

THE PROBLEM(S) OF EVIL

Related exam questions:

- Can one plausibly explain the existence of natural evil? (2000/10)
- "There are some who, while no less free than others, would never knowingly harm another person, and it is surely conceivable that everyone should have been like that." Can the 'free-will defence' be faulted by this consideration? (2001/7)
- (a) "The free-will defence makes the indefensible assumption that the value of human freedom outweighs all the atrocities which people have freely committed." Discuss. OR (b) What precisely is 'natural evil'? (2002/8)
- Can it be plausibly claimed that the existence of evil in the world does not count as evidence against the existence of God? (2003/8)
- Is it possible to justify the evil in the world morally by appeal to the greater amount of good which this evil makes possible? (2004/5)
- Can a theist adequately explain non-human suffering? (2006/7)
- "It is a mark of the limitless goodness of God that he permits evils to exist, and draws from the good." (Aquinas) Is this an adequate response to the problem of evil? (2007/9)
- Does the postulation of an afterlife help to solve the problem of evil? (2008/7)
- If a baby deer dies horribly in a forest fire, is this evidence against God's existence, and if so, how strong is the evidence? (2009/5)
- "The evil in the world may not be strictly incompatible with its creation by a benevolent, omnipotent and omniscient being, but it makes it very implausible." Discuss (2010/4)
- Is the 'logical' argument from evil dead? (2011/2)
- "To defuse the logical problem of evil, it is enough simply to point to the logical possibility that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil." Discuss (2012/11)
- (a) Is some free will defence an adequate response to the problem of moral evil? OR (b) Evaluate 'sceptical theism' as a solution to the problem of natural evil. (2013/8)
- Does the strongest form of argument from evil manage to make it irrational to believe that God exists? (2014/13)

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The problem of evil is probably the most difficult open problem in the philosophy of religion. There are hundreds of papers on it, but there's no satisfying solution in sight.

Intuitively, an omnipotent, loving God would want, and so have, a world without suffering. But we know that humans suffer and die horribly all the time everywhere. So God does exist. Analytically:

- (1) If God exists, then God is omnipotent and morally perfect.
- (2) There is evil.

- (3) Necessarily, if a morally perfect being coexists with evil, then that being is not omnipotent.
- (4) Therefore, God does not exist.

The argument has three premises, (1), (2), and (3). Denying (1) means denying the traditional conception of God. This leads to weird alternative theologies (see the cartoon at the end of this doc for an example). (2) is indubitable. So the theist who doesn't want a weird theology must deny (3).

Please read

Alvin Plantinga: God, Freedom, and Evil, pp. 54–64

(a brief summary of Plantinga's celebrated free will defense, plus his infamous speculations about Satan as the cause of natural evil)

and

William Alston: "The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition"

(This is a classic paper on sceptical theism [see below], but its real virtue is that it contains helpful little summaries of current defenses and theodicies.)

and whatever seems interesting from the readings mentioned below.

The basic concepts:

Moral evil: torture, genocide, racism, murder etc.; i.e. evil perpetrated by humans.

Natural evil: earthquakes, disease, predators, epidemics, ageing etc., i.e. evil that results from the operation of nature and ultimately from natural laws (unless Plantinga is right and these evils are caused by Satan, see below).

Logical argument from evil: The claim that evil *logically* contradicts God's existence, and hence (3) is a *logical* truth and one can literally *prove* (using the indubitable empirical premise (2)) that God does not exist. This idea is usually traced to a 1955 paper by J.L. Mackie called "Evil and omnipotence." The currently received wisdom is that the logical argument has been refuted by Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense. The gist of Plantinga's argument is that (3) is false because of the possibility of free will, and it must be replaced by (3*):

- (3*) Necessarily, if a morally perfect being coexists with evil that could be prevented without preventing some greater good or causing some evil at least as bad, then that being is not omnipotent.

And (3*), in turn, cannot guarantee (4), at least not from (1) and (2). To repair the argument, we'd need to replace (2) with (2*):

- (2*) There are evils that could be prevented without preventing some greater good or causing some evil at least as bad.

And this premise, in turn, is far from being obviously true.

Evidential argument from evil: Once these rejoinders came to light, the Secret Atheist Synod convened and, after 24 years of deliberation, they devised the *evidential* (or inductive) argument from evil. The gist of the evidential argument, as developed in William Rowe's 1979 paper "The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism," is that given the magnitude, duration, and distribution of evils in our world, we have good inductive evidence that (2*) is true, and therefore we are justified to conclude that God does not exist—not as a matter of logic but as a reasonable conclusion based on all we know of evil. This version of the argument is very much alive today.

Theodicy: A theodicy is an explanation of God's reasons for not preventing genocide, cancer etc. Theodicies are bold responses to the problem of evil, seeking to give us God's actual grounds for allowing our world to be infested by evil. The term "theodicy" originates from Leibniz, who believed that our world is the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz's own theodicy, in his own words, is the following:

"[God] permits the dissonance [i.e. evil], not reluctantly but willingly, yet nevertheless *per accidens*, i.e., not on account of its own nature, but because by its occurrence a greater perfection exists in the whole. Thus God tolerates and permits sins, not reluctantly; nevertheless, he wills them *per accidens* because he knows that the series will be more perfect with these included and compensated for in a marvellous way. Hence, the ultimate ground of sin is not the will itself of a loving God but the nature of the universal perfection of things, which requires that a picture should be set off by shadows and that a melody should be enlivened by dissonances that increase the pleasure by their very resolution."

Defense: A defense is a response to the problem of evil that is less bold than a theodicy. The proponent of a defense, unlike the proponent of a theodicy, does not claim to be aware of God's actual reasons for permitting evil. Rather, she outlines a hypothesis that, for all we know, might be true, and contradicts one of the premises of the argument from evil.

The main current responses to the problem of evil

The free will defense (FWD): Championed by Alvin Plantinga (as well as by famous historical figures like St. Thomas Aquinas). The gist of FWD is that genuinely free will (free will not determined by prior natural causes) is such a great good that God is justified in creating it, but genuine free will by definition makes it possible that evil exists. The big bug in FWD is its failure to account for natural evil (unless you postulate Satan, as Plantinga does in the reading indicated below).

The original sin defense: Evil is the consequence of the sins of prehistoric humans, who were originally living in a state of bliss. Ch.8 from *the Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Religion* explores this idea.

The soul-building theodicy: The function of evil is to foster the development of humans virtues. The papers by Hick and Swinburne are variations on this theme.

Sceptical theism: The gist of sceptical theism is that we are not cognitively equipped to judge whether actual evils could serve some higher purpose. Alston's paper is a classic source. If you're interested, read also the one by Wykstra and/or whatever seems interesting from the *Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*.

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Two other nice papers: In "**The problem of hell**," Marilyn McCord Adams argues that hell must be empty, because damnation would ground an even worse version of the problem of evil. In

"**Victimization and the problem of evil**," Thomas Tracy argues that God does not wrong those that he allows to suffer for some greater good.

