# If God is so Great, Why do Innocent People Suffer?

“The traditional arguments for the existence of God have been fairly thoroughly criticised by philosophers. But the theologian can, if he wishes, accept this criticism. He can admit that no rational proof of God's existence is possible. And he can still retain all that is essential to his position, by holding that God's existence is known in some other, non-rational way. I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian can maintain his position as a whole only by a much more extreme rejection of reason than in the former case. He must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved from other beliefs that he also holds.” (JL Mackie)

The **problem of evil** is generally recognized as the strongest argument for the non-existence of God. Theists have been trying to respond to the problem since at least the time of Augustine (~400 CE). In this class, we’ll be talking about how this argument works, and how theists have attempted to respond to it.

## The “Problem of Evil”: TWO VERSIONS

The **logical problem of evil** contends that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the very idea of an all-good, all-powerful God. According to the logical problem, it is *literally impossible for God to exist.* One version (based on a famous version of the argument given by J.L. Mackie) is as follows.

1. An all-good being will strive to eliminate evil wherever it can.
2. An all-powerful (or omnipotent) being could eliminate evil if it chose to do so.
3. CONCLUSION: At least one of the following statements is FALSE.
   1. God is all-powerful.
   2. God is all-good.
   3. Evil exists. (i.e., war, disease, starvation, natural disasters, etc.)

The closely related **evidential problem of evil** contends that while it might be logically possible that 3a-3c are all true, it is *very unlikely*. The nature and quantity of evil in the world are strong evidence that an all-powerful, all-good God does not exist. Both versions of the problems of evil conclude that theism is irrational (and should be rejected), though the evidential problem grants that there is *some* chance (however small) that God exists.

## Can the Problem of Evil be Solved? The Project of Theodicy

Some theists have responded to the problem of evil by stating that 3a, 3b, or 3c is false: they have claimed that God is not all-powerful, not all-good, or that evil/suffering does not really exist. These solutions are obviously adequate (they “work” to solve the problem), but they have not generally been popular, as nearly all theists think that 3a, 3b, and 3c are true. There are also a number of “half-hearted” solutions, which don’t *really* work, once you look closely (at least according to Mackie). For example:

* Theist Response: “Evil is just an illusion. It doesn’t really exist.!”
  + Atheist Objection: OK, but then you have to say (and *really mean*) that things like suffering, fear, etc. are really A-OK, and there’s nothing wrong with them (most theists don’t actually think this).
* Theist Response: “God is all good, but God’s goodness is different than that of humans.”
  + Atheist Objection: OK, but are you saying that God’s goodness means that causing harm, suffering, etc. are actually inherently *good* things? Again, most theists don’t actually believe this—part of the reason they are theists is that they think God loves and cares about humanity, and wants to help with suffering.
* Theist Response: “God’s ways are mysterious. We shouldn’t expect (as mere humans) to be able to understand them, but just need to have faith.”
  + Atheist Objection: This is missing the point—the problem of evil contends that believing in God is *irrational* and quite possibly *immoral* (if believers use their belief in God to decide what to do). The way the argument is set up (as a purely logical puzzle), there’s no possibility that future science (or divine revelation) could help answer the problem.
* Theist Response: “Well, naturalists don’t have any better explanation for why evil (or good) occurs!”
  + Atheist Objection: This is probably false (it is perfectly consistent with cosmology, evolution, etc. that both good and evil exist). It’s also irrelevant—there’s nothing in naturalism as such that leads us to believe the world will be especially good or evil. This is only a problem for theists, who think that an all-good, all-powerful God created the world and the beings living in it.

Along with these simple (and unsuccessful) solutions, theologians have defended a number of more robust responses to the problem of evil. J.L. Mackie argues that the most common versions of these are unsuccessful as well.

## Response 1: It’s Impossible to Have Good Without Evil

This response contends that premise 2 of the problem of evil is false, since not even an omnipotent being could not create a world with good without evil. There are several varieties of this response:

**Response 1a.** The existence of evil is **logically necessary** for the existence of good, just as the existence of a larger thing logically necessitates the existence of a smaller thing. (According to this response, the word “good” really means “better” and “evil” really means “worse”). The idea here is that the very meaning of the term *good* requires that there exist something that is *evil.*

**Problem:** This makes good and evil into merely relative/comparative notions—i.e., according to this solution, slavery might count as “good” when we are comparing it the Holocaust, but “evil” when we were comparing it to eating ice cream. But this is absurd—there is a perfectly ordinary (and non-comparative) sense in which slavery is evil. And there’s nothing logically contradictory about a world without slavery. (That is, a “world without slavery” is NOT like “A five-sided triangle”).

**Response 1b.** The existence of evil is **metaphysically necessary** for the existence of good, just as the existence of a red thing metaphysically necessitates the existence of at least one non-red thing. Here, *metaphysical necessity* is a sort of “necessity” that has nothing to do with either words (like logical necessity) or scientific laws (like physical necessity). It’s intended to capture something about the “essences” of things. In comparison to logical/physical necessity (which philosophers are usually OK with), philosophers have spent a *long* time arguing over whether this sort of necessity actually makes sense.

**Problem.** Even if metaphysical necessity makes sense, this application of it is based on a false principle about what is possible and what is not—that is, it is perfectly possible for everything in the world to be red (or to be good); people just wouldn’t *know* what red (or good) were (since they would have nothing to compare them with).The same thing holds with good and evil—there’s nothing *metaphysically impossible* about an all-good world. Finally, even if it were the case that good required evil in this way, God would only need to create a *tiny* amount of evil to satisfy it. So, the response fails.

**Response 1c.** The existence of evil is **physically necessary** for the existence of good, just as water being heated past a certain point physically necessitates its boiling. (The basic idea: the laws of nature in our universe make it so that at least some evil will happen—for example, the nature of our physiology means that exercise will hurt, but will eventually make us strong).

**Problem:** Unlike the first two versions of the response, it is obviously true that evil is physically necessary. However, this is irrelevant to the problem of evil. After all, this problem is aimed at an all-powerful God. On this conception, God is the one who makes the laws of nature, and could just change them if this were the case. God could surely enable us to exercise without pain, for instance.

## Response 2: A World with Some Evil is Better than A World With None

This response contends the premise 1 is false, since some evil (in the form of physical or mental suffering) is necessary to create the really important forms of goodness: e.g., benevolence, courage, pity, prudence, humility, and so on. It is in order to allow humans to develop these morally important traits that an all-good God allows suffering.

**Problem 1:** Let’s suppose that this succeeds in explaining why first-order evil (i.e., suffering or physical pain) needs to exist. It doesn’t explain why second-order evil exists: e.g., evils such as greed, cruelty, cowardice, and so on. It seems possible to have a world where *these* sorts of things don’t exist, even if physical pain exists. The problem of evil can simply be rephrased in terms of these sorts of second-degree evils: “An all-good God will strive to eliminate cruelty. An all-powerful God could eliminate cruelty. Cruelty exists. So,…”

**Problem 2:** This solution puts “the horse before the cart.” That is, it assumes the *most important* sorts of goods are things like kindness, and that things like pain/pleasure/fear/sadness/happiness don’t really matter. But this gets it backwards—after all, the *reason* we think that kindness is a good thing is because it makes people happy!

## Response 3: Evil is Due to Human Free Will

“The central core of any theodicy must, I believe, be the ‘free-will defence’, which deals — to start with — with moral evil . . . The free-will defence claims that it is a great good that humans have a certain sort of free will which I shall call free and responsible choice, but that, if they do, then necessarily there will be the natural possibility of moral evil. . . . A God who gives humans such free will necessarily brings about the possibility, and puts outside his own control whether or not that evil occurs. It is not logically possible . . . that God could give us such free will and yet ensure that we always use it in the right way.” (Richard Swinburne)

This response also contends the premise 1 is false, since (1) free-will is a very important good and (2) evil (both in the form of first-order suffering and second-order cruelty) follows necessarily from the existence of free will.

Mackie’s Objection: God knew ahead of time how the humans that were created were going to act. It was perfectly possible to create humans (humans with free will!) that would have chosen NOT to harm one another. For example, nothing forced God to create Hitler in the first place, or to allow Hitler’s actions to affect other humans. So, the mere fact that humans have free didn’t mean there had to be evil. There is nothing incoherent (or logically impossible) about God creating a world without people like Hitler, and with more people like Gandhi.

## The “Evidential” Problem of Evil

Mackie’s “Evil and Omnipotence” was published in 1955, and it helped start the “modern” debate over the problem of evil. However, while his argument has been influential (and there are a fair number of atheists who argue that it is successful), many other philosophers (both atheist and theist) think it can’t succeed in *proving* the non-existence of God in a way that a traditional Jew, Christian, and Muslim accept. This is, in part, because these people think it is at least *possible* that an all-good, all-powerful God couldn’t actually do the sorts of things that Mackie claims that this God could: namely, create a world where free will existed, but evil didn’t. (The basic idea: Maybe there are logical constraints on world-making that we simply don’t grasp). With this in mind, most current discussions have turned to the **evidential problem of evil,** which claims merely that evil (and more specifically, certain *types* of evil) provide evidence that make the existence of God really unlikely. Here is a simplified version of this argument (based on an argument by **William Rowe**):

1. There are some sorts of evil for which we (humans) don’t know of any particular “good things” that would justify God’s allowing them. Nobody “learns” anything from these things, they don’t inspire heroism, etc.
   1. Rowe’s examples: the brutal rape and murder of a young girl (E1), or a fawn dying in a slow, horrible fashion after a forest fire (E2).
2. The fact that we don’t know of any good reason for God allowing E1 and E2 these means it is very likely that *there really isn’t* any good reason for God allowing E1 and E2.
3. So, given that events like E1 and E2 occur quite regularly (in fact, most people can think of examples…), it is highly unlikely that God doesn’t exist.

According to this argument (unlike Mackie’s), it’s still possiblethat God exists. However, it is very unlikely, and certainly isn’t the sort of thing we ought to believe. An analogy: while its certainly possible that invisible unicorns live on Mars, this doesn’t seem likely, and we would rightly criticize people who believed in this sort of things.

## Review Questions

1. Which sorts of evil do you think are the \*most difficult\* to square with the existence of an all-good, all powerful God? Try to give at least two examples (and explain why you chose them).
2. You’ve been asked to explain the Problem of Evil to a group of middle-school students of varying religious backgrounds. Give a summary of the argument that would be accessible to them (remember, they are kids, so give plenty of examples!). Then, try to think of at least two QUESTIONS they might have, and answer these.
3. The **“Just World Hypothesis”** (or “Just World Fallacy”) holds that, whenever something bad happens to someone (assault, bullying, sickness, poverty, etc.), we can *prima facie* assume that the person must have done something to *deserve it,* and that this lessens our obligation to go to their aid. Try to come up with a few examples of this phenomenon, and then explain why so many people seem to adopt this hypothesis. Finally, give an argument for/against adopting this hypothesis as a general philosophical approach to life.
   1. An example: Studies have found that people who accept the Just World Hypothesis tend to assume that victims are to blame, even when presented with strong evidence to the contrary. For example, when researchers had them watch a video about the Holocaust, Just Worlders came away with a worse opinion of the *victims.* People who reject the Just World Hypothesis (who believe in an “unjust world”), by contrast, did better on this. However, other studies that the Unjust Worlders tend to be angrier and more prone to certain sorts of criminal behavior.

## References and Bibliography

Some good presentations of the problem of evil include the following:

* Mackie, J. L. 1955. “Evil and Omnipotence.” *Mind* 64 (254): 200–212.
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