

Problem of Evil

PHIL101

Prof. Oakes

Winthrop University

updated: 10/7/13 9:28 AM

Section III: How do I know?

Reading III.2

The apparent existence of evil in the world has long troubled humans, both in itself and for what it means, intellectually. Evils beset us in many different forms, from physical pain and discomfort to emotional torment to moral deprecation. Philosophers sometimes divide the evils of the world into two classes, the *physical* or *natural evils* and the *moral evils*. The former we may define in terms of suffering: any mental or physical state that the subject find unpleasant may be counted a natural evil of the world. Here, the focus is perhaps on the physical make-up of a human, one's neurological "wiring" that enables one to experience pain in both bodily and mental forms. Much of the activity of the world about us is such as to produce in us various states of suffering, from the stubbing of a toe to sorrow at the death of a loved-one. This is, evidently, simply a matter of how the physical world operates and how that operation impinges on our nervous system. Certain forms of damage to the tissues of our bodies result in pain. Equally, we naturally form emotional relations with others such that we can experience feelings of loss, worry, anxiety, and other unpleasant mental states. The bodily and mental suffering come together to produce some of nature's most intolerable evils, such as the suffering of the mother of the cancer-stricken child.

Natural Evil: suffering experienced as a result of the natural operations of the world.

Moral evils frequently involve natural evils. A brutal rape or sadistic torture involve the body's natural suffering systems, both mental and physical, but unlike natural evils per se, these evils also involves a moral element – or, rather, an immoral element – the wrongful act of some person. Moral evils are simply the class of moral wrongs. In many cases, as above, moral wrongs entail suffering. One and the same act, then, may constitute both a natural and a moral evil. This is not always the case, however, as when a moral wrong leads to no particular harm.¹ Some would say that the attempt to cause harm is wrong, and thus a moral evil, even if unsuccessful. Is an attempted assassination not an evil if it fails? Moral evils vary widely, in any case, ranging from petty cruelties to monstrosities whose proportions we struggle to comprehend, such as the murderous pogroms of Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

Moral Evil: any morally wrong act or state.

In the context of religious belief, the existence of evil entails what has come to be called *The Problem of Evil*. The problem, in a nut-shell, is simply the question of the compatibility of the existence of evil alongside the existence of an all-powerful, benevolent God. Frequently, the problem is expressed in the form of an argument for atheism, the doctrine that God does not exist:

¹ Note that the definition of moral right and wrong is an important philosophical issue. Some moral theorists would deny that an act that led to no harm could qualify as immoral. See our section on value theory and the utilitarian moral theory, in particular.

The Problem of Evil

1. The existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God.
2. Evil exists.

so,

3. God does not exist.

If the existence of evil is incompatible with that of God, then if evil exists, it would seem that God must not exist. The key premise in the argument is step (1), asserting the incompatibility of God and evil.² The reasoning in this step is as follows: being omniscient, God would be aware of any existing evil; being perfectly benevolent, he would wish to eliminate any existing evil; and being omnipotent, God would be able to eliminate any existing evil. But if step (2) is also true, then it would appear that God must not exist.

The problem of evil has a long history in both theology and philosophy. Job struggles with the problem in the biblical book by the same name, and the Ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus formulates a version of the above argument in the third century B.C.E. More specifically, where the rationality of religious belief is concerned, we might say that the problem of evil poses a challenge to the epistemic rationality of religious belief. That is, where God is conceived as omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent, it would seem that the existence of evil entails that God does not exist, and in this light belief in God would appear to be epistemically irrational. Equipped with a proof that God does not exist, it would be irrational to believe that he does.

Supreme Being: the conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly benevolent.

We have two readings to inform our thinking on this subject. A passage from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* recounts some of the evils of the world and presses the problem of religious belief that such evils may represent. Excerpts from John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* present a response to the problem of evil on behalf of theism.³

Somewhat more specifically, Hick offers what is known as a *theodicy* – a defense of the existence of God in the face of the problem of evil.⁴ Typically, a theodicy will seek to show that step (1) of the argument for atheism is *false*. That is, the theodicist seeks to show that the existence of God is *not* incompatible with the existence of evil. This involves explaining why it might be that God would allow the existence of evil in our world. Theodicies are typically tentative, in nature, given that they purport to reveal the mind of God. But it may be enough to show simply what *could* be God's thinking in allowing the existence of evil. Where the argument for atheism seeks to show that God does not exist, an objection to the effect that the argument's central premise might be false would be sufficient to allay many a theist's concerns about the soundness of that argument.

Theodicy: a defense of the existence and justice of God in the face of evil.

² The second premise is of course no less vital to the argument's logic. But if evil does not exist – if evil is in some sense either an illusion or, perhaps, inexact thinking on our part, then there would seem to be no “problem” of evil, where belief in God is concerned.

³ Theism is the doctrine according to which God exists. Naturally, the exact form of the doctrine varies with one's conception of God. It is handy, however, to have a blanket term for the general view.

⁴ ‘Theodicy’ derives from the Greek words ‘*theos*’, meaning “God” and ‘*dike*’, meaning justice. A theodicy seeks to explain what might be the divine justice in God's permitting the existence of evil.