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.
1. Logical problem 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.  (From 1, 4)
6. God eliminates all evil  (2, 5)
7. Evil does not exist  (6)
8. Contradiction  (3, 7)

9. God is either not good, or limited, or non-existent  (4-8)
Responses to the logical problem

• 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.