

Why would a benevolent and omnipotent God have created a world with evil and suffering?

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Abstract

This essay is divided into four parts. Firstly, an introduction defining evil and the two types of evil; moral and natural evil. The second part will focus on exploring arguments on God and evil. Thirdly, examining why would God allow moral evil to exist. Finally, discussing the reason(s) for the existence of natural evil. This is concluded by answering the question “Why would God allow evil and suffering?”.

Keywords: Evil, Mackie, Plantinga, Freewill, Natural and moral evil, logic, theism

The 1755 earthquake of Lisbon Portugal is considered one of the most devastating moments in European history. One of the people who were affected by the horror of the incident is Voltaire. Writing a poem on the incident at the beginning of his book *Candide*, he followed a pessimistic view about the incident unlike Leibniz and Alexander Pope who maintained an optimist view. Reacting to the incident, Voltaire claimed that Christ is not God Incarnate while rejecting divine revelation (Walther, 1956). Voltaire’s pessimism presented the question “Why would God allow such evil to exist?”.

The main question proposed is: If God is omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent, why would such a deity allow the existence of evil. An answer to this question is easy to be found if any of these adjectives is changed or removed (Mackie, 1955, p. 201). If God is not benevolent then it can be argued evil can exist. If God is not omnipotent then sometimes God cannot stop

evil. If God is not omniscient then sometimes God cannot know every single act of evil (Calder, 2018). This argument by its conclusion states God does not exist. If theists would consent to such definition of God, then the problem of evil would not exist anymore. However, theists, believers in God, insist and claim that God has all three qualities and yet evil exists.

There are two types of evil, moral and natural evil. Moral evil is the type of evil that is committed by individuals or a group of individuals that is considered evil when harming others. Examples of this type of evil are murder, rape and stealing. This type of evil requires a moral agent (entity) to harm another moral agent(s). It should be noted that evil in this definition is not the evil that goes against the culture of a specific community or norms. For example, if a community has a cultural norm that tea is morally evil and a person does drink, in the community's perspective it is considered evil but not in the meaning sense of evil. Natural evil is a type of evil that is part of natural occurrences. The earthquake that Voltaire despised is considered a natural evil. Hurricanes, plagues, diseases, birth defects, storms, blizzards are few of the many natural evils. These type of evils occur on a natural level and are not attributed to a human being (Calder, 2018; Tooley, 2002).

Reasons for why God and Evil exist

Evil's existence in the case of God existing has several explanations. Major arguments include the following: Pandeism, Skeptical Theism, arguments that Mackie explored, soul-making Theodicy, Privation theory, and Freewill.

Pandeism is a theory that uses the combination of pantheism and deism into one. In this theory, upon the creation of the world, God became the universe when it was created. In this theory, God does not reside "above" the world rather within, hence, blame cannot be attributed to a God who

is immersed within the universe rather than a God who was “above” creation. In this theory, the universe/God requires to be unified, to be unified, the universe must be working together through specific laws which requires transactions (Forces/actions) in which requires information (Entities to exert force). In this theory suffering/evil are a reason for information(entities) to apply forces(transaction), for example, human(information) helping(transaction) others in suffering/pain or universe(information) creating life(transaction) (Lane, 2010, p. 76-77). The problem is if God is all powerful before becoming part of the universe, why does God need to be part of the universe if he is Omnipotent?

Skeptical theists argue, for greater evil to impede, God allows some evil. Such argument allows for humans to do greater good while some evil exists. Similarly, it argues that evil could be a blessing in disguise. For example, larceny happening to the person(a) can be justified by God having hidden motives for such evil to happen. A hidden motive behind the action for example, the person(b) witnessing the action gets a chance to do a greater good and stop such action happening. Person(a) could learn gratitude and person(b) would feel courageous (Swinburne, 2004, p. 241-245). This method calls for being skeptical of one’s own ability and having faith in God’s hidden motives (Dougherty, 2014). The problem with this method is that it limits the omnipotency of God. Since God is all-powerful, he would be limited by *casual* law for a human to commit evil to achieve the greater good, if so, then he would not be omnipotent (Mackie, 1955, 205-206).

Another argument is what Mackie referred to as ‘the universe is better with some evil’ (Mackie, 1955, p. 206). This argument suggests that goodness and evil exists and good would gradually pull a person towards goodness. For example, being in the dark of night (evil) and watching the sunrise (Goodness) to see the beauty. As goodness progresses, it can be argued that the universe

should not remain static, but rather progressively conquers evil. Therefore, for goodness to be attained, some evil is better than none (Mackie, 1955, p. 206; Tooley, 2002). Nonetheless, God's supposed omnipotence still challenges this argument. This method limits God and obliges him to show humans through a gradual process even if he could do otherwise (Tooley, 2002; Beebe, 2020). Moreover, this argument provides an answer for moral evil but it fails to explain natural evil.

Mackie also explores the argument the existence of good necessitates evil's existence. This argument proposes that for a person to understand the concept of good they must see/understand the concept of evil. For example, for a person to know the sense/meaning of pleasure, they must go through the sense/meaning of pain. The problem with this argument, much like the other arguments discussed above, is that it limits God's omnipotency. Additionally, this argument constrains God within logical bounds. It can be argued that these constraints are created by God only for humans, nonetheless, it still limits the all-powerful quality of God. Another problem with this view is that theists can claim that 'good' and 'evil' are opposing qualities that bound by necessity just like 'greatness' is the opposite of 'smallness' and neither can exist without the other. An example to understand 'redness' doesn't necessitate understanding 'non-redness'. A person can see/comprehend redness without labelling it red. Therefore, while opposing entities greatly help in linguistic conceptualization of one another, they don't necessarily affect one another ontologically (Mackie, 1955, p.203-205).

Privation Theory considers evil a 'private' of another substance (ex. Good). This theory suggests that since God is benevolent, then God doesn't create evil, rather all is good and evil is the absence of goodness. For example, diseases are not real evils but rather the absence of health. Therefore, if God is all-good and created everything as good, then anything evil in the real sense

is the absence of good (Calder, 2007, p. 371-72). This argument falls apart on two grounds. First, some aspects of evil, such as pain, cannot be the absence of good, as pain at times can be positive. For example, painful fevers heal the body or a sadist who takes pleasures from the pain of others. Second, it can still be said that God can enforce goodness to prevail in every given instance since he is omnipotent, yet he does not. (Calder, 2018). Therefore, this challenges either his omnipotency or his benevolence.

Soul-making theodicy dictates that evil is required for the refinement of people. This theory argues; for a person to refine their soul, they must go through the hardships and pain of life. The problem with this argument, it also limits God's ability to create a perfect world without evil as a necessity. However, there are refined, rich, extravagant and well-established people who enjoyed life pleasures from a very tender age and did not need to go through evil to acquire their refinement. Furthermore, excessive suffering might even cause people to de-humanise and commit horrific acts resulting in even greater evil, for example, sociopaths (Calder, 2018).

Freewill provides another explanation for the existence of evil. This argument suggests that God did not create evil but rather created human beings with freewill to choose what courses of action to take, hence human beings created evil. Within the context of this argument, a person is better to be acting according to their desires and aspirations rather than being fixed predetermined machine automata (McCloskey, 1960, p. 109-10). Freedom here follows the libertarian freedom where a person is free if they can perform an action and free to refrain from doing an action, both without any external forces (Beebe, 2020).

Nonetheless, in this argument, freedom is considered more important than benevolence. Theists would defend the claim that benevolence is a quality of God, however, God preferred a quality 'freewill' over his main three qualities and left humans to reach benevolence by themselves.

Even though God does not create evil, it can be argued he allows it to exist through the freewill of humans. Theists argue if God does not allow such freewill then the definition of freewill is invalid and this would make God illogical. Furthermore, while God, in this argument, gave humans freewill to choose their courses of action, he still created them with predetermined circumstances, such as their families and countries, that help in shaping their characters. Their circumstances play major parts in the courses of action they choose to take. In other words, if humans are free, then their actions are random and are not bound to their character. It can be argued that God's gift of freedom for humans is not the ability to prevent evil, but rather refraining from preventing evil (Mackie, 1955, 209-10). Then again, why would God, a benevolent deity, allow for that?

Plantinga gives a defence for the freewill argument. The question at hand was, why can't God create a world of freewill and human beings keep choosing the good rather than evil? The answer according to Plantinga it would be impossible, if so, then a person is not free according to the libertarian definition (Plantinga, 1974, p. 29-34; Beebe, 2020). His argument eliminates the idea that God can do the logically impossible: evil cannot be eliminated without eliminating freewill. Take the following worlds as examples:

First world, (I)God creates people with freewill, (II)God does not determine people's choices, (III)No evil exists.

Second world, (I)God creates people with freewill, (II)God determines people's choices, (III)No evil exists.

Third world, (I)God does not create people with freewill, (II)God determines people's choices, (III)No evil exists.

Fourth world, (I)God creates people with freewill, (II)God does not determine people's choices, (III)There is evil.

The fourth world is the actual world which consists of freewill, therefore it is possible to exist.

Regarding the third world, it can be possible and it could be considered an ideal world, but this is not the actual world and if such world did exist, then we in our current form would not exist because we would not be free. The second world is the ideal world in which people have free will but they are only free to choose good. This world is possible, however, it is not probable. Because (II)God can determine people to always choose good and never evil, however, that logically entails that they are not free. Assuming, that God does not determine actions rather influences humans to actions. The problem of this argument humans wouldn't be free to be influenced in all options, but rather are focused on a specific influence of good. Therefore, in this scenario God is doing the logically impossible, and assuming he can do so, God is beyond our capacity of reason (Plantinga, 1974, p. 36-38; Pike, 1979, p. 454-55; Beebe, 2020). The first world where people have their own choices but there is no evil is a very much possible world. It can be argued it is the world theists envision in heaven, nonetheless, it is possible but not probable since free will can result in evil (Plantinga, p. 34-35; Beebe, 2020).

Why does God allow Evil

Between all arguments, the freewill argument by Plantinga is the most tenacious for the co-existence of evil and God. Mackie who proposed that the problem of Evil cannot be answered logically was proven wrong by Plantinga's defence (Beebe, 2020). However, without resorting to scripture, Plantinga's defense explains why humans commit moral evil but does not provide an adequate answer for natural evil.

Questions regarding natural evil are usually answered using the natural laws, privation, and soul-making arguments. Natural disasters or diseases could be chances for people to refine themselves and have a humbling experience that teaches them appreciation. Some might even suggest natural evils aren't even evils rather just mere unfortunate situations (Calder, 2018). It can also be argued that natural evil is part of moral evil due to the actions of people that affects the environment. The problem with such argument it does not answer the suffering of animals which is not done by humans (Tooley, 2002). Why would God let natural evil exist has yet to have a compelling argument.

A final argument that can be used to argue why God and natural evil co-exist is the 'noseeum' inference. Theists can argue that lack of evidence does not constitute as evidence of absence. Not seeing God does not constitute as evidence that God does not exist. This argument, the noseeum inference, could infer the skeptical theism argument. In which case, just because we don't understand why evil exists, doesn't mean it exists without a reason (McBrayer; Tooley, 2002). However, people would find it hard to accept a vague reason (Tooley, 2002). Furthermore, this argument also results in questioning God's omnipotency.

Alston argues that there is 'gratuitous suffering' that can be recognised by people that helps to improving their lives, but the problem is that people cannot have the ability to be certain God has a moral sufficient reason for evil to occur (Alston, 1991, p. 30-34; Tooley, 2002). To this argument, God's sufficient reason for natural evil to occur is noseeum inference. To know why God would permit evil would require extra knowledge which either we receive from God or by discovery (innate or external).

Conclusion

The universal laws of physics were used as the bedrock of science for a period of time until the 20th century. Then, the discovery of sub-atomic particles led to the establishment of laws of quantum mechanics. Where once teleportation was considered myth and science fiction, quantum tunnelling now allows sub-atomic particles to disappear in one area and appear in another (Ananthaswamy, 2020). Similarly, human logic is limited to comprehend sufficient reason for the time being. However, that doesn't eliminate the future possibility to comprehend beyond it.

I argue moral evil is satisfied by Plantinga's defense in the following sense: God created humans with free-will. Therefore, even if evil as a potential is created by God in the form of human free will, it can only actualize its existence if humans choose to commit it. I argue for natural evil to be a noseum inference, if a reason cannot be found for the existence of evil, therefore it is pointless to be considered as evil. Additionally, I argue if natural evil is considered an evil, just like human beings came to observe quantum tunnelling thinking it was science fiction or magic, similarly, human beings would develop a logic that can comprehend the sufficient logical reason for the existence of natural evil.

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