

The Argument from Evil

Scott M. Sullivan

Department of Philosophy

Statement of the Issue

The problem of evil deserves attention by every theist. It should be admitted that the argument from evil is the best weapon in the atheist's arsenal. It is perhaps the most commonly cited reason from the average "man in the street" as to why they do not believe in God. But what exactly is the argument from evil? In its simplest form, the problem of evil is how, given that there is a God who is all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, can there still be evil in the world? We find in the world *physical evil* such as pain, disease, suffering, earthquakes, etc. We also find in the world *moral evil* such as murder, genocide, torture, rape, unspeakable crimes committed against innocent children, etc. How can the existence of God be reconciled with all of this pain and suffering we know to exist? For the proponents of this argument, the existence of both evil and a good God are not compatible.

The argument from evil can take two main forms, one "softer" in that the existence of evil makes the existence of God *unlikely* (Evil exists, therefore God *probably* does not). The other "harder" form, that the existence of evil *demonstrates* that there is no God (Evil exists, therefore God *does not*). Proponents of the stronger version argue that it is simply a contradiction to say both that evil exists and God exists. One cannot hold the fact of evil on one hand, and the belief in the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God on the other. In other words, according to the hard argument, these three statements are incompatible with one another; 1) God exists, 2) God is all-powerful and loving, and 3) evil exists. Clarifying the two types of arguments:

The "Hard" Argument from Evil:

If evil exists, God *does not* exist

Evil exists

Therefore God *does not* exist.

The "Soft" Argument from Evil:

If evil exists, God *probably does not* exist

Evil exists

Therefore, God *probably does not* exist

However the hard argument cannot succeed unless it shows that God cannot have *morally sufficient reasons* for allowing evil. Barring this the hard argument is inconclusive. *Thus most atheists have abandoned the hard argument from evil and go with only the soft.*

There is another consideration. The atheist may say that he himself believes and agrees that some things are evil, and may even elaborate on their frequency or gravity. Here the atheist is making the claim that evil really exists in the world. In this view evil is *external* to the theistic worldview. But this external approach seems problematic because the atheist seems to have taken on an additional problem. How can an atheist make sense of a real *objective* evil? Without a transcendent Lawgiver and divine Being to give things purpose order, in other words, without some God to set the way things ought to be, there cannot be any derivation from this. If there is no way "things ought to be", then what sense does it make to talk about "evil" as a departure from the "way things ought to be"? It seems meaningless to talk about good and evil, what should and should not happen, apart from a transcendent "Purpose-Giver" or "Lawgiver" who can act as an anchor for those "oughts", and ground them in something beyond mere human subjectivity and opinion. *Objective evil only makes sense in a theistic worldview.* In fact, the theist may turn the tables on the atheist right here and say if you admit evil you must admit God's existence! *Si malus est, Deus est.* (If evil exists, God exists!)

However, the atheist may take a different tack. The atheist may say that he himself does not believe in evil, but the problem is that someone like a Christian does. Evil here then becomes an *internal* problem for the Christian. This distinction makes a difference. If the argument is internal, then the Christian theist must

show that any deduction or probability disproving God's existence does not succeed. Since the claim is an internal inconsistency, there is no good reason why the Christian theist may not appeal to other aspects of his faith that will help counter the problem. This additional burden for the atheist gains him nothing, for he must *still* direct the problem to the theist who must not be restrained from bringing all of his theological and philosophical resources to bear on the problem. In other words, the theist must not be asked to "fight with one arm behind his back". Indeed, it is through faith that steadily assures the Christian of God's love and goodness. A believer claims to more know about God through faith. If one doctrine of faith (God's love) is being played against some other fact about God (omnipotence) then it is perfectly legitimate to employ one's faith in answering the objection. Theological resources can be used in answering it and the door is open for a Christian theist to make use of all of the available resources in addressing the problem

Since the external arguments only add an additional and insurmountable problem for the atheist, with the theistic response being largely the same, we will answer only the internal arguments from evil; is the existence of evil logically incompatible with a loving God or does it support the view that God probably does not exist?

The Theist's Response

How might a theist respond to the problem of evil? Fundamentally, the theist's response here is that both certain theological doctrines and unresolved philosophical issues *offset* the argument from evil and render it unsuccessful, even on the grounds of an alleged probability that God does not exist. *Probabilities can only be reliably determined based on relevant data and the theist argues that it is impossible for the atheist to consider all the relevant data in this situation.* Thus, the theist argues that the argument from evil is desperately inconclusive.

THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINES THAT OFFSET THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

The atheist attack on an all-loving God is also an attack on what is known by faith. **But if certain Christian theological doctrines are true, then the problem of evil loses a lot of its sting.** Yes, it is true that the Christian faith holds that God is all loving, but there is more to it than that.

Theological considerations offset the problem of evil in three ways:

First for example, "why doesn't God take care of the evil in the world?" could be answered with "well, actually *He is.*" From the Christian theological perspective, *God's justice does take care of the problem of evil.* The problem of physical evil will be taken care of in the Resurrection will there will be no disease, no pain, and all tears will be wiped away "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new." (Rev 21:4-5). Moral evil too, will be taken care of in both the Particular Judgment and the Last Judgment where everyone will be judged according to their works (Rev 20:12-13). So it is clear that the Christian faith holds that *God is taking care of the problem of evil, currently with those who will die today and later for those who will die tomorrow.* The solution is now present for some, still coming for others. Hence, the atheist's attack needs to be changed to something like:

"A God who is all-loving needs to take care of all evil immediately"

But how could the atheist possibly know this? Under what obligation, from what source could God be obliged to interrupt or take care of every problem of evil immediately and not on His own time? This assertion would be gratuitous indeed, and insofar as it is that, it is inconclusive and cannot be an argument against an all-loving and all-powerful God.

Secondly, Christian theology holds that God is not responsible for evil to begin with. The doctrine of the Fall explains the existence of evil in the first place. According to Christian faith, God created the world and man as good, with no physical or moral evil stains within it. It was the Fall of mankind that brought sin, disease, and death into the world. Given this as the Christian faith's understanding of the origin of evil, the atheist must modify his position to something like:

"A God who is all-loving cannot create a world without evil that later falls into evil by the actions of created free-agent, without first doing something about that evil immediately and not wait for a later solution."

Again we would have more gratuitous assertions that allegedly place even more obligations upon God. Gratuitous assertions are best answered by a categorical denial.

Take a most horrible act of evil, the murder of an abducted innocent child. From God's point of view it could be something like this - "I created the world good, sin has entered through the choice of men. Here is an instance. After this abductor harms this child, I will bring that child up here in for eternal joy and safety. Never again will she have to worry about disease, falling down and skinning her knee, or losing a favorite toy. As for the perpetrator, he will face the just consequences of his actions in 6 years when he dies from the cancer growing in his lung."

In spite of the fallen situation that God did not create, the victim is brought immediately to safety and bliss and the criminal faces a later divine justice. It strains believability to think that such a chain of events can somehow show an incompatibility between God's love and power on one hand, and the presence of the evil in the world on the other.

Thirdly, the theist holds that the presence of evil in this world could be vastly disproportionate relative to the whole scheme of things. The weight of temporal sufferings must be weighed against the perspective of unending time. In Rom 8:18, Paul writes, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that shall be revealed in us." Whatever evil occurs in one's lifetime, if the person continues to exist immortally, those temporary sufferings of this life will continually grow smaller and smaller over time. Imagine what 80 years of suffering would look like from the perspective of 10,000 or 10,000,000 years – not even a mere drop in the bucket by comparison.

If the atheist wants to show what is known by faith as incoherent, then the whole faith - the entire picture - needs to be addressed, not just the part about God being all-loving. The Fall gives credence to why there is evil in the world in the first place, and the Judgment is His solution in dealing with it. The atheist argument, in order to be successful, must show that God cannot create creatures that will choose to reject His commands and Fall, and if He does and such a thing happens, then God needs to address the problem right now, not later, in order to safeguard his all-lovingness. Such a demonstration seems impossible. As a result, the argument from evil fails to demonstrate any incompatibility in these four propositions that the Christian holds by faith:

1. God is all-loving
2. God created the world without evil
3. Evil entered the world in spite of God's wishes
4. God will set everything right again and the sufferings of this world for the just are infinitesimally small from the perspective of eternity.

The theist maintains that there is no logical contradiction, nor even a probable falsity, in holding all four propositions to be true.

We now turn to some philosophical considerations that also offset the argument from evil.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS THAT ALSO OFFSET THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL Leibniz and the "Best Possible World"

Leibniz simply counters the argument from evil by saying that this is the best possible world. He addresses this formulation of the argument from evil

- 1) If God were all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, then this world would be the best possible world.
- 2) But surely this world is not the best possible world.

3) Thus, God is not all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good.

Leibniz believed that the conclusion of this argument was demonstrably false. He agrees with 1 and so attacks number 2. What reason, Leibniz asks, does the critic have for thinking that 2) is true?

Leibniz says that while we can think of certain individual events or features of the world that might be better than they are, we don't know whether or not it is possible to create a better world without those features, since we can never be sure of what the connections between the individual events and other events in the world might be. If we could improve the individual event without otherwise changing the world, sure we may well then have a better world. but we have no way of knowing if changing the event would leave the world otherwise unchanged, or might instead make things, on balance, worse. [See *Theodicy* 211-214 (H260-2; G VI 244-7) for examples].

Leibniz holds that we are simply unable to know how changing certain events would change the world's capacity to meet the standards of goodness described as maximization of essence and having the most variety with the simplest laws. **As a result, we can never, with any confidence, make the claim that this world is not as good, all things considered, as some other world we might try to imagine.** According to Leibniz, then, the “underachiever problem” (a good God could have made a better world) **cannot get off the ground unless the critic is able to defend the claim that this world is not the best possible world.** While we might think such a defense would be easy to mount, **our inability to know how changing certain events in the world would affect other events, and our inability to know how such changes would affect the true overall goodness of the world makes such a defense impossible for us.**

Leibniz also says that human standards of what is a “good world” may not be God's standards. For the best possible world might not consist in the most human happiness but something else (like the maximum amount of variety obeying the simplest laws).

God is Not Obligated to Create the Best Possible World

Other philosophers say that 1) there cannot be a “best world” and 2) even if there were God is not obligated to create it. First, they say it seems that talk of the “best world” is incoherent, i.e. like talking about the greatest whole number. You can always imagine world with just one more flower, or one more act of love, or one more beautiful sunset. So if God is not obligated to create the greatest possible world, what might be a *reasonably good world* to create? It seems that all God can do is create a world that is good, on balance, and it seems this is precisely the world we have. In spite of all the bad, there is still a lot of good in the world. Life on balance is good to most people, and this is indicated by the fact that most people want to continue living.

Secondly we might ask if God is bound by any obligation at all? Isn't God free to create whatever world he wants? Must he produce a world that has less evil than it does? How could one prove this obligation?

God Allows Suffering for a Greater Good

The natural possibility of suffering is cause for a greater good. We are all familiar with countless examples of natural evils that present the opportunity for compassion. It is these natural laws and evils that provide a vital backdrop for moral choices. Whether we are speaking of courage in the face of a murderer or courage in the face of cancer - easy lives would not manifest an opportunity to show great courage or goodness. God could allow physical evils to occur for the same reason moral evils do (consider the occasions for heroism presented to the firefighters in 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center).

But is there too much evil? How much is too much? Should there be less physical evil? It could be that God has already prevented thousands of more plagues and natural disasters. In any case, overall it does not seem there is too much evil. We need to consider that for all we know God may have prevented many horrible moral evils as well as physical, and our ignorance is not grounds for blaming God for what he is already doing. It could also be that God has left it up to us to be active in stopping evil rather than us passively sitting by and letting him do all of the work.

Must God even prefer a perfect world, a world without any evil over a world with evil? Not necessarily. *God may not prefer the evil-less world if suffering can bring about a greater good than could not be had by a morally perfect world.* In other words, God may have *morally sufficient reasons* for permitting some evil. Overprotectiveness can stifle moral development and responsibility. As we saw above, evil may be justified in bringing about a greater good. Suffering is not always a bad thing, for example, cutting off an arm to save someone's life. It may be that evil is necessary for moral development. A beggar's suffering can be the vehicle of benefit for one that feeds him. An all-good person could reasonably allow some evils in order that a greater good be brought about. This is what a parent does when their child is allowed to get small bumps or nicks in order to learn a lesson. In this context, the possibility of moral evil is a necessary condition of a greater good.

Some atheists have objected that God could use an *illusion* to teach people such virtues instead of real suffering. But this objection suffers from three problems. First, if true it would make God into a deceiver and that is contrary to his nature of being the source of all goodness and truth. Secondly, the alleged illusion would have to be convincing in order to achieve this effect, so convincing in fact that we could not know that it was in fact an illusion and so it would seem absolutely no different to us anyway. Thirdly, it should be admitted that even really good illusions can cause suffering – i.e., if you suffer an illusion that you have a daughter and that she is killed in a car accident, the pain involved in the loss would be just as great as if it really happened. True it would not be a real daughter that is killed, but the point here is that such illusions would not rid the world of suffering anyway. Painful illusions are still painful!

A World of “Hard Knocks”

Physical evil is any evil that is not done by the deliberate action of human beings. How might the theist deal with this sort of evil? God has decided to create a "world of hard knocks" - a material universe that follows natural laws. Gravity works, wood, rocks and concrete are hard, thunderstorms form, fire is hot, and bacteria exist. The world of hard knocks is our challenging theater of human development. These natural laws must be stable for the creatures in it to learn from experience. Wood needs to be counted on to remain solid and so on. If God miraculously intervened in these natures, these things could not be counted on and we could not learn from repeated experience nor would have any incentive to learn. A stable environment is needed within which free agents can interact. God may see some good in wanting us to learn how to get by on our own necessity in this world of hard knocks, use our creativity to prevent evils from happening and make use of our charity and compassion when they do. Without this challenge, virtuous habits such as courage prudence, justice etc. could hardly be developed, humanity would simply consist of spoiled little children getting everything they want.

Humans are not in a Good Position to Know God's Purposes

A limited perspective such as ours is in no position to judge the ultimate relevance of events. The philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz argued that it would be like putting your nose on a large masterpiece like the Mona Lisa and trying to determine the significance of this tiny blotch of color that you see. Limited perspectives prevent one from seeing the overall picture. Significant historical ripple effects with great consequences can emerge from say, the murder of an innocent child, even if the effect is centuries later. We have no way of knowing what all of the consequences are for a particular bad event and our lack of knowledge is only a mark against our abilities to know, not against God's existence. We are in no position to determine what God must do. God's reasons for permitting evil remain a mystery to us. The reasons God has for allowing these things are far beyond our comprehension. The theist should not take on the burden of proof here and show what he possibly cannot - what God's reasons are for permitting evil in the world, the best he or she can do is suggest what some morally sufficient reasons *might* be for God's allowance of evil.

It may be objected that from any evil event there is *no good reason to think* that there will be any good come out of it, but then the theist can simply respond by saying his source of knowing that good will come out of evil *does not come from viewing the evil act in itself but from other areas* (such as faith). In this case the theist would agree that be merely looking at the evil occurrence itself there is no indication that it will turn out for the best, but the theist does not derive such trust merely from that evil incident.

The Relevance of the Meaning of Life in Assessing Evil

Before one can say that evil and pain are never good for our lives; one must first know what the purpose of life is. Why evil may very well be counterproductive if the goal of life is pleasure, it nonetheless may very well be positive if the goal of life lies beyond this world. Evil in this world would then be a loving reminder that our current condition is not final and good, that our destination ultimately lies in another world. As C.S. Lewis once said, God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts at us in our sufferings. Pain leads us to God. *Pleasure is not the only good thing in life, nor is it always preferable.* The good of humans does not consist in the thrills of pleasure. For example, it can be a privilege to die for a noble cause, illustrating that death and suffering are not the only bad things in life. Is it not the case that man is sharpened on the rock of adversity? The human spirit emerges from the struggle, rising to the challenge, but with no challenge we might all virtuously stifled, forever hooked up to a divine heroin-like pleasure producing IV.

Positive Arguments for God's Existence

Any argument that alleges God probably does not exist because of evil, must take into account that there are other independent arguments that claim to establish God's existence. In fact, when coupled with the recognition that it is not really "evil" *per se* that poses a problem for God's existence but only apparent purposeless and gratuitous evil that does so, these independent arguments for God's existence can be used to "turn the tables" on the atheist's argument:

If *gratuitous* evil exists, God *does not* exist
But God *does* exist
Therefore gratuitous evil *does not* exist.

Notice that the atheist supplies the major premise, *but the second premise now comes from the other arguments for God's existence*, and the conclusion follows. Until these arguments are addressed and shown to be *probably* false, the data for determining that God probably does not exist based on the existence of gratuitous evil cannot succeed.

Conclusion

Why the Hard Argument from Evil Fails

Since any of the above are possible overriding reasons why an all-loving God might permit evil, the "hard" argument from evil fails. The hard argument must show that God has *no* morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil – a mammoth burden of proof to shoulder. All of these possibilities above are open, and *so the burden of proof falls on the atheist to show that permitting evils cannot bring about a greater good. As long as the possibility remains open, the hard argument from evil fails.* One cannot reach logical certitude until alternate possibilities have been ruled out.

Why the Soft Argument from Evil Fails

Since the "soft" argument from evil is based on probability and since all probabilities have to be made with an adequate amount of background information, the theist argues this argument fails as well. Limited information will produce skewed results. For example, what is the probability of grabbing the one white ball in a barrel full of black balls? Without sufficient background information, there is simply no reliable way to reach a probable conclusion with any degree of confidence. Probabilities must be made upon an adequate amount of the available evidence. We must have some idea of how many black balls are in the barrel. Thus, any probability calculations considering God and evil must factor in all of the above considerations, again:

- Theological doctrines such as the Fall that explains the origin of evil in man and the Judgment with eternal rewards and punishments greatly offset the relatively brief and minor evils suffered in this world.
- God is not obligated to create the best possible world. The best possible world itself is incoherent, all God can do is create a good world. It seems this world is such a good world with more good, on balance, than evil, and this is indicated by the fact that most people find life worth living.
- A world of "hard knocks" that is a world that operates according to natural physical laws within which free agents can interact and make real choices.
- We are not in a good position to know God's purposes. There may great long-term goods that arise from relatively minor and short-term evils.

- A clear determination on what the true meaning of life is can go far in explaining evil. It is not at all clear that suffering is a pure loss. If the purpose of life is to be mentally drawn from this world to another, then the permission of evil might very well be a good means of accomplishing this.
- Positive arguments for the existence of God.

Any judgment of probability regarding the problem of evil must take all of this into account. What arguments can the atheist use to prove all of these are probably false? Such a task would seem to be impossible. There is simply no way to assess any of these as probably false, yet no probability judgment can be made without them. Until this is done, probabilities cannot be assessed with any amount of confidence. Thus, the theist concludes, the atheist's argument appears hopelessly inconclusive, and accordingly, the problem of evil does not demonstrate that God neither does not, nor probably does not exist.