terrestrial intelligent life.

If God had a reason for *this much* suffering, would we be able to see what it was?
Response

• Even if we think we couldn’t, there might still be good reason to think that theism is false.

• For example, the world might have existed for only 6000 years. Or all this might only be a computer-generated fantasy (as in the Matrix). *If those scenarios were true, then we wouldn’t be able to tell.*

• Does that mean we should regard such scenarios as quite possibly true?

• Not if they’re still *implausible.* (Can we say why they’re implausible?)
• In a similar way, the theory that God is good and omnipotent, but has his own reasons to allow (and even use) evil is arguably *implausible*.
• For example, the theistic story is relatively *complicated*. Naturalism is simpler, saying that the universe is amoral, and doesn’t care about us. Shit happens, etc.
• Suffering *appears* to be pointless because it *is* pointless. (The world appears to be billions of years old because it is billions of years old.)
“Creatures determining in cooperation their own character and future, and that of the universe in which they live, coming in the process to show charity, forgiveness, faith, and self-sacrifice is such a worthwhile thing that a creator would not be unjustified in making or permitting a certain amount of evil in order that they should be realized.”
Natural disasters

• God created a half-finished world. It’s our job to tame it. Go to work engineers!
  – Earthquake-proof buildings
  – Houses on stilts
  – Flood defenses
  – Potable water
  – Sustainable agriculture, etc.

• “I suggest that to create a universe of the third kind would be no bad thing, for it gives to creatures the privilege of making their own universe.”
Is there *too much* evil?

If two boys are hitting each other, then a parent may stand back and let them sort it out. (A babysitter can’t.)

But if they start really hurting each other, then of course the parent gets between them. The parent *sets a limit* to the amount of harm they may do to each other.

Swinburne says that there are limits to how much evil God will allow.

– But God seems to have a very high limit!
• Another possible response: Free beings are likely to create pointless evil.

• A world of free beings entails the (likely) existence of “pointless” suffering?

• For God to remove such suffering would restrict free will in some way?

• God might see a need for something like Star Trek’s “Prime Directive” of non-interference? (Or severely restricted interference?)
Get off the swing, Twinky.

FORGET IT, MOE. WAIT YOUR TURN.

PUNCH!

IT'S HARD TO BE RELIGIOUS WHEN CERTAIN PEOPLE ARE NEVER INCINERATED BY BOLTS OF LIGHTNING.