

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is the problem which states that it seems unlikely that a morally perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing God exists due to the fact that there is so much evil in the world (which such a God, if He existed, would not permit).

1. A priori expectations: Hume begins by asking the reader to imagine a rational person who knew nothing about the world whatsoever. If you told this person that there were a morally perfect, all-powerful, all knowing God, and asked them to predict what the creation of such a God would look like, what would they say? Surely this person would predict a world with much less—or perhaps none at all?—vice and misery. In short, given the existence of God, a reasonable person would expect God to create a world with little or no evil.

If you then showed this person the REAL world, they would be surprised and disappointed by how awful it is. Still, if they knew FOR SURE that God existed, they would suppose that there must be some good explanation for all of the evil in the world. However, we are NOT sure of God's existence. So, it seems that the evil in the world is evidence of God's NON-existence. In short, if you showed any reasonable person the miserable state of the world, that person would never infer that a supremely perfect God exists.

If this isn't enough, Hume uses an analogy to illustrate. Imagine that you were shown an apartment building where everything was very shoddy and susceptible to falling apart easily. Surely, you would assume that the architect wasn't a very good one. And, even if someone explained to you how the weaknesses of the building were NECESSARY in order for the building to stand properly, you'd STILL assume that a better architect could have done a better job; a better architect could have built an apartment building which stood WITHOUT the need for weaknesses.

2. The problem of evil: The basic argument can be stated like this:

1. If a supremely perfect God existed, He would (probably) eliminate all evil.
2. All evil is not eliminated.
3. Therefore, a supremely perfect God (probably) does not exist.

Hume lists a number of complaints against the world, which all seem to be instances of evils that a perfect God would eliminate:

- We often experience pain as motivations to preserve ourselves (e.g., thirst, hunger, and weariness). But, it seems like a perfect God could have found some better motivation than this; pleasure, for instance.

- Each species seems to have barely enough skill or power to survive (e.g., humans have intelligence, but nothing else). A perfect God would have given us better means of taking care of ourselves, and not been so frugal with abilities.
- Nature does not have the mark of a fine craftsman. It is full of defects (e.g., winds get out of hand and become hurricanes, rains necessary for nourishment often come too seldom or too frequently, and our bodies are defective and suffer so many malfunctions). A perfect God would have designed our environment and our bodies more perfectly.
- Many evils do not seem to be necessary. A perfect God would intervene and prevent them. Even if it is objected that constant miracles would disrupt the course of nature, surely God could AT LEAST do a few small things (e.g., Hitler could have died of what LOOKED like a heart attack at an early age). It seems like the world could be a LOT better without disrupting the regularity of nature. As Hume writes,

A fleet whose purposes were salutary to society might always meet with a fair wind; good princes enjoy sound health and long life; persons born to power and authority be framed with good tempers and virtuous dispositions. A few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world, and yet would no more seem to disturb the course of nature ...

3. The choice: Hume believe that we have four choices concerning the nature of the cause(s) of the universe. That cause, or causes, are either:

- Good
- Evil
- Some good and some evil
- Neither good nor evil

The best we can do is take what we KNOW and infer that whichever of these is most likely to be the case.

- It is unlikely that the cause is good since the world contains so much evil.
- It is unlikely that the cause is evil since the world contains so much good.
- It is unlikely that the cause is both good and evil, since the world functions so smoothly, with laws and regularities; i.e., the universe shows no sign of a struggle between good and evil.

We are left with the final option: The cause of the universe is neither good nor evil. Hume concludes that the cause of the universe is not a god at all. The cause is merely the indifferent universe itself, which has always existed without any external cause.