

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Ted Sider  
Intro Philosophy

## 1. Arguing that God does not exist

- If arguments *for* God's existence don't work, that wouldn't be an argument *against* God's existence.
- (Although, some say that if we have no evidence for God, then the "default" position should be to disbelieve in God.)

## 2. Initial statement of the argument

In its simplest form the problem of evil is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions... (Mackie, *R&R*, p. 119)

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? (Hume, *R&R* p. 104)

The argument:

1. If God exists, she is able to eliminate evil
2. If God exists, she is willing to eliminate evil
3. If God is able and willing to eliminate evil, then there is no evil
4. But there is evil
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

How might a theist respond?

### 3. Giving up on the traditional conception of supremacy

E.g.: God is not omnipotent, and so premise 1 is false.

### 4. Evil does not exist

...a fanatical artist who cares only for the aesthetic quality of creation—perhaps the abstract beauty of getting rich variety to emerge from a few simple laws, or perhaps the concrete drama of human life with all its diversity—and cares nothing for the good of the creatures whose lives are woven into His masterpiece. (Just as a tragedian has no business providing a happy end out of compassion for his characters.) (David Lewis, “Evil for Freedom’s Sake”, *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993), pp 149–172)

### 5. Good can’t exist without evil

For me, there’s no gain without pain. But why not for an omnipotent God? Perhaps *second-order goods* are impossible without evil:

**First-order evils:** pain, disease, suffering, etc.

**First-order goods:** pleasure, health, happiness, etc.

**Second-order goods:** sympathy, heroism, sacrifice, etc.

But what, Mackie asks, explains the existence of second-order evils?:

**Second-order evils:** stinginess, cruelty, cowardice, etc.

### 6. Free will defense

It is good for humans to have free will rather than being “robots”. Evil is due to free creatures making bad decisions. (Which premise does this deny? In one sense, 2; in another sense, 1.)

Some challenges faced by the free will defense:

### 6.1 Freedom without wrongdoing?

...if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. (Mackie, *R&R*, p. 124)

Reply: this is impossible. If God *caused* people not to do evil, then they wouldn't be free. (Issues about the nature of free will are relevant here.)

### 6.2 Freedom in a playpen?

A world in which agents can benefit each other but not do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. If my responsibility for you is limited to whether or not to give you a camcorder, but I cannot cause you pain, stunt your growth, or limit your education, then I do not have a great deal of responsibility for you. A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details. (Swinburne, "Why God Allows Evil", pp. 87-8)

### 6.3 Problem with omnipotence?

Does the free will defense contradict God's omnipotence? Perhaps not if "omnipotent" just means: can accomplish any *possible* task.

### 6.4 Foreknowledge

The free will defense suggests that God was unlucky: she took a chance on freedom and lost. But God is omniscient, so God knew the free creatures would make bad choices.

Also, God could "rig" the free-will game by only putting free creatures in situations she knows (via her omniscience) will not lead to bad results.

## **6.5 Natural evil**

The Free Will defense doesn't seem to explain evil that isn't caused by humans.