

The Problem of Evil

1. Introduction to the Problem of Evil: Imagine that someone had told you that I was all of the following:

- Really smart
- Really strong and able-bodied
- One of the best people, morally, that you had ever met

Then, imagine that you read in the paper that I was arrested after the following took place (all caught and recorded by a security camera):

● **Child on Fire:** I am sitting and reading out in my backyard, when a neighborhood child wanders into my yard. The kid plays around in my yard in front of me for a while, but do not ask them to leave. Even when the child finds my tool shed, I do not stop the child from exploring. And when the child finds a canister of gasoline and starts playing in it, and splashing it on himself, I still just sit there without intervening. When the child finally finds some matches and lights them—and catches fire and dies—I simply continue reading my book.

You would probably be at a loss to explain how I could let such a thing happen. After all, surely I was smart enough to recognize the potential danger. Surely I was strong enough to have prevented what was happening and rescue the child. And any morally upright person would WANT to stop this from happening. So, how can we reconcile these events that I let happen right in front of me with the fact that I am smart, able-bodied, and morally upright?

2. The Problem of Evil for the Existence of God: The story above is what the problem of evil for the existence of God is all about. For consider: There is evil in the world. Terrible things happen every day:

- Every day, 25,000 children in the world die of starvation and poverty
- Every day, 21,000 people in the world die of cancer
- 250,000 people in the world are killed each year by natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis.
- Over 500,000 (half a million) people in the world are murdered every year
- About 20% of women in the U.S. will experience rape or attempted rape with their lifetime.

These things are all really awful. Many have a hard time reconciling these occurrences with the existence of a good God. "If God exists," they say, "How could He allow such awful things to occur?" For, remember, God is defined as being:

- Omniscient (all-knowing), so He KNOWS about all of the bad things that happen.
- Omnipotent (all-powerful), so He has the POWER to prevent the bad things from happening.
- Omnibenevolent (morally perfect), so He must WANT to prevent bad things from happening.

The Problem: So, then, how do we reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of God? WHY would a good God allow evil the world? Atheists claim that he WOULDN'T. "If God existed," they say, "He wouldn't ALLOW there to BE any evil. So, because there IS evil, He must not exist." So, atheists generally take the existence of evil to be a decisive proof against the existence of God. We can formalize this argument as follows:

The Logical Argument From Evil

1. If God existed, He would prevent all evil.
2. But, there is evil in the world.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

It is important that theists have an answer to this problem; whether in order to have a response for a friend who is having doubts about their faith, or to defend against an atheist who accuses theism of having no good explanation of the existence of evil—this problem is one of the most important philosophical issues that the theist can study.

The God is Not Perfect "Solution": Remember the child in my backyard. If one of the following was true, this might ease your confusion:

- 1) Perhaps I'm not very smart after all. Maybe I didn't KNOW that what the child was doing was dangerous. Or, perhaps I just had my ipod on really loud at the time, and was really absorbed in my book. So, I never heard or saw a thing.
- 2) Perhaps I'm not able-bodied after all. Maybe I'm paralyzed from the neck down, so I wasn't ABLE to help the child. Or maybe it was just that, at that very moment, paralysis took over my limbs and I found myself completely frozen. I tried to move in order to intervene, but couldn't.
- 3) Perhaps you were being lied to when someone told you that I was morally good. Maybe I am actually not a good person at all. So, I don't really care about helping others, or saving them from harm.

These responses WOULD ease your confusion. They seem to reconcile the facts. Similarly, we could deny that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, or morally perfect, and this would "solve" the problem. Most theists do not find this to be an attractive response, however. After all, God is supposed to be the most perfect possible being there is; a being maximally worthy of our worship! If we decide that God must not be very smart, or very powerful, or that He is evil rather than good, He ceases to be the sort of being that is worthy of worship.

3. Three Solutions to the Problem of Evil: Above, the argument stated that, **if God existed, He would prevent all evil.** “But, wait!” the theist says. Perhaps a good God WOULD NOT prevent all evil—namely, if that evil was a means to some even GREATER good. We endure bad things, or evils every day in order to achieve even greater goods. For instance, eating your vegetables and exercising is no fun at all—but it helps you to achieve health. Getting surgery or cavities filled is pretty bad, but, again, it keeps us healthy. Studying can be a chore, but it makes us smarter and helps us achieve success. Getting grounded or spanked is the worst, but we often grow up to become better people because of it. So maybe God allows evil for THESE sorts of reasons—because they lead to even greater goods.

Let us go back to the Child on Fire case. Imagine if, prior to the child coming in to my yard, I discovered that if a child was set on fire in my yard, it would somehow save the entire world from total destruction. I saw the child enter my yard, and I miserably watched the kid meet their awful fate, but I dared not intervene, because I knew that if I DID intervene, I would make the world so much worse. Would that explain why I did what I did? Probably.

Similarly, the theist claims that, OF COURSE God wants to prevent evil, and has the power to do so. But, He does not prevent it, because doing so would make the world much worse, either by preventing some much greater good, or ushering in some much greater evil.

The idea that a bad thing can sometimes make the whole better overall seems correct. Consider the most beautiful paintings in the world. There are surely some particular brushstrokes that are “ugly”; they would seem like blemishes if we looked at them closely. But, step back and look at the entire picture: The whole is made more beautiful because of the blemish. Here are some reasons that evil might make the world better:

- (1) Good cannot exist without evil; or, at least, it cannot be APPRECIATED
- (2) Evil is an inevitable side-effect of creaturely freedom
- (3) Evil is a necessary means to a virtuous character

Let’s look at each in turn:

(1) **There Cannot Be Evil Without Good:** Some suggest that, if there weren’t any pain, then evil could not exist; or, at the very least, we wouldn’t recognize or appreciate good things. For instance, you might say, “It feels good to be well again. I didn’t appreciate my health until I got sick!”

Reply: What this objection seems to be implying is that there is something like a scale that goes from badness to goodness. On one end of the scale is extreme torture, and on the other is intense bliss. The middle of the scale is neutral. The

intuition seems to be something like, if God somehow deleted all of the “bad” events on the bottom half of the scale, neutrality would just shift upward, so that what USED to be viewed as just barely good (e.g., a hot pocket) is now viewed as the worst thing ever. Hot pockets would BECOME just as awful as extreme torture is to us now.

This seems false. For instance, most of us are never tortured; and yet we seem capable of euphoria or bliss all the same. So, perhaps we don't PERSONALLY need to experience evil to appreciate good. Perhaps we just need to be AWARE of it. For instance, someone might say, “I really appreciate this meal. After all, there are millions of people who don't have anything to eat AT ALL.” But if that is true, then couldn't God just give us very vivid dreams to help us recognize what pain is, or couldn't He just give us the occasional pain? Recall the statistics given earlier. Why do millions have to suffer horrible deaths due to disease, starvation, murder, etc. each year? This seems like overkill.

(2) **The Free-Will Defense:** The basic idea of the free will defense is that creatures are only capable of moral goodness if they have free will. If one freely chooses to do good, this is a morally significant choice. Furthermore, a world where creatures are capable of making morally significant choices is better than a world with no free creatures at all.

Imagine that the person in your life whom you love most says, “I love you too.” This is really wonderful, and a meaningful, valuable thing. Now imagine that you found out that this person was a robot, and they only said they loved you because they were PROGRAMMED to say it. This is what it would be like if human beings lack free will. Everything we ever do we do only because we were PROGRAMMED to do it by the laws of nature. All of our actions are inevitable. That would be terrible, and our lives—our good deeds, our bad deeds, our choices to love, or to worship and so on—would all be meaningless

So, basically, freely choosing to do a morally good thing, or to love God, is a REALLY GOOD thing. And, God wanted these really good things for his creation. However, this freedom comes with a price tag: namely, the possibility of evil. If we're capable of doing GOOD, then we must also be capable of doing EVIL. Therefore, whenever there are beings with free will, evil will be a necessary SIDE-EFFECT.

Objection #1: Sure, God might have reasons for giving us freedom (namely, because freedom is awesome). But, couldn't He have made us so that we ARE free, but we always freely choose to do good? There doesn't HAVE to be evil in a world full of free creatures.

Reply to #1: Alvin Plantinga actually says that it is impossible for there to be a world full of free creatures who ALWAYS choose to do good. He calls this theory “**Trans-World Depravity**”—basically, it is the idea that, no matter how God made the world, or what people with free will He put in it, they would ALWAYS freely choose to sin, NO MATTER WHAT. In other words, it is impossible for human beings to live their lives without sinning. [Does this sound plausible/correct to you?]

Objection #2: There are actually TWO categories of evil:

- **Natural evil:** Evil that is NOT the result of human beings. For instance, hurricanes, earthquakes, cancer, famine, and getting bitten by mosquitos or eaten by sharks.
- **Moral evil:** Evil that IS the result of moral beings (e.g., humans). For instance, rape, murder, or even human negligence (for example, if you pay me to repair the brakes on your car and I take your money but like about fixing the brakes, if you are injured on the road, the harm is HUMAN-caused).

The free will defense seems to only account for MORAL evils. But, what about NATURAL evils? Surely God did not need to create a world full of earthquakes, cancer, famines, and shark attacks in order to achieve the greater good of human freedom? This sort of evil seems to remain unaccounted for.

Reply to #2: The theist might reply that natural evil actually *increases our freedom*, in the following way: By observing the pain and suffering that nature causes us, we learn how to produce evil for ourselves. The knowledge that we gain by observing the evils of nature thus increases our options to do good or evil; in other words, natural evil increases our freedom.

Rebuttal: Again, we might ask, is it really necessary to have SO MUCH pain? MILLIONS of people die each year due to starvation, earthquakes, cancer, AIDS, tsunamis, hurricanes, etc. Isn't this overkill? Is there any real or satisfying sense in which millions of people dying of disease, hunger, natural disasters, etc. helps to increase our freedom? For instance, does it make sense to say, “Thank the Lord that 25,000 children die of starvation every day. Otherwise, I wouldn't feel as free to choose good or evil”?

Furthermore, can we really say that human freedom is SO good or SO sacred that God should NEVER intervene to violate our freedom EVER? For instance, Hitler exercised his free will to bring about the deaths of 11 MILLION human beings (6 million of them Jews). Even if free will is a REALLY great thing, and this is why God

in general allows evil, couldn't God at least step in and violate SOME people's freedom?

[Reply: Perhaps he DOES and he has prevented LOTS of people who were WAY WORSE than Hitler from exercising their free will?]

(3) **Soul-Building Theodicy:** John Hick's soul-making solution is a nice compliment to Plantinga's free will defense. It seems to account for natural evils more satisfactorily than the simple free will defense. Hick's basic idea is that being MADE perfect is not that valuable. People would only ever do good things because they were made that way. They couldn't really HELP but do good things. Hick says, it is much more valuable to be faced with temptations and trials, which one overcomes, and goes through a process of BECOMING perfect.

Consider the actions of a parent looking out for their child:

- **Parent-Child:** A parent who wants their child to grow up to be a good person will not just provide them with the most pleasurable lifestyle possible. Rather, that parent will delegate some responsibility to that child, and even allow them to cause a certain amount of harm to their self and others (or be harmed by others). This gives the child a certain amount of autonomy and responsibility, and allows them to learn the lessons that they need to learn in order to become an upright person.

This is analogous to the way that God sees us. As Hick points out, we are not pets, whom God gives treats and fluffy pillows to. Rather, we are children, whom God places in the sort of environment that will allow them to experience the necessary trials and temptations, by which we can become perfect (or, Christ-like).

But, to become more perfect is to become more VIRTUOUS. And, many of the virtues cannot be acquired in the absence of evil. For instance, in order to be **courageous**, there must be some danger to be courageous in the face of. In order to be **generous**, there have to be other people in need. In order to be **perseverant**, there must be some trial or tribulation that one can persevere through. Whereas evil was a necessary SIDE-EFFECT of good on the free-will defense, evil is the necessary MEANS to achieving good on the soul-making view.

On Natural Evil: Hick's soul-making theory seems to explain natural evil as well as moral evil. For, those who endure natural evils are given options that they wouldn't otherwise have; for instance, to endure it with patience, or complain about it with anger and regret. Likewise, those who see others enduring evils have the option to look on their troubled friends with either compassion or

callousness. Thus, evil is a sort of test of our character, which could not occur if there were no evil; without such evil, we would not be able to “soul-build.” In a way, “soul-building” is like **body-building**. To get your BODY big and strong, we need to work out. And, as they say, “**No pain, no gain.**” Similarly, to get our SOUL big and strong, we need to work it out too—and no pain, no gain.

Objection: Again, do we really need to have SO MUCH evil? And why does it seem to be distributed so disproportionately? It seems like we could be virtuous without millions dying painful untimely deaths every year. Furthermore, is it any consolation to a child dying of starvation to say, “Cheer up! God is giving you the chance to endure this slow and painful death with patience and perseverance, and also this gives others the chance to look upon you with compassion. You’re one of the lucky ones!”

Reply: Hick says that critics of theism are confused when they look at the suffering and imperfections in this creation and blame the architect. God’s goal is not maximum PLEASURE for human beings; rather, it is maximum VALUE. Hick says, the question is not, “Is this the most pleasant and most comfortable world that an all-powerful being could create?” Rather, the question is, “**Is this the kind of world that provides an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and choices, into perfect children of God?**” Hick admits that the answer to the first question is “No.” But, that is the wrong question. He answers “Yes” to the latter, which is God’s true aim for us; i.e., to fashion us into perfect beings. And this process of becoming more perfect is called “soul making.”

A Final Worry: Is God Imperfect?: Hick says that if God just MADE us good, this would not be meaningful. In order to be TRULY good, we must overcome adversity and make ourselves virtuous. Now consider: God is eternally good. He did not have to overcome adversity in order to become good. So, the question is: Is God’s goodness meaningless?

6. Conclusion So Far: The solutions we just examined reject the above argument against the existence of God by denying premise 1. It is NOT the case that an all-powerful, all-good God would prevent the existence of ALL evil. God would allow SOME evil, and he has. But none of it is unnecessary evil. It all leads to a much greater good. As it turns out, God WANTS there to be some evil, because this evil is a necessary means to achieving a MUCH GREATER good; namely, free creatures capable of morally significant choices that help them to become more perfect and more like God.

7. Unnecessary Evils: We might object to the above solutions by pointing out that, even if free will and soul-making are God's goals, and those goals require SOME amount of evil, the ACTUAL evils that occur often seem completely unnecessary to achieve those goals.

For instance, refer to the list of atrocities that occur every day. A LOT of really bad things happen ALL THE TIME. So, we might ask: Is ALL of this evil necessary to promote free will and moral virtues? If some of the evil that occurs is NOT necessary to achieving God's goals for us, then there STILL might be some reason to doubt the existence of God. William Rowe gives the following modified argument from the problem of evil:

The Evidential Problem of Evil

1. There is an abundance of **unnecessary** evil in the world (i.e., evil which could be prevented without sacrificing some greater good).
2. If an all-powerful, all-good God existed, there would not be any such evil.
3. Therefore, an all-powerful, all-good God does not exist.

On Premise 2: It seems that this premise is uncontroversial. God, since he is morally perfect, would only allow evil if doing so led to a greater good, or prevented a greater evil.

On Premise 1: So, if the theist is correct in thinking that there is a God, she needs to reject premise 1. Is it true that there is some evil in the world that does not lead to a greater good, or prevent some greater evil? Rowe asks the reader to consider a scenario that likely happens on a regular basis:

- **Rowe's Fawn:** There is a fawn in a forest. A forest fire begins. As the fawn runs, a tree falls onto it, pinning the fawn to the ground. The fawn is burned horribly, but does not die. Instead, it lays there, severely burned, for days until it finally dies of dehydration.

The suffering that this baby deer endures seems completely pointless. Is it reasonable to think that God—who is ALL-powerful—could not prevent it without sacrificing some greater good? Rowe does not think so.

Objection: The theist might claim at this point that we are not in a position to know for sure whether or not God has some plan or use for the fawn's suffering. Perhaps God somehow brings some greater good out of it. He is omniscient, and we are just too limited to understand God's plan. The sentiment of this sort of reply is captured with phrases such as "Who are we to question God's will?" or "**The Lord works in mysterious ways.**" Perhaps all of the evil that occurs IS a necessary part of His plan. Just because some of the evil that occurs seems unnecessary to US does not mean it really IS unnecessary.

God's morality is not our morality: Some theists may even go so far as to suggest that God operates with a different moral system than ours, so God does not allow what would be considered evil TO GOD, though He does allow what would be considered evil TO US.

Reply: Rowe points out that there are LOTS of things we can't know for sure, but we make reasonable inferences anyway. For instance, can you know FOR SURE that you are not in "The Matrix" right now? It doesn't seem so. Yet, we are still justified in believing that the world we see and touch is REAL. Similarly, we can't know FOR SURE that God doesn't make use of the fawn's suffering for the greater good, but it is reasonable to think that the suffering is pointless.

As G.E. Moore pointed out, with any "if ... then" claim, we can draw a valid conclusion by affirming the antecedent OR denying the consequent. So, in other words, BOTH of the following arguments are valid:

Theism says:

1. If God exists, there is no unnecessary evil in the world.
2. God exists.
3. Therefore, there is no unnecessary evil in the world.

Atheism says:

1. If God exists, there is no unnecessary evil in the world.
2. There is unnecessary evil in the world.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Notice that premise 1 is the same in both of these arguments. They only differ in their second premise. So, it seems that we have to make a choice between two premises: Either "**God exists**" is true, or "**There is unnecessary evil in the world**" (i.e., evil that could be removed or prevented without thereby sacrificing some greater good or causing some greater evil).

Rowe asks us, which of these two claims is more plausible, given the information that we have? Clearly, Rowe thinks that "There is unnecessary evil" is the more plausible of the two claims. Which do you think is more plausible?

God's Morality: As for the claim about God's morality, this seems to be suggesting that God's definition of "right" is our definition of "wrong" and vice versa, which is absurd. Imagine God consoling a woman who has just been raped and dismembered, "There there. There's nothing to complain about. What you THINK is bad is actually beautiful in my eyes. What just happened to you is actually good, by my definition." Clearly, this would not be a very satisfying consolation. If God is truly all-powerful, wouldn't He have given us a general sense of morality that is CORRECT?