

The Argument from Evil

Antony Eagle

antonyeagle.org

God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 4

Contents

- Arguments Against the Existence of God
- Logical Arguments from Evil
- Higher Goods Theodicies
- Free Will Theodicy
- Horrendous Evil and Deontological Theodicy
- Evidential Arguments from Evil
- The Evil of Divine Judgment

Arguments Against the Existence of God

Our Dialectical Position

- › We've discussed over the past couple of lectures some arguments **for** the conclusion that God exists.
- › Atheists can offer some resistance to such arguments, and specifically in the case of teleological arguments, they can offer **alternative explanations** of the phenomena that theists appeal to as evidence for the designer.
- › But this **defensive** strategy only shows that atheists needn't take these arguments to be **persuasive**.
 - ›› Showing that an argument for p is **not persuasive** \neq offering a persuasive argument **against** p !
- › Can the proselytizing atheist offer a persuasive anti-theistic argument?

Alternative Explanations of Apparent Design

- (AE₁) The existence of God is not **required** to explain any of our evidence.
(premise)
- (AE₂) Extraordinary hypotheses are credible only if they are required in explaining some of our evidence. (Premise)
- (AE₃) If the existence of God is an extraordinary hypothesis, it is not credible.
(AE₁, AE₂)
- (AE₄) The hypothesis that God exists is an extraordinary one. (Premise)
- (AE₅) The existence of God is not credible. (AE₃, AE₄)
- (AEC) God does not exist (AE₅)

What This Argument Doesn't Show

- › Does the conclusion follow? Pretty clearly **not** as a matter of **logic**.
 - › An incredible hypothesis may well be **true** – especially if the alternatives are equally incredible (as in the case of the multiverse alternative to design explanations of fine-tuning).
- › Moreover, many people will **resist** the premises:
 - › Proponents of *a priori* arguments for God will reject AE₄; AE₄ will also be rejected by many ordinary theists, who find the hypothesis that God exists much more familiar and deserving of prior confidence than the 'discoveries' of modern physics.
 - › Die-hard adherents of the design arguments will reject AE₁.
 - › AE₂ is a controversial epistemological premises to which we will return in part III.
- › This might be a **plausible** argument for the atheist, bolstering their belief that theistic explanations are unnecessary. But it isn't a **persuasive** argument against the existence of God; which is just to say, the design argument may remain a plausible one, even if not persuasive.

Logical Arguments from Evil

Arguments from Evil

- › Mackie and many others propose an argument for the conclusion that God does not exist that is supposed to be persuasive to theists, because it is supposed to rest only on **premises theists already accept**.
- › The **argument from evil** attempts to turn an apparent **tension** between God's goodness, God's power, and the actual events of our world, into an argument that God can't exist:

Terrible things happen: for example, innocent kids are killed in natural disasters. God doesn't prevent them, so either he doesn't want to or he can't. He's perfectly good; he would want to. So he must not be able to. If he exists, he can do anything. So the reason he can't stop **terrible evils** is that he doesn't exist.

Two Varieties of Argument from Evil

- › Detailed versions of that argument come in two varieties:

Logical arguments from evil These try to strengthen the tension into an outright contradiction – the existence of evil is **incompatible** with the existence of God.

- » Particularly suited to ‘perfect being’ conceptions of God, such as Anselm’s.

Evidential arguments from evil These are **empirical** arguments against God’s existence – the best explanation of the presence of evil is the absence of God.

- » Like an argument from **design flaws** against God; they share an inferential reliance on IBE with design arguments.

Mackie's Argument

- (M1) If God exists, 'God is wholly good' (Mackie 1955: 200). (premise)
- (M2) 'a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can' (Mackie 1955: 201). (premise)
- (M3) If God exists, God always eliminates evil as far as it can. (M1, M2)
- (M4) If God exists, 'God is omnipotent' (Mackie 1955: 200). (premise)
- (M5) 'there are no limits on what an omnipotent thing can do' (Mackie 1955: 201). (premise)
- (M6) If God exists, God always eliminates all evil. (M3, M4, M5)
- (M7) 'yet evil exists' (Mackie 1955: 200) – i.e., some evil has not been eliminated. (premise)
- (MC) God does not exist. (*modus tollens*, M6, M7)

A Persuasive Argument?

- › Mackie intends it as persuasive: it is supposed to be one that **even theists will accept**.
- › A perfect being theism must accept M1 and M4.
- › The empirical premise M7 seems obviously true.
- › Mackie says of (M2) and (M5) that they are
 - quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'.
(Mackie 1955: 201)
- › If Mackie is right, then the concept of God as an **omnipotent** (all powerful) **and omnibenevolent** (all good) **being** is in trouble – the existence of such a being is by itself inconsistent with the existence of evil.
- › Even if we reject a 'quasi-logical' status for those claims, their truth would still be bad news for perfect being theism.
 - › How could anyone deny that someone powerful enough to create the universe from nothing could have created it free from evil (M5); or deny that someone perfectly good would have wanted to create it without evil (M2)?

What Could a Solution Look Like?

- › A theistic solution to the challenge posed by Mackie's argument will reject one of the premises (assuming we are dealing with a perfect being theist, so rejecting God's perfection embodied in M1 and M4 is not on the table).
- › They can thus argue:
 1. Evil doesn't really exist (M7 is false);
 2. God can't eliminate all evils (M5 is false); or
 3. Even perfectly good things won't always eliminate evil when they can (M2 is false).
- › An approach of the third sort is called a **theodicy**: a justification for thinking that
for every actual evil found in the world, one can describe some state of affairs that ... will provide an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil in question. (Tooley 2021: §4)

Rejecting M7: There is no Evil

- › When confronted with ‘paradigmatic horrors’ (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 300) like rape, murder, torture, child abuse, starvation, childhood cancers, etc., it is very difficult to maintain this response – *evil* loses all meaning if these things don’t count.
- › One possible approach we will consider at greater length in the following lecture: the idea that God is the **arbiter** of what is morally correct, so that anything God **decides** is good would thereby **be** good.
- › But even if possible in theory, in practice even this response will fail, since (theists assure us) we have ample evidence that God has decided that the things on this list are **actually** evils.
 - ›› He could have decided otherwise, but since he didn’t, they are still evils.
 - ›› Indeed, since (on this view) he could have made everything that actually happens a good, why didn’t he? It’s easier to **reclassify** an evil than prevent it!

Rejecting M7: Recalibrating Good and Evil

- › One idea about the **afterlife**: the blessed get to behold God's face as their divine reward, while the wicked do not:

Rise up, Lord, confront them, bring them down; ...

By your hand save me from such people, Lord, from those of this world whose reward is in this life....

As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness. **Psalm 17:13-15**)

- › If an eternity of contemplation of God is the best reward, despite having not much to do with what we ordinarily find pleasurable, maybe we just have the wrong idea about good and evil: maybe pain and suffering are not after all bad.
 - ›› This response may actually be an **afterlife theodicy**, rejecting M2 – given this infinite reward, maybe earthly evils just don't matter.

Rejecting M5: No Best World

- › We might reject M5 if there is no best possible world – for every possible world, there is a better one.
- › Hence, every world must contain some amount of evil, at least to the extent that deprivation of good is an evil (Tooley 2021: §5.2).
- › But is **this around us** really the best God can do? Surely a perfect world in which someone, once, stubs their toe will be **indescribably superior** to this world (Mackie 1955: 205).
 - › Note that such a world would also contain enough evil to generate the contrast with good, so this is also a problem for the next approach to rejecting M5.
- › We could run a revised argument from evil: if there were a benevolent and omnipotent God, he would have created a world with **not much evil**; yet there is much evil in our world, and an improvement on our world that contains less is easily envisaged.

Rejecting M5: Good Needs Evil

- › As Mackie puts it, 'if there were no evil there could be no good either' (Mackie 1955: 203). So there is a limit on God's power: he cannot eliminate all evil without eliminating all good too.
- › Even if a good thing will eliminate evil so far as it can, as long as there is positive value to having good things, that thing will not eliminate every evil since to do so would be to create a **neutral world** which is worse than a mostly-good-with-a-little-evil world.
 - › This too may in fact be a theodicy: God could remove all evil, but his goodness makes him want to ensure goodness exists and hence he does not.
- › But why would we even think that good requires evil? Perhaps without the contrast we wouldn't have a **word** *good* – for it would be synonymous with *existing* or *occurring*. But that wouldn't mean that nothing was good.
 - › No more than the fact that an all-red world wouldn't have a word *red* would mean that somehow nothing is red (Mackie 1955: 205).

Theodicy Elaborated

- › A **theodicy** aims to give ‘reasons that would suffice to justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in allowing all of the evils found in the world’ (Tooley 2021: §4).
- › Theodicies as responses to the problem of evil go back at least to Descartes (1641) and Leibniz (and earlier):

Higher goods theodicies It contributes to a higher good that there be some (lower) evil: ‘This evil will be more than overbalanced. God will derive a greater good from it, and it will finally turn out that this series of events... is the most perfect among all the possible series of events’ (Leibniz 1686: §XXX).

Free will theodicies ‘because of the great value of libertarian free will, it is better that God create a world in which agents possess libertarian free will, even though they may misuse it, and do what is wrong, than that God create a world where agents lack libertarian free will’ (Tooley 2021: §7.2).

» Of course this may be an **instance** of the first kind (Mackie 1955: 208).

Higher Goods Theodicies

Higher Goods

- › Leibniz:

the best course is not always that one which tends towards avoiding evil, since it is possible that the evil may be accompanied by a greater good. For example, the general of an army will prefer a great victory with a slight wound to a state of affairs without wound and without victory. (Leibniz 1710: 378)

- › Here it is not merely that the victory is a larger good than the wound – it is supposed to be that the victory is a **more important variety of good** than the mere avoidance of injury would be.

Mill on Higher Pleasures

- › Compare here Mill on **higher pleasures** (poetry over pushpin):

[i]t would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone. ... Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference ... that is the more desirable pleasure. (Mill 1861: ch. II)

- › So we need some goods that are **more worthy** than first-order goods, and also **essentially** involve the **sacrifice** of undergoing some first-order evil.
- › Examples: the existence of **sympathy**, or **heroism**, or **resisting temptation**, or the 'gradual overcoming of evil by good' (Mackie 1955: 206).
 - › Topically: coronavirus provides an opportunity for all of us to show self-restraint and empathy for the suffering of others; these goods are worth the social and economic costs we're now experiencing, on the higher-goods view.

A Higher Goods Theodicy (Mackie 1955: 206–8)

- › The proposal is that to create or ensure a higher ('more important') good, a first order evil 'is a necessary component' (Mackie 1955: 206).
- › Indeed, if the higher goods are structured in the right way, any amount of the higher good will more than **compensate** for the actual pain and suffering there is.
- › This is a theodicy: the existence of evil is justified by the greater good, a greater good which God can actualise and which **he would desire to actualise** – even more than a world with no first-order evil.
 - ›› This doesn't just retread the ground of the 'no good without evil' objection – it is perfectly possible, say these people, to have a world of pure first order goods. But that world would lack other more valuable goods that can only be secured by **trading in** some of the first order goods for first order evils.

'The fatal objection' (Mackie 1955: 207-8)

- › If the **pattern of balance** between first order goods and evils is a certain way (e.g., that good perseveres and overcomes evil), that is a higher good.
- › But if the pattern is **not** that way – e.g., if evil prospers through indifference and overcomes good, or if 'malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice' exist – that situation is an instance of a **higher evil**.
- › Moreover, if the higher good is incommensurable with the lower goods, then 'by analogy' (Mackie 1955: 207) the higher evil would also be incommensurable, and be the more important kind of evil to prevent.
- › But this kind of higher evil does actually exist – the problem of evil recurs for the new class of evils.

Objection to Higher Goods

- › We might also object in general to the assumptions about good that it makes.
- › It may be a 'low, materialistic view of good and evil' to equate them with 'pleasure and pain' (Mackie 1955: 206), but it is an elitist and callous view of good and evil to identify them with quasi-aesthetic values like a satisfying **world narrative**.
 - › Only someone in a relatively privileged position of never having experienced much hunger or abuse or violence would take the attitude that such things were necessary for the world to have a well-constructed plot.
 - › It's a cliché, for example, for the 'damaged heroine' to have **rape as a backstory** – and while that is useful for setting up why your character is as she is, it's hardly necessary in real life.
 - › A life devoid of suffering might not make for a good movie, but it would make for a perfectly decent life.

Free Will Theodicy

Characteristics of Free Will Theodicy

- › Typically, we will need to say that it is not goodness or badness of individual acts which makes God's decision about what kind of world to actualise: it is the **goodness or badness of the universe as a whole** that God considers.
- › The claim is: a world of wholly 'good' acts without freedom is worse than a world with some bad acts with freedom.
 - › This is then a kind of higher good – and it has a corresponding higher evil, namely, **coercion**.
- › Implicit in the free will theodicy is the assumption that
 - it is better on the whole that men [sic] should act freely, and sometimes err, than that they should be innocent automata, acting rightly in a wholly determined way. (Mackie 1955: 208)

Determination Undermines Freedom: Libertarian Free Will

- › If **compatibilism** were true, people could have free will while God determines that they must exercise their will for good:
 - there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good. (Mackie 1955: 209)
- › We must be **presupposing** a **libertarian** conception of free will – free choices are purely the effect of the agent's will, subject to no external control.
- › A world of wholly good acts, all done freely, would be best – but God cannot plan to make that world. To **ensure** those acts would **undermine** the libertarian freedom of its inhabitants.
 - ›› God can at most plan to make a world with particular creatures facing particular choices, such that their choices **could** lead to the best of all possible worlds.
- › What makes our world good (and better than any deterministic world), is that it could have evolved into the best, even if it did not.

Libertarianism and Constraints on Actualization

- › God cannot actualize a world where everyone is guaranteed to choose the best, since to do so would **undermine** free choice in what to do.
 - » This is no constraint on omnipotence – libertarians think the outcomes of my future choices being actualised by God's decision necessarily excludes those choices being the result of **my decision**.
- › Free creatures are **co-creators** of actuality - God can't choose for them without making himself the **sole** creator.
- › Accordingly, God cannot 'actualize any world He wants' (Adams and Sutherland 2018, fn. 10). He will choose to actualize one of the **best achievable** worlds, which will be one containing creatures able to make genuine decisions, just like God himself can.
- › But that means he cannot pick which of those best worlds to actualize; were he to pick **just one**, he'd actually be picking a world that is **superficially** like one with free agents but really lacks them.

The possibility of exclusively good choices

- › It is of course **possible** that free choosers should always choose the good:

If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. (Mackie 1955: 209)

- › But it must be **possible for this world God has actualized**, that its inhabitants sometimes choose the bad, else God would have actualized a world without free choice.
 - » It's possible that a fair coin should land heads every time. But God couldn't choose to actualize a world where some coin cannot land otherwise than heads and also have that coin be fair.

Another role for free will: afterlife theodicy

- › According to some denominations, God rewards some and punishes others for their conduct here on earth. Maybe he rewards good actions; maybe he rewards faith and repentance.
- › Free will is important because it gives us a chance to display – or fail to display – the qualities which are important for the divine reward. And remember that the divine reward is of **infinite magnitude**.
- › If that's right, the only thing which may be important about our earthly existence is that it gives us the opportunity for free choices. Nothing else that happens is relevant to the evaluation of the quality of our life, because it will be wholly **swamped** by whatever happens to us in the final chapter of our existence.
- › Hence suffering and other worldly evils don't matter at all – *a fortiori*, there is no reason for God to try and prevent them.
 - » Objection: Lewis (2007) on divine evil.

Objections to Libertarianism

- › Many object to these kind of theodicies on the grounds that libertarian free will is **incoherent**, offering this sort of argument (Hobart 1934):
 1. No free act can be **determined** by the past of the agent, whether it was then under their control or not – so says the libertarian.
 2. So free acts must be **undetermined** at the time of choice – that the antecedent events were exactly the same, but the decision was different.
 3. But how is that agency: ‘*liberty*, when applied to voluntary actions ... surely cannot mean, that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with ... uniformity from the other’ (Hume 1777: §8, ¶23)
- › We also need what libertarians have so far failed to offer: ‘an understanding of what could lead us to want to say that an *organism* [rather than an event] has brought something about...’ (Steward 2012: 11); a metaphysically coherent account of **agent causation**
- › But even granting libertarianism, free will theodicy faces serious objections.

Objections to the Free Will Theodicy (Tooley 2021: §7.2)

1. **Constraint and coercion isn't always bad**, so it would in fact have been preferable for God to intervene to stop the bad consequences of our evil decisions:

very few people think that one should not intervene to prevent someone from committing rape or murder. ... almost everyone would hold that a failure to prevent heinously evil actions when one can do so would be seriously wrong. (Tooley 2021: §7.2)

2. I can't exercise **voluntary control** over all my bodily movements, but that doesn't make me unfree. Why couldn't God have made us free but unable to exercise voluntary control over murdering/torturing/etc. actions?
3. Many bad outcomes result from **natural evils**: childhood cancer, or death by tsunami, for example. How can human free will justify the existence of these evils?

Horrendous Evil and Deontological Theodicy

Horrendous Evils

I define 'horrendous evils' as 'evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole'. ... horrendous evils seem ... to engulf the positive value of a participant's life. ... most people would find in the doing or suffering of them *prima facie* reason to doubt the positive meaning of their lives. (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 299–300)

- › These are not just evils that make the universe worse than it would otherwise be – they are evils that make an individual's life worse than worth living.
- › How could God let something like that **happen to someone**?

The Problem of Horrendous Evils

[Distinguish] between two dimensions of Divine goodness in relation to creation—viz., ‘producer of global goods’ and ‘goodness to’ or ‘love of individual created persons’... we may separate two problems of evil parallel to the two sorts of goodness mentioned

... establishing God’s excellence as a producer of global goods does not automatically solve the second problem, especially in a world containing horrendous evils. For God cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives He allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils—that is, individuals within whose lives evils remain undefeated. ... [G]lobal and generic approaches ... fail to give satisfaction. ...

Could the truck driver who accidentally runs over his beloved child find consolation in the idea that this ... unintended side-effect was part of the price God accepted for a world with the best balance of moral good over moral evil He could get? (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 302-3)

Deontological and Consequentialist Evils

- › There is a parallel here with some things which are **permissible** according to different normative theories.
- › **Consequentialist** views (like **utilitarianism**), according to which (roughly) good acts are those which **maximise global wellbeing**, can permit harms to individuals so long as they are outweighed by the greater good.
- › **Deontological** views, according to which (roughly) good acts are those which respect the rights and obligations accruing in virtue of personhood. Many such views, like Kant's, will say that in virtue of that, you **cannot use a person as a means** – and in particular, you cannot use them as a means to a greater good that does not benefit that very person.

The Inadequacy of Consequentialist Theodicies

- › Most theodicies are consequentialist – they allow God to trade off harms to individuals. But such theodicies
 - draw a picture of Divine indifference or even hostility to the human plight. Would the fact that God permitted horrors because they were constitutive means to His end of global perfection, or that He tolerated them because He could obtain that global end anyway, make the participant's life more tolerable, more worth living for him/her? (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 303)
- › This is not just to prefer deontology to consequentialism – it is made sharper by the fact that God is supposed (particularly by Christians) to **care, individually, for his creatures**:
 - The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in, from this time forth, and even forevermore. ([Psalm 121:8](#))

'Loving Intimacy with God' (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 309)

- › Adams herself argues that God can trade off past harms with future goods – so the promise of future reward may swamp harms suffered during life: 'the good of beatific, face-to face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any ... ills a person might experience' (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 306–7).
- › But she goes further: a relationship with God may even confer 'significant meaning and positive value even on horrendous suffering' (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 309).

perhaps our deepest suffering as much as our highest joys may themselves be direct visions into the inner life of God... so any vision of God (including horrendous suffering) would have a good aspect insofar as it is a vision of God.... For the most part, horrors are not recognized as experiences of God.... But, Christian mysticism might claim ... from the post-mortem perspective ... such sufferings will be seen for what they were.... (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 308)

Defeatism

- › The higher goods and free will theodicies at least make the attempt to ‘explain the ways of God to man’, by appealing to facts about **values** that believers and unbelievers share.
- › But Adams’ theodicy is not like that – it is **partisan**, because it makes claims not only about God, but also about the value of various outcomes, that atheists will not and cannot share.
 - › Indeed, many theists will find it hard to share them, and they will have to rest content with the possibility that they will never ‘understand the reasons why God permits our participation in horrendous evils’ (Adams and Sutherland 2018: 309).
- › So this is a very narrow defensive strategy – it may even reduce, in the end, to the crude strategy of simply denying that these things are evil since they will turn out **all along** to have had significant positive value for their sufferers.
- › This is to solve the problem of evil by simple stipulation that God will solve the problem of evil in some incomprehensible way that we will feel no need to question.
Unsatisfying.

Evidential Arguments from Evil

The Quasi-Logical Premises

- › The battle over logical arguments from evil concerns whether **it is possible to come up with some rationale for God's permitting evils.**
- › An evidential argument from evil **concedes** at the start that this is possible, even if by Adams' manoeuvre of stipulating that experience of God will resolve evil experiences in our favour.
- › But such arguments contend that, on balance, **it is more plausible than not** that *prima facie* appearances are correct, and the theodicies are incorrect.
- › In one common formulation, evidential arguments from evil propose that the **best explanation of evil** is that God doesn't exist, rather than the inferior explanation offered by theodicy.

Rowe's Crucial Claim

- › Rowe offers an argument proceeding from the premise that
 - (i) : There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. (Rowe 1979: 336)
- › This is to deny theodicy – and (for those who propose theodical responses to the logical argument from evil) if it were true, it would entail that God doesn't exist, since a good God would have prevented such **avoidable evils**.
- › But whereas Mackie attempts to suppose an analogue of (i) is a quasi-logical truth, Rowe attempts to support it by appeal to **plausibility considerations**.

Rowe on Anti-Theodicy

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. ... It must be acknowledged that the case of the fawn's apparently pointless suffering does not prove that (i) is true.... But it is one thing to *know* or *prove* that (i) is true and quite another thing to have *rational grounds* for believing (i) to be true. ...

Is it reasonable to believe that there is some greater good so intimately connected to that suffering that even an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have obtained that good without permitting that suffering or some evil at least as bad? It certainly does not appear reasonable to believe this. ... In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. (Rowe 1979: 337-38)

Theistic Responses

- › Inference to the best explanation is a notoriously slippery principle.
- › On standard Bayesian reconstructions, an inference to the best explanation is **an inference to the most likely explanation of the evidence**.
- › But whether h is likeliest given e depends on your **prior belief** in h .
 - › The theorem of total probability says that

$$P(h) = P(h | e)P(e) + P(h | \neg e)P(\neg e).$$

- › So if your prior confidence that God exists h is high, and you are confident that you have seen *prima facie* pointless suffering e (so that $P(\neg e)$ is low), then it mathematically follows that $P(h | e)$ must be high.
- › If you are a theist, you already have in effect **priced in** the problem of evil in your credences, and so you will not be moved by inference to the best explanation.

The state of play

- › The atheist, of course, will accept the apparently natural assumption that the probability of God's existence given pointless suffering is low (Draper 1989).
 - ›› The debate in the literature generally concerns whether we can offer some **non-subjective** account of probability which will make even theists accept that suffering disconfirms God (Tooley 2021: §3).
- › But we might also return to Sober's point (2003) discussed last time: to know whether apparently pointless suffering is improbable given the hypothesis that God exists, we should have to know something about God and his intentions. If Sober is right, we have no basis for making such judgments – we are not in a position to judge whether the likelihood of apparent suffering given God is high or low.
 - ›› Either we know something about God, in which case apparent design is evidence for God, and apparent suffering evidence against God, and we shall have to weigh up which is stronger. Or we know nothing about God, which blocks the design argument and likewise blocks the evidential argument from evil.

The Evil of Divine Judgment

The Problem of Divine Evil

God, if we are to believe an orthodox story, has prescribed eternal torment as a punishment for insubordination. ...

along both dimensions, time and intensity, the torment is infinitely worse than all the suffering and sin that will have occurred during the history of life in the universe. ... God is supposed to torture the damned forever, and to do so by vastly surpassing all the modes of torment about which we know.

Although those who elaborate the orthodox account are sometimes concerned with the fit between crime and punishment, there is no possibility of a genuine balance. For the punishment of the damned is infinitely disproportionate to their crimes. (Lewis 2007: 232)

A Different Argument

- › Lewis' concern is with **absolute proportionality**: that what sinners end up getting isn't an accurate reflection of the **intrinsic merit** of their actions.
 - › E.g., suppose we had a justice system that gave every guilty person a base sentence of 30 years plus the usual sentence for that kind of crime – as long as the guilty/innocent distinction marks a genuine distinction, this respects **relative** proportionality – since it treats worse criminals worse – but is **absolutely** unfair.
- › Moreover, because the absolutely disproportionate judgment is a **punishment**, God does evil in delivering it.

Lewis' Argument

- (L1) God has damned some people for insubordination.
- (L2) People are insubordinate only if either we are ill-informed about the consequences, or being insubordinate is an unavoidable side-effect of something else valuable (e.g., libertarian free will).
- (L3) If they were ill-informed, then God has damned some people without helping them to avoid it – 'my eternal prospects were determined by a choice I was forced to make in ignorance' (Lewis 2007: 235).
- (L4) If they were exercising free will, God has damned some people without helping them to avoid it (e.g., he could have kept free will intact while still doing 'far more luring and urging than he does' (Lewis 2007: 234)).
- (L5) God has damned people without helping them to avoid it. (L1–L4, proof by cases)

The Argument, Continued

(L6) '[D]amnation is torment' (Lewis 2007: 233)

(L7) God has condemned people to eternal torment when he could have helped them to avoid that fate. (L5,L6)

(L8) God has committed great evil. (L7)

- › The final argumentative move rests on the idea that **not helping someone who you are in a position to help without any inconvenience to yourself** is an evil. (God is omnipotent, so is always in a position to help out his creation if he wanted to.)
- › The conclusion that God has committed great evil is **inconsistent** with perfect being theism, and it can be taken as an argument against God (or that God, at least).
 - » But it can also be taken as a *reductio* argument against (L1).

Resisting (L6)

- › If damnation is not torment, it may not be evil to damn people without giving them a chance to avoid it.
- › Some say: it is merely the experience of being deprived of/insubordinate to God that is **called** 'torment' in scripture, but that is in fact mere **metaphor**.

This proposal depends on supposing that torment is an apt metaphor for insubordination.

I deny that it is. Contented atheist that I am, my state of alienation from the deity is not one for which torment is an apt metaphor. Christians may respond that this judgment is shallow: From my mundane perspective, I may judge myself happy enough in my denial of God. Once I am fully informed, however, I will appreciate the grossness of my swinish satisfaction, and torment will be an apt description of my insubordinate condition. ...

But, as before, I have been placed in a dangerous situation... Once again, I have been treated unjustly. (Lewis 2007: 234-35)

Resisting (L1): Universalism

Christianity, properly so-called, requires a redemption. At its heart is the claim that Jesus was born to save us from something. ...

if there's a redemption, there'll have to be a distinction between those who take advantage of it and those who don't. What happens to those who don't? According to universalism, they are not to be punished. God will place them in some condition without perpetrating divine evil.

The afterlife is a more heterogeneous affair than people have thought. The point of our earthly lives isn't to divide us into two groups, one to live forever in unimaginable bliss, the other to suffer unimaginable torment. Instead of being tried, we simply discover who we are. ...

Not all of us are destined for Christian salvation, for God's eternal Sabbath, but everyone will receive a well-adapted reward. God does not treat all of us alike. But there is no divine evil. (Lewis 2007: 237-38)

References

References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord and Stewart Sutherland (2018) 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **63**: 297–323.
- Descartes, René (1641/1996) *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham, ed., trans. Cambridge University Press.
- Draper, Paul (1989) 'Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists', *Noûs* **23**: 331–50. doi:[10.2307/2215486](https://doi.org/10.2307/2215486).
- Hobart, R E (1934) 'Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable Without It', *Mind, New Series* **43**: 1–27. doi:[10.1093/mind/XLIII.169.1](https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/XLIII.169.1).
- Hume, David (1777/2022) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Amyas Merivale and Peter Millican, eds. <https://davidhume.org/texts/e/>.
- Leibniz, Gottfried (1710/1985) *Theodicy*, Austin Farrer, ed.; E M Huggard, trans. Open Court.

References (cont.)

- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1686/1989) 'Discourse on Metaphysics', in Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew, eds., *Philosophical Essays*: 35–68. Hackett.
- Lewis, David (2007) 'Divine Evil', in Louise Antony, ed., *Philosophers Without Gods*: 231–42. Oxford University Press.
- Mackie, J L (1955) 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind* **64**: 200–212.
doi:[10.1093/mind/lxiv.254.200](https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/lxiv.254.200).
- Mill, John Stuart (1861/1969) *Utilitarianism*, vol. **10**, The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, John M Robson, ed. University of Toronto Press; Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rowe, William L (1979) 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **16**: 335–41.
- Sober, Elliott (2003) 'The Design Argument', in Neil A Manson, ed., *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*: 25–53. Routledge.
- Steward, Helen (2012) *A Metaphysics for Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

References (cont.)

Tooley, Michael (2021) 'The Problem of Evil', in Edward N Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/evil/>.