

J.A Cora
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

SUMMARY

In this essay, I'll present what I refer to as the Definitional Argument: which I will develop by analyzing what I see as the core basic problems that arise from definitional misconceptions as well as the definitional traits of a definitionally independent God.

In addition, addressing speculative arguments concerning why a good God would allow evil; I would say from any logically coherent standpoint, for arguments to be logically sound: definitions need clarification.

Therefore, before moving on to my primary definitional argument, I shall first account for the biblically undisputed origin of the term "evil." Remember that I'll be addressing this with the presuppositions of a Christian apologist in response to J.L. Mackie's¹ arguments.

EVIL AT CONCEPTION

According to theology, sin entered the world when Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree of knowledge of "good and evil," as described in the book of Genesis. As soon as sin entered the world, the potential for evil also did, giving people the opportunity to choose between good and evil—or, as I like to put it, their sudden knowledge of the two—through the gift of free will.

I would also argue free will is the foundational source of necessary subsequent consequences, solely factoring on choice, which leads to a path; to turn against God's foundational goodness, which is what some may define as "evil." As I shall explain, the word "evil" is frequently misused, often being replaced by a false generalization in place of decisions made in opposition to God and the course of action that follows.

That being stated, you may assume that I believe "evil" as we understand it is a myth. Contrarily, I am merely making a point on a distinct meaning of evil in this context, which I think to be frequently and unfairly classed under claims of a contradictory biblical creation. Later, I'll evaluate the claim that God's nature is inconsistent and explain why, in my opinion, it is erroneous.

Regarding sin, it is also necessary to make a clear distinction: "sin," or the road taken in rebellion against God, is the forerunner of what most people today would consider to be "evil." It is important to note that Ancient Hebrew Scripture provides context for the nature of this distinction that resulted from

¹ J.L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind*, Vol. 64, No. 254 (1955), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2251467> [accessed 20 October 2022].

J.A Cora
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

disobedience; for the early Israelites interpreting Scripture, the "tree of knowledge of order and disorder" and the entering thereof would have been the more contextual translation within the garden.²

Consequently, there was a sudden awareness between the two. (Awareness of shame, etc.) Which, in my opinion, is comparable to the innocence of a fully developed infant who is acquiring the knowledge of all potential perversions of intrinsic good with great force.

Having shown how so-called evil may coexist with a good God's world (at least at creation), I won't address any more objections to the assertion that there are inconsistencies about the presence of evil at the time of earth's conception. But I'll go on to what, in my opinion, is the real problem—the fundamental misunderstanding of God's omnipotence.

DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

I will now give my definitional argument. The fact that evil still exists is a typical argument against the existence of a good God. That if evil exists, God must have either created it or at the very least permits it. When pursuing this, two topics are of utmost importance: confronting what we label as evil and key definitional characterizations of God that go unrecognized. We would be wrong to approach evil with the assumption that it has a fixed, intrinsic meaning. As been previously demonstrated, there are significant problems with how evil is categorized on a basic basis.

The result is that there are many mischaracterizations of God. God's refusal to coerce his creations into following him, God's character, which states that he will not forcibly reject a creation, coerce a creation to love, coerce a creation to refrain from being spiteful toward him, and, most importantly, my main argument: the character of God, which is defined independently.

J.L Mackie argues:

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) God is wholly good.
- (3) Evil exists.³

Instead of asking how evil contradicts anything, I would like to know how something that transcends contradiction can contradict itself. Fundamentally, how we define and interpret these "evils" or "goods" raises a significant problem that even Christian thinkers sometimes overlook. This means that even our definition depends heavily on God's meaning. If that's the case, how are we even going to attempt to describe God's own character, something only he is capable of doing? If every definitional attribute of

² Nicholas J. Schaser, 'What is the Knowledge of "Good and Evil"? (2019), *Israel Bible Weekly*, <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/knowledge-good-evil/> [accessed 23 October 2022].

³ J.L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind*, Vol. 64, No. 254 (1955).

J.A Cora
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

God is accurate, then God's definition of his attributes is everything that is accurate within the parameters of what he wills to be characteristically accurate.

I would rather argue:

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) An omnipotent being can do anything; therefore, God defines himself.
- (3) Evil exists.

We are aware that the God of Christianity is an independently thinking being with feelings similar to those of the things he created. What do we mean when we say that God must be defined within our definitions? We talk about an all-good God, which is clear from the Bible, but how would we describe God's goodness if he made it real? What say we deny that God has the possibility to change, given that he unquestionably possesses the capacity to do so? The assumption that an almighty God would have the greatest ability to describe himself is entirely reasonable and tenable.

To explain, I think that the fundamental premise of J.L. Mackie's (and others') argument is flawed because it assumes that we can even begin to ascribe the definition of something or someone (God) who is a definitionally independent creature. Meaning that since God determines his own definitional properties, any argument based on God preserving the precise nature of a characteristic description of himself is useless.

The issue arises when we make claims about God's nature and assume that he has a clear-cut definition. By doing this, one presupposes that God somehow depends on that precise definition. The claim that God cannot be entirely benevolent, fully powerful, or have a definitional grasp of his omnipotence with regard to evil is analogous to saying that you are more knowledgeable about space than the one who created it.

I'm not suggesting that people can't wonder why God would let such situations. Nevertheless, based on what I've said thus far, I claim that it is a feeble attempt to refute the existence of God.

People could also assert that you might apply my reasoning in a variety of circumstances. Some people would interpret my claim as stating that since God has defined everything, we cannot define anything. In answer, I would reply that when we're talking about the definitions of God himself rather than the analogs of his works, it is astronomically different.

We may directly experience good and evil, which naturally fits into Christian theology, but how could we ever compare our personal perception (let alone definition) of good and evil to a creator's? If we are his creatures and are able to distinguish between good and evil or right and wrong, then we may be able to develop a feeling of understanding. However, if God, who creates the same fundamental reality that we define, does not determine what is right or wrong, good or evil, then who or what does? In a universe where God is the creator, I contend that all bicycles would have a definitional sense of "evil" if God said that "all bicycles are evil."

J.A Cora
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

In this situation, I'm attempting to show how ridiculous it would be to act as though we could understand the actual meaning of good or evil, let alone what it means to be omnipotent or omniscient, and yet argumentatively assign it to an independently definitional God.

If God is the very definition of "good," as is evident from his description of himself, then everything that he judges to be contrary to that definition would be "not good." Given that "not good" is the reverse of "good" and that God is the pinnacle of "good," living a life of sin would be a route taken in opposition to God, who is the very essence of good. If sin is seen to be the root of all evil, then there is a compelling case to be made that how God defines himself through omnipotence depends entirely on how we interpret the ensuing "not goods" and, ultimately, "evils." Creating a knowledge and definition of himself that is independent of us. (Which is open to conceivable modification.)

EVIL, SUFFERING AND ALLOWANCE

Shifting from my definitional argument, I will continue following the subject of evil as it plays into our current world. Of course, there can only be conjectural justifications for why evils exist within God's universe relating to his good nature (his independent definitional characteristics). That said, I will comment on what I believe to be evident.

Christian doctrine holds that redemption comes through a route toward God, whereas suffering comes through a path away from God (sin), which to some extent may characterize the diversity and severity of protracted suffering. Furthermore, it is crucial to define "evil" and the various degrees of "suffering;" I would contend that pain brought on by "evil" would be of a different caliber of severity than natural suffering, which is more often the result of a cause-and-effect chain of events.

Let me explain, the vast majority of "horrendous evils"⁴—to use a phrase from M.M. Adams—come from human actions (or decisions) that are fundamentally at odds with God's standards. It is obvious that man's free will is the root cause of "bad" deeds. If we can identify human behavior as the root of these horrendous evils, then may begin to speculate about God's nature and the tolerance of evil.

In my mind there are few possibilities, one of which corresponds to God's grant of free will, and another of which concerns the greatest potential good (which both have their respective arguments.) If we believe that God permits evil because he won't make people comply or disobey him, we may perceive God's allowance a weakness, but we would be viewing such a viewpoint from a distorted perspective.

On the other hand, many have argued that these actions could be justified if God permits evil because it ultimately leads to greater good. I don't now feel as though I have a firm position on either after giving

⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, Stewart Sutherland, 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 63, (1989), pp. 297–323. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106922>> [accessed 24 October 2022].

J.A Cora

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

both some thought, but as I have explained, I am certain that both might be consistent with God's nature (as it is definitionally independent.)

Speaking of "natural evils," according to Christian theology, the earth itself fell into corruption and decay after the fall, not only man. (man's sickness etc.) A self-explanatory story about natural calamities is included in the Genesis passage on stewardship. Given this, the Bible also mentions several instances of God passing judgment by way of the planning of natural calamities.

When approaching this subject, we would need to have a grasp of God's justice (which yet again I would argue is self-definitional with no exceptions). That being stated, we can only make educated guesses on the toleration of evils.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, every argument concerning the problem of evil rests on the premise that, so long as evil persists, the character of a loving God is incoherent, contradictory, or faulty. It is clear from my definitional argument that a self-definitionally defined God who is able to act omnipotently need not rely solely on our understanding of what it means to be omnipotent and omniscient; rather, we rely on his self-definition.

Therefore, it would be foolish to assert that a self-defining God must conform to our definitions of the good and evils (i.e., Omniscience); inferring a contradiction from the aforementioned would lead to flimsy conclusions. It is pure guesswork as to how a good God might permit evil, yet regardless of the circumstances, it can still be true and uncontradictory given the characteristics of a self-definitive God.

As I have aimed to achieve from my argument, I will conclude with this statement: *'The viewpoint to embrace a God who defines good, as opposed to the contradictory character of a good God, is the solution to the dilemma of evil.'*

-J. A CORA

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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: DEFINITIONAL ARGUMENT

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