

# The Problem of Evil

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## Introduction

'The Problem of Evil' is a title given to an argument against God's existence. The argument points to an apparent inconsistency between the way the world actually is and the way world should be if God existed. For a very forceful way of putting the point, watch the following interview with Stephen Fry [here](#).

It is important to understand the kind of argument strategy that you will be encountering. Suppose that you were in a windowless room and received a text message that it is raining outside. This will generate an expectation: there should be water falling from the sky. If you walk outside and no water is falling from the sky, you will conclude that the text message erred, or perhaps conclude that someone was playing a prank on you.

In a similar way, many have observed that if God exists, the God of the Abrahamic religions at least, then we expect the world to be a certain way. Namely, we expect it to be a world in which there is no evil. However, when we look around the world, there clearly is evil. Just as we can conclude that it is not raining if there is no water falling from the sky, so too we can conclude, says the Atheist, that God doesn't exist since there is evil all around us. I outline the argument below and survey some responses. You can also watch a presentation of the argument [here](#).

## God's Perfections

Before I introduce the argument, note that the three Abrahamic religions attribute to God the following three qualities:

- God is omniscient: God knows everything. He knows everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen. He knows what you had for breakfast yesterday, he knows what is going through your mind as you read this sentence, he knows what you will do tomorrow and every day after that.

- God is omnipotent. God is all powerful. He *can* do anything that a person can do and so much more. There is nothing he cannot lift. There is nothing he cannot move. There is nothing he cannot stop. If you can imagine it, he can do it.
- God is omni-benevolent: God is all good. God has the thoughts, emotions, and responses that any good person would have. If good people feel angry when watching cruel behavior, God too would feel such anger. If good people think it's required of them to save the sick, the downtrodden, and the elderly, then God thinks that this is also required of him.

If God is all loving, he would not want anyone to suffer. Since he is all powerful, he could bring it about that nobody suffers. And since he is all knowing, he knows both that suffering exists and knows how to alleviate it. For instance, God knows about each person who is being tortured as you read these notes, he has the power to stop it, and he wants to stop. If God is like this, then there should be no evil in the world. Unfortunately, there is evil in the world, so, the Atheist, claims God does not exist.

## Summary of the argument

1. If God exists, then He is omni-benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent (call this "omni+")
2. If God is omni+, then evil does not exist.
3. Evil exists.
4. Therefore, God is not omni+ (from 2&3)
5. Therefore, God does not exist (from 1&4)

Premise 1 is a central claim of the Abrahamic Religions. You cannot believe in the God of these religions and deny that God is all powerful, all-knowing, and all good.

Premise 2 is the key claim. Consider a simple example. Recently Arthur Cave, the son of my favorite musician Nick Cave, fell to his death accidentally while walking along a cliff at Ovingdean Gap, England. Arthur, 15, had a twin brother who is, along with his parents, suffering extreme shock and pain over their sudden loss. Since God is all knowing, he knew that Arthur was walking on that cliff. He knew that Arthur would fall. And he knew the pain that his family would experience. Since God is all powerful, he could have prevented Arthur from falling. He could have sent a blast of wind to push him away from the cliff edge. He could have sent a sign. He could have moved the Earth up to break the fall. He did none of these things. God is also all good. A good person would prevent Arthur from dying if he or she were able to. If a person who can swim sees a child drowning and does nothing to save them, we would judge that person to be morally weak. They are certainly not good. So God cannot be

all good, all knowing, and all powerful, and, at the same, time allow Arthur's family to suffer such a loss. The corollary of this point is that if God had these features, there would not be events like Arthur's death.

Premise 3 states that evil exists. This is obvious. There is needless pain and suffering all around us. People die in bizarre accidents; others are killed in terrible natural disasters; others develop terribly painful and fatal diseases, many dying so young that they never experienced any kind of joy in this life; others are killed by senseless acts of violence, by individuals like Dylan Roof who savagely killed so many innocents in a church in Charleston.

Premise 4 is an inference from 2&3. Since evil exists, there is no omni+ God.

5 states our conclusion. Since there is no omni+ God, there is no God at all.

The argument as stated is valid. The conclusion does follow from the premises. The main point of contention is Premise 3. Theists have tried, in a number of ways, to argue that God's existence is, in fact, compatible with the existence of evil, i.e., they have tried to argue that God's being omni+ does not entail the non-existence of evil. I will outline two solutions and responses to those solutions.

## Whole/Part Solution

- Suppose a whole, w, has a property F.
- Suppose a part, p, of w has the opposite property, not-F.
- It's possible that w's being F depends on p being not-F.

Consider a novel. The whole novel being exciting might depend on it having a chapter that is not-exciting. A whole film being exciting might depend on it having a non-exciting part.

Similarly, the Theist claims that a whole life that is good depends for its goodness on some part of that life being not-good, i.e., depends on it containing some suffering. The idea here is that God makes our lives better by including in it some challenges, pains, episodes of suffering, etc. In other words, the Theist claims that there are *Necessary Evils*, i.e., they claim that the goodness of the world, of a life, etc., depends on the existence of some evil.

The solution seems a good one. Many pains and sufferings are necessary to achieve some good, e.g., receiving a vaccine might be painful, but being vaccinated is better than not being vaccinated. So, perhaps, the evil that surrounds us is required for the goodness in our lives.

This solution, though, is easily rebutted. The most fatal objection is that God could have created goodness independently of evil. Recall that God is all powerful. If he created everything, he also created all of the dependency relations that are contained in this world. For instance, if good health depends, in part, on

consuming sufficient vitamins, then God is the one who made the world so that this dependency exists. But, if God is all powerful, he could have created us so that this dependency does not exist, i.e., he could have made our maintenance of good health independent of vitamin intake.

Similarly, if God is all powerful, he could have made it so that no dependency exists between good and evil, i.e., he could have created a world in which the goodness in a life does not depend on some part of that life being bad. If he is all good, then he would have gone ahead and created the world in this way.

Another way of putting this objection is that if God couldn't have made it so that goodness is independent of evil, then he is not all powerful. There would be one thing that he could not do. If, on the other hand, he could have made goodness independent of evil, but didn't, then he is not all good after all. Either way, if goodness depends on evil, then God as described by the Abrahamic religions, does not exist.

## The Free Will Response

The most promising solution to the Problem of Evil is called **the Free Will Response**. It claims that evil is the product of free-will. While God could prevent this evil, this would undermine our freedom. Since he has decided that it is good for us to be free, he watches, sadly perhaps, as we use our freedom in evil ways.

Before I introduce this argument, let us note the following key assumption about the nature of freedom: a person S does P freely only if it is within S's power to not do P. For instance, I freely move my hand only if it is in my power to do otherwise. If, then, Mike Tyson takes my arm and uses it to hit my brother, I do not freely hit my brother—it was not in my power to do otherwise. Likewise, a person only freely saves a child or steals some bread if it is in their power to do otherwise. Keeping this in mind, here is our Free Will Response:

1. The best thing for humans is free will.
2. Since God is Omni+, he would give humans what is best for them.
3. God created humans with free will (from 1 & 2)
4. Evil is either directly or indirectly caused by some person's free will.
5. Evil is compatible with God being omni+ (from 4 & 5)

Premise 1 is one we will all accept. The reason slavery is so abhorrent is precisely because it inhibits the basic freedom every human should be allowed to enjoy. The reason we raise our children to be responsible for their own actions is because we think being free to make your own choices is an essential feature of living a good life; an adult who could not make any of their own choices would be living an impaired life.

Premise 2 is best illustrated by focusing on the fact that God is omni-benevolent. Consider a good parent. They will want to give their child everything good in this life. Similarly, if God is all good, he will want us to have all good things. Since he has the power to do so, then he will go ahead and give those goods to us.

Premise 3 is an inference from Premises 1&2.

Premise 4 needs some clarification. It claims that all suffering is caused directly or indirectly by some human's free choice. The direct cases are easy. They include all those cases where one person directly harms another person emotionally, physically, or psychologically. In these cases, the person *chooses* to harm someone, *chooses* to cause some evil.

Indirect cases are harder. They include instances where someone doesn't intend to cause any suffering, but where they set in motion a chain of events that result in someone suffering. For example, you may freely choose to drive very quickly to arrive at work in time. As you speed, you swerve to miss a deer on the road. Unfortunately, as you swerve, you hit a car that hits a school bus. The school bus veers off the road and several children die. In this case, the suffering was caused by your free-will. Even though you never chose to hurt some children, their suffering and pain was the unexpected result of your free choice to drive quickly to work.

5 states our conclusion: evil is not incompatible with an all good, all powerful, all knowing God.

## Objections

1. Not all suffering, specially the suffering caused by natural disasters, is caused by human action. No person, or group of people, caused Hurricane Katrina. Of course, climate change is caused by humans and so future natural disasters may be caused by humans. But many past natural disasters were not caused by humans.
2. Many of our poor free choices come from weakness of character, e.g., laziness, sloth, and so on. If God were all powerful, he could have created us with better characters, which in turn would have lead us to make better choices. In other words, he could have created us in a way where we freely choose better things. He could have made us smart enough to avoid tragic mistakes. Note that this objection concedes that free-will can explain some of the suffering in the world. The problem is that there is *so much* suffering in the world. The objection assumes that God could have made us with free-will and still found ways to minimize our mistakes.
3. God's omniscience seems incompatible with free will. Suppose that being omniscient means knowing of every proposition whether it is true or false. God then knows exactly how the future will be. If he knows that I will

chose the hamburger over the hot-dog on Fri., then there's a truth of the matter as to whether I will choose one over the other. But if there is a truth of the matter, I do not have the power to choose what my future will be. In other words, God's being all knowing entails that our future is fixed and not in our control. If God's omniscience is incompatible with us having free-will, then appeals to free-will cannot reconcile an omniscient God with evil; there cannot be free-will, evil, and an omniscient God at the same time. For more on the problem of free-will, watch this [video](#).