



Fernando Botero, The Gates of Hell, 1973, detail

The Problem of Evil

If God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent then why does evil exist?

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The problem of evil has long been seen as the greatest challenge to conventional Christian belief. How can an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God permit evil to exist? If He can't prevent it, then can He be all powerful? If He doesn't realise that it's happening, then can He be all-knowing? If He knows that it's happening and can prevent it but doesn't, how can He be all-loving?

This paper seeks to investigate whether this formulation does actually result in a paradox that rules out the simultaneous co-existence of evil and God as traditionally conceived, or if the defences presented by Christian theologians are effective. It then seeks to explore whether the sheer amount of suffering, particularly in relation to non-human animals, means that even if not logically impossible, this co-existence is at least unlikely.



1. Introduction

1.1 At the age of eleven, I was in a Religious Education lesson at school listening to the teacher telling the class that God was all-loving and all-good. A question occurred to me, and so I sheepishly raised my hand and asked, why then is there so much suffering in the world? The teacher turned to the rest of the class and asked a counter-question: wasn't it the role of a loving parent to discipline his children when they misbehaved. They seemed to think that it was, and the teacher turned back to me to say that this was all that God was doing, punishing the guilty. I persisted and asked what had a baby horrifically dying of rabies (a major health scare at the time) either done wrong at all or done wrong to such an extent as to deserve this extreme punishment. He declined to answer, but instead put me into detention where I was able to copy out bible passages and ponder on my presumption.

Later in life, I took an Open University Philosophy course and discovered, predictably, that I wasn't the first to have come up with this "problem of evil", but had been preceded by the likes of Epicurus, David Hume, and Charles Darwin. The OU course also provided defences to the problem that I found far more considered and convincing than my old teacher's. It is this problem and its rebuttals that I want to explore in this paper.

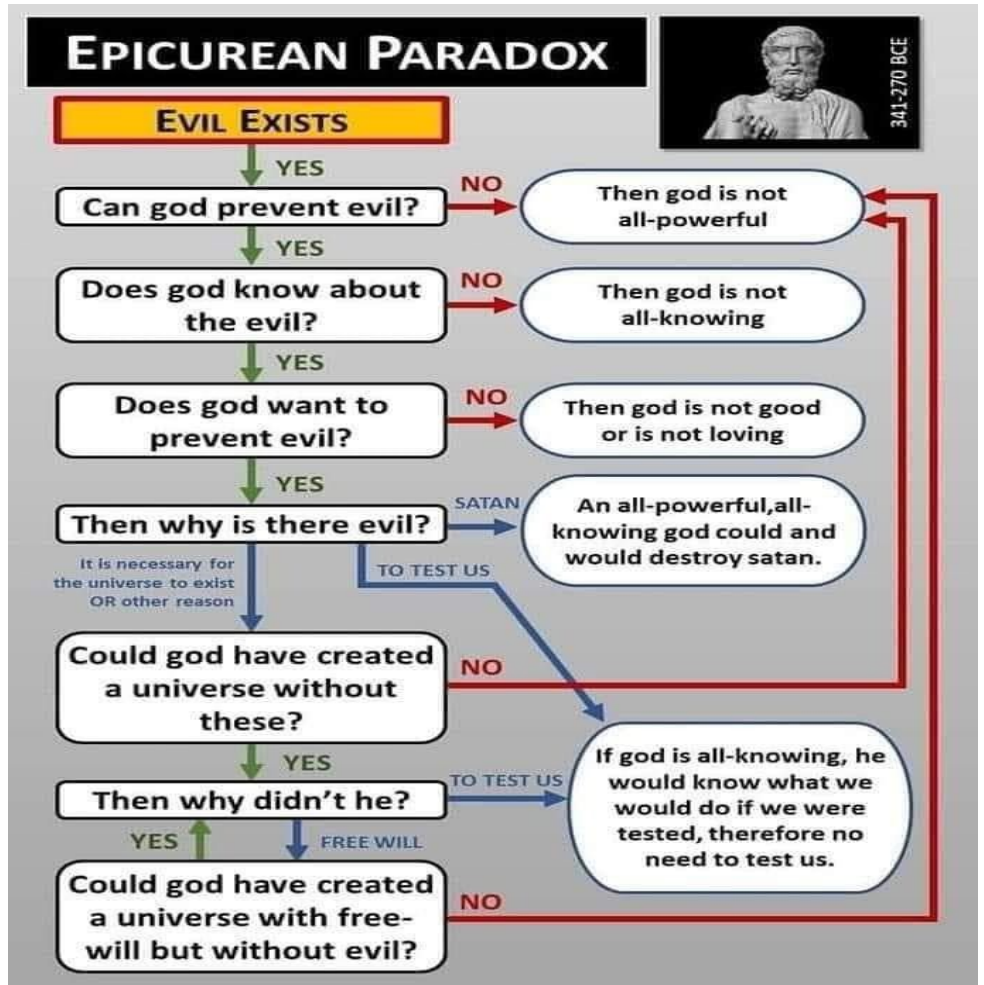
Theodicy: a theological construct that attempts to vindicate God in response to the problem of evil.

1.2 I will make a number of assumptions for the sake of brevity.

The concept of God that is being examined is that of mainstream Christianity; a supernatural being that is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent: the 'triple-omni' God. This also accords with orthodox conceptions of the "Gods" of Islam and Judaism, but the defences that I will be considering derive from Christian theodicy



I'm assuming that evil does actually exist and can be experienced during such phenomena as earthquakes, floods, diseases, massacres, predation, etc.. I'm also trying not to be too specific in using the word "evil", which can often have supernatural connotations, but employ it here because it has traditionally been used in this context. I intend it as a coverall for related concepts such as suffering or anguish.



2. The Logical Problem of Evil

2.1 An internet meme is currently being circulated under the title *The Epicurean Paradox*; it may have turned up at some time in your own social media feeds. Epicurus was a pre-Christian Greek philosopher who lived between 341 and 270 BCE, but has been identified by subsequent Christian theodicians as the originator of this challenge to their faith.



2.2 This *reductio ad absurdum* argument can also be represented as follows:

Premise 1: God (An omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being) exists.

Premise 2: God (being omnibenevolent) abhors all evil.

Premise 3: God (being omnipotent) can prevent the existence of anything he abhors.

Premise 4: Evil exists.

Premise 5: God (being omniscient) knows that evil exists.

Premise 6: If anyone abhors something, and knows about it, they will prevent it if they can.

Conclusion 1: God will prevent all the evil he can (from Premises 2, 5 and 6).

Conclusion 2: Evil does not exist (from Premise 3 & Conclusion 1).

Conclusion 3: Therefore, evil exists and doesn't exist (from Premise 4 & Conclusion 2).

2.3 And so, a paradox results, and in order to resolve this paradox at least one of the premises must be shown to be false. The rejection of any of the Premises 2, 3 or 5 would also mean rejecting Premise 1, and this would be to deny a key part of Christian theology. Hence, the only remaining line of defence is to challenge the soundness of Premise 6. Historically, the main arguments in this regard have been as follows.



3. The just punishment defence

3.1 As employed by my old RE teacher. I still consider this the weakest defence, and really only include it here for old-time's sake, and as a poor excuse to include a picture from a recent holiday!

It seems to completely ignore what we normally regard as criteria for just punishment: proportionality and actual culpability. Whilst the biblical story of The Fall, its 'evil origin-story', when Man is expelled from Paradise for disobedience, seems to be unsatisfactory even on its own theological terms.

For example, who sent the snake to The Garden? If it was God, then was this really a benevolent act? If it was Satan, then why isn't he, rather than Man, to blame? Wasn't the snake only being more honest than God when he told Adam that God's words, "in the day that you eat of it [the tree of knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die," [Genesis 2:17] weren't entirely accurate? And if there had been no prior suffering how could God admonish Eve with the words, "I will surely *multiply* your pain in childbearing" [Genesis 3:16]?



Masaccio, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise*, 1425



4. The Free-Will Defence

4.1 In his 1966 book, *Evil and the God of Love*, the English philosopher and theologian John Hick (1922-2012) discusses a number of more profound challenges to The Problem of Evil. I'll begin with his formulation of the free-will defence, in which he leans heavily on the ideas of US philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1932-present).

The argument essentially takes the form of:

Premise 1: God's purpose requires that humans have free-will.

Premise 2: This necessarily means that humans may chose evil.

Premise 3: God does not will this evil, and would prefer it if humans didn't choose this path.

Conclusion: Therefore, God isn't responsible for human evil.

4.2 An objection to this is why didn't God just make humans with sufficient moral fortitude to resist temptation, so that although they can choose evil they freely choose not to? Couldn't God have created an "evilless" world in this way?

Hick's response is that although God *is* omnipotent, this doesn't mean that he can accomplish the self-contradictory/logically impossible, such as making a four-sided triangle. And it would be just such a self-contradiction to have personal beings that have been "pre-programmed" to always choose right, but simultaneously to insist that they are free to choose wrong.

4.3 Hick continues by pointing out that our relationships to each other are not the only or even the most important type of relationship that we have. Instead it's our



relationship with God that is essential to our existence. Hick states that God only values our love for Him if it is given freely; therefore, if He'd "programmed" humans to only do good they would just be following a laid-down path, and so not be fully deserving of God's approbation. We might feel that we're doing well in resisting temptation, but God would know this is only how He'd "built" us. The analogy Hick uses is that such a relationship would be 'comparable with that of the hypnotist to his patient'.

4.4 There have been a number of counter-arguments to this defence. These include the thorny issue of whether free will can exist at all if determinism is true. But this is a topic large enough to launch a whole fleet of Philosophy Fora, and so I won't labour it here. However, I think it is fair to wonder where the free-will is for the victims of others' actions? Were the infants in Matthew [2:16–18] able to exercise any before Herod and his soldiers exercised theirs, or were they merely instruments of an ultimately divine plan? Cue the opportunity for another (gruesome) holiday snap!



Matteo di Giovanni, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1482, detail



4.5 And is God's omniscience relevant here; would knowing in advance every detail of each interaction in a relationship be that far removed from the hypnotist/patient analogy? Where, for God, would be the spontaneity and surprised delight that we usually expect from relationships?

And isn't this a particularly needy God? One who is prepared to introduce a whole world of pain and suffering just to ensure that the worship that He receives is up to snuff? Can this really be described as omnibenevolence?

4.6 There have also been objections of a more theological bent. For example, will we have free-will in heaven? If not, will we have to spend an eternity effectively as automata? If so, will there also inevitably be evil in heaven? And if not, doesn't this mean that God has somehow found a way to reconcile having free-will with also always choosing good, and so why can't He do this on earth?

What of God himself, if He's omnibenevolent, and only ever chooses to do what is good, does this mean that He must somehow lack free will? If so, doesn't this mean that He is not omnipotent? If not, in what way are both having free will and always choosing good akin to the logical impossibility of, for example, a three-wheeled bicycle that Hick posits?

4.7 Finally, and I think most damagingly for this defence, it only seems to apply to 'moral' evil, that is evil caused by human choices, rather than 'natural' evil, that is suffering caused by natural phenomena such as earthquakes or diseases. It's hard to see how humans having free-will causes tsunamis.



5. The Vale of Soul-Making/Character Building Defence

5.1 Hick identified with Irenaean theodicy: the belief that suffering exists as a means of spiritual development. That is, by allowing suffering God can enable human souls to grow and develop.

Irenaean theodicy: this world is the best of all possible worlds because it allows humans to fully develop. Most versions of this theodicy propose that creation is incomplete, as humans are not yet fully developed and experiencing evil and suffering is necessary to enable such development.

So, although in this way God is responsible for the existence of pain and suffering, this perceived evil is not truly bad; because this world has been designed to test our mettle, to see if we are worthy of a privileged position in the next. And without any tribulations to overcome, we would be unable to completely express the full range of our humanity; for example, those virtues of courage, compassion and forgiveness that we value so highly, and which provide the justification for us to deserve eternal bliss.

If we were fully able to appreciate God's purpose here, we would instead see that the "evil" we experience through suffering is not ultimately an evil, but rather a good because it is for the betterment of our souls. Consequently, Hick can rationalise the existence of pain and suffering as serving God's good purpose of raising our imperfect and immature selves to commune with Him 'in uncompelled faith and love.' However, he also acknowledges that this isn't a perfect process in our fallen world, but holds that 'God will eventually succeed in His purpose of winning all men to Himself' in the after-life.

5.2 A sceptic might think that it's easier for those who are in relative comfort to make this argument, rather than those overwhelmed by suffering.

It's also not clear that everyone starts on a level playing field: that we're all judged equally.



Are we meant to be blank slates who, when faced with a moral choice, are entirely free to act however we may choose, regardless of the genes we've been assigned, the upbringing we've been allotted or the context in which we find ourselves? Do none of these things affect our character: was Mandela, Mandela or Pol Pot, Pol Pot simply as a matter of free choice?

6. The Leibniz/'Panglossian' defence

6.1 This is also an idea from Irenaean theodicy. It's most famous proponent was the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), and it led to him being lampooned by Voltaire as the naively optimistic Professor Pangloss in *Candide* (1759).

God has purposes for this universe and for us His creation which we are incapable of fully understanding; and so evil can be justified since God always chooses the best among an infinite number of possible worlds. If a world without evil would have been better than this one, then God would have created this world. But as such a world does not exist, evil must exist because it must contribute to the realisation of a greater good or the prevention of a greater evil. Everything is inevitably for the best in this best of all possible worlds, because it's been created by God.

6.2 This and the vale-of-soul making defence have the advantage of applying to both natural and moral evil; and taken together many philosophers have been convinced that Plantinga, Hick et al have successfully challenged Premise 6 of the logical problem of evil argument [if anyone abhors something, and knows about it, they will prevent it if they can]. Hence the paradox has been avoided, and so the co-existence of the triple-omni God and evil doesn't actually present a logical impossibility.



However, the problem of evil won't go away that easily, and I now want to examine two further objections that have convinced me that this issue presents the biggest challenge to traditional Christian teaching.

7. The Empirical or Evidential Problem of Evil

7.1 This posits that although the co-existence of evil and the triple-omni God may not be a logical impossibility, such an arrangement is (highly) improbable. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) began to develop this opinion as his studies progressed; 'I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.'

In essence, this argument takes the form:

Premise 1: There is some suffering that exists or has existed which could have been eliminated by a triple-omni God without the loss of some greater good.

Premise 2: A triple-omni god would prevent this extraneous suffering, particularly when no greater good was being served.

Conclusion: Therefore, there is no triple-omni God.

7.2 Premise 2 above seems to be the orthodox Christian position, therefore for this argument to be rendered invalid theodicians would have to demonstrate that Premise 1 was unsound, and that every single act of pain and suffering since the emergence of consciousness was inflicted and experienced in the service of a greater good.



Can the defences employed against the logical problem assist here? The amount and the extent of suffering throughout the time sentient life has existed seems to exceed the need for any punishment for eating some fruit; it also seems to be an egregious price to pay for the existence of free will; and couldn't God have got an actionable idea of our moral worth with only a tad less evil to assist him, would just one baby dying in slightly less agony, somewhere and at some time, have been possible without materially affecting its or someone else's moral development?

I find these defences hard to accept, but what of Leibniz's idea that 'God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform'? Maybe this *is* the best world it can be, maybe a combination of punishment, judgment and moral improvement do require exactly this level of suffering, and maybe we should just trust in the goodness of the deity, the efficacy of the process, and focus on the rewards to come?

8. The Issue of Animal Suffering

8.1 However, what has tipped the scales for many is their observation of the non-human animal world.

Charles Darwin again: "Some have attempted to explain this [amount of suffering in the world] in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement. A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time?"



When a deer breaks its leg in a forest and slowly starves to death what greater good is being achieved, or greater evil being avoided?

It isn't to blame for man's original sin, whether man has free will or not is surely of no matter to it, its suffering doesn't appear to lead to its or our moral development, and orthodox Christianity denies that it is being judged to see whether it is worthy of joining the elect: there is no deer heaven.

8.2 Perhaps tellingly, many theodicians appear to be silent on this subject; however, Hick does attempt to mount a series of defences/explanations in *Evil and the God of Love*.

Pain, he states, "is part of their equipment for survival"; that is, a benevolent God created pain to help animals avoid danger. But why pain, why not some internal alarm? And why must this pain be so extreme, and why does it persist even after any danger has passed? Couldn't God have reduced just one instance at some point in time? Wouldn't you?

Hick then presents a somewhat contradictory justification by seeming to deny that animals really suffer at all. Firstly, in terms of fear, he states that animals don't have a concept of death as they can't see beyond their immediate existence, and so "they don't share our anxieties." Then, in terms of pain: "in general it [the animal] lives from instant to instant either in healthy and presumably pleasurable activity, or in a pleasant state of torpor."

But even if we accept that animals have no sense of their own mortality and so don't fear death, albeit we can also observe that some 'higher' species do appear to mourn their dead fellows, this isn't to say that they are incapable of fear at all, as dog-owners on Bonfire Night may attest. And having seemingly claimed that pain was a useful survival tool, he now appears to be denying that animals experience it at all.



Again, this appears not to concur with our observations of the natural world: hyenas kill a wildebeest by eating it alive, starting from its genital area and then progressing into its intestines, all the while as it bellows in apparently very real pain and fear.

If my dog doesn't actually experience any suffering at all, why shouldn't I casually torture it when I feel like, wouldn't this just be like whittling a stick?

8.3 Zoologists now believe that the very first animals appeared 800 million years ago, and that they were most likely carnivores (*Science Magazine*, 30/08/2019). Why would an omnibenevolent God arrange his creation so that some animals have to prey on others in the first place? Some theodicians answer that a natural balance is achieved in this way, otherwise prey species would become too numerous and would then die of slow starvation rather than of a quicker kill. But are we to believe that an all-powerful God couldn't just have reduced the fertility of herbivores, or at least designed them with a "kill switch" which could provide a less painful death, rather than have them ripped asunder while still conscious? If He had to have lions, why didn't He equip them with chlorophyll so that sitting in the sun all day would be sufficient to sustain them, rather than make them so that they have to occasionally hunt down and kill some poor young zebra?

9. Conclusion

9.1 If we accept that God does have sufficient reasons for creating, allowing and/or tolerating some instances of evil, then the logical problem of evil will fail to end in an irresolvable paradox.

However, I contend that the evidential problem does present a serious challenge to the concept of a triple-omni God.



The only defence to it which appears to hold any water is Leibniz's: we humans are but intellectual Lilliputians compared to a God who can operate outside of our temporal universe, and so what can we ever know about his nature? However, wouldn't this mean that we can't actually say anything about him? But, surely the God of the Bible is nothing if not a sharer? He seems keen to let us know in minute detail who He is and what He wants us to do and think; repeatedly turning up in the ancient Near East in various guises telling us what we should and shouldn't eat, what we can wear, what we can and can't do in our love lives and even how best to spend our weekends. He also appears to be extremely exercised about us believing in Him and worshipping Him. And He must have always known what a barrier to a belief in Him the problem of evil would become once we'd evolved enough to recognise it? But if we allow Leibniz, do we also have to believe that God has suddenly come over all coy and mysterious, hiding behind a curtain of inscrutability like some cosmic Wizard of Oz?

9.2 David Hume (1711-1776) considered this barrier to belief in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779. Hume created the character of Philo who devises a thought experiment. Supposing that if before you were born you had been convinced that the world you were about to enter had been created by a triple-omni God, then when you experience life on earth, although you may be somewhat disappointed at how much it doesn't actually resemble a Utopia, you could still live with it by concluding, Leibniz fashion, that God knows better than you. However, muses Philo, 'supposing... that this creature is not antecedently convinced of a supreme intelligence, benevolent, and powerful, but is left to gather such a belief from the appearances of things – this entirely alters the case, nor will he ever find any reason for such a conclusion.' That is, even if belief in a good God cannot be shown to be inconsistent with the existence of evil, it is not a belief that anyone could reasonably arrive at on the basis of their experience of this world alone.



Therefore Philo, and probably Hume, concludes that, “there is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone.”

Consequently, all the evidence points away from the existence of a triple-omni God, and only those “blinded” by an *a priori* belief could conclude otherwise.

10. Possible Discussion Topics / Questions

1) I suspect that most of us growing up had, at some stage, some form of religious belief: whether from home, school, church or just the general tenor of society. Some of us will have lost this faith, whereas others will have retained it. What part, if any, did the problem of evil play in this, was it discussed with parents, teachers or clergy, what did you think about the answers you received?

2) Have you been sent the “Epicurean Paradox” on any social media channels? If so, what did you make of it?

3) Of the featured defences to the logical problem of evil, which do you find the most or least persuasive and why? Can you think of any better?

4) Do you agree that the defences to the logical problem of evil mean that it does not ultimately result in a paradox?



Fernando Botero, The Door of Paradise, 1973



5) Of the featured defences to the empirical problem of evil, which do you find the most or least persuasive and why? Can you think of any better?

6) Do you agree that the empirical problem of evil is a strong challenge to the belief in a triple-omni God?

7) What do you make of the explanations/excuses for the existence of animal suffering, are they persuasive? If not can you think of any better ones?

11. Further Reading

Destiny Purpose and Faith, 2002, Stuart Brown, Open University.

Evil and the God of Love, 1966, John Hick, Macmillan.

Evil and Omnipotence, 1955, J.L. Mackie, Mind LXIV.

The Problem of Evil, 1990, ed. Marilyn McCord & Robert Adams, Oxford.



Notes

