Evil and Omnipotence

J. L. Mackie

The problem of evil, according to Mackie, is that the following set of propositions is inconsistent.

1. God is omnipotent.
   - There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
2. God is wholly good.
   - A wholly good being is opposed to evil in such a way that it eliminates evil as far as it can.
3. [God is omniscient.
   - If evil exists or is about to come into existence, then an omniscient being knows that it exists or is about to come into existence.]
4. Evil exists.
5. God exists.

Premises 1-3 are traditional attributes of God. Consider the beginning of §48 of Leibniz’s Monadology:

In God there is:
[1] **power**, which is the source of everything, then
[3] **knowledge**, which contains every single idea, and then finally

[2] **will**, which produces changes in accordance with the principle of what is best.

In Leibniz’s view, while finite or created substances are in various ways limited, God is not limited in any way. As he says in the same section:

But in God these attributes are absolutely infinite or perfect, whereas in created monads . . . . they are only imitations of the divine attributes, imitations that are more or less close depending on how much perfection they possess. [‘Monad’ is a Leibnizian term for the basic creatures of the world.]

From these premises, Leibniz (in)famously concludes in §55 of the *Monadology* that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

And that is the reason for the existence of the best [possible world], which God’s wisdom brings him to know, his goodness brings him to choose, and his power brings him to produce.
But the above argument from evil brings us back down to earth. It makes the following demand:

In order to regain consistency, one must deny at least one of the 5 premises.

For instance, one might try to deny the existence of evil.

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony, not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

(Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*, Epistle i, lines 289-294.)

It is hard to deny the existence of evil, despite what Pope says (and however elegantly he says it.) Just restricting our concern to human beings, both nature (floods, famines, and other natural disasters) and our fellow creatures (through wars, greed, and ignorance) inflict suffering too great to be discounted to zero.

Various Fallacious Solutions

1. “Good cannot exist without evil” or “Evil is a necessary condition as a counterpart to good”.
Mackie allows that an omnipotent being can not do what is logically impossible. But is it logically necessary that in creating good God must also create at least some evil? At the least, argument is needed for this claim (and none seems to be forthcoming), and the claim seems implausible.

- If good and evil are qualities, it is unclear why an omnipotent being could not create good without evil.
- If they are relative quantities, they don’t seem relevant to theology. The better, indeed, cannot be without the worse, but that does not seem to be at issue. It’s not that God is better; God is wholly good.
- Finally, even if it were established that evil is necessary in order for there to be good, it would have to be the minimum amount necessary, if God’s benevolence it to be maintained. But (a) this does not seem to be the case, and (b) “theists are not usually willing to say, in all contexts, that all the evil that occurs is a minute and necessary dose.” (205)

2. Evil is necessary as a means to good.

If this view requires that God be restricted by some causal (as opposed to logical) laws, then it denies omnipotence.

3. The universe is better with some evil in it than it would be if there were no evil.
This solution contends that “evil may contribute to the goodness of the whole in which it is found, so that the universe as a whole is better than it is, with some evil in it, than it would be if there were no evil.” (206)

This solution requires that goods and evils be stratified. That is, it supposes that the existence of (what we might call) first order evil (like pain) is a necessary condition for the existence of second order good (like sympathy). The latter could (logically, not causally) not exist without the former and, it is added, the universe is better than it would otherwise be, given that it contains sympathy.

But insofar as one tries to solve the problem of evil by stressing the importance or value of second order good (in counterbalancing the existence of first order evil), one falls prey to what Mackie calls a fatal objection—the existence of second order evil (like indifference). If one tries to argue that this form of evil exists primarily to provide for the existence of some important third order good, there will be third order evils to raise the problem again, and so on in an infinite chain, the problem never being resolved.

That is, if the argument seems to be resolved at level n, the problem of evil breaks out again at level n + 1.

4. Evil is due to human free will, not God.
In this “solution” the existence of first-order evil is justified as logically necessary for the existence of second-order good (as in (3) above). Second-order evil is then explained away as the result of human free will and so not attributable to God.

The **first** thing to notice is that there still seems to be more first-order evil than is strictly necessary to produce-second order good. A benevolent and omnipotent being would not permit this much (first-order) evil to exist, one might suppose.

**Second**, the notion of free will is philosophically difficult to pin down, but Mackie waives objections of this sort.

**Third.**

“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 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” (209)

If God failed to do this, then either God is not omnipotent or not benevolent.
Reply (on behalf of the theist): If our choices are to be genuinely free, then they sometimes must be wrong choices, else we are more like puppets or automata than autonomous agents.

Rejoinder (on behalf of Mackie):

(a) But if these choices are ours in the sense that they arise from our motives, intentions, characters, and circumstances, then these can all be traced back to God, who made them as they are and who is then responsible for the wrong choice.

(b) If these choices are not so connected to our motives, intentions, characters and circumstances, then the choices are free in the sense of spontaneous or random. [If God made us as we are but did not determine our wrong choices, then these wrong choices are not determined by us as we are.] How can an act that is spontaneous or random be said to be a product of the will? But if “free” but evil acts are not products of the will, what possible relevance could invoking the existence of such wills, free or not, be to the problem of evil? [Cf. Hobart]

(c) If freedom is sheer randomness, then it will not be a third-order good, the presence of which outweighs the second-order evils it mitigates. If freedom is a third-order good and so not sheer randomness, then what is it?
Why would a benevolent God create a randomizing device (us) that would from time to time do evil (even if only in a random way)?

If God fails to control our free will when it chooses evil, then God is not benevolent. Unless, perhaps, God cannot control our will once it is created, in which case God is not omnipotent.

This last thought raises the question: “can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control?” (210) (Can God, for example, create a genuine randomizing device? Or a universe governed by indeterministic laws? These things don’t seem to be logically impossible, and so they ought to be things that an omnipotent being can do.) This is Mackie’s “Paradox of Omnipotence.”

We can put the paradox this way: Can an omnipotent being make rules which then bind itself?

Yes; but then it is no longer omnipotent. No: but then it is not omnipotent right from the beginning.

The Paradox of Omnipotence (but not the problem of evil!) can be met by distinguishing between first order omnipotence (or omnipotence₁), which is unlimited power to act, from second order omnipotence (or omnipotence₂), which is unlimited power to determine what powers to act things shall have.
One could then consistently say that God has at all times omnipotence₁, but then no thing has powers independent of God (and the problem of evil remains). Or one could say that God had omnipotence₂, and assigned independent powers to objects (avoiding the problem of evil), and so one would have to hold that God no longer had omnipotence₁, which does deny one of the elements of traditional theology.

“The paradox of omnipotence has shown that God’s omnipotence must in any case be restricted in one way or another, that unqualified omnipotence cannot be ascribed to any being that continues through time.” (212)

[Consider an odd dilemma that confronts one here. If there are laws governing our universe, they (logically) must be either deterministic or indeterministic. But genuinely indeterministic evolution seems to be beyond Divine control, and so clearly incompatible with Divine omnipotence.

Deterministic evolution seems no better. Once God has started the Universal Clock running on its appointed tracks, God can’t change what has been set in motion (compatible with the laws).

If God, being omnipotent, is able to intervene in either sort of universe, then they are not universes governed by genuinely indeterministic or deterministic laws, since they are subject to miraculous intervention at any instant. Hence God must not be omnipotent in some sense or other. Either God can’t create a law-governed universe or, if It can, then God is not omnipotent,
since such a universe must be either deterministic or indeterministic.

Consider this remark, which Aristotle attributes to the poet Agathon:

For even god lacks this one thing alone,
To make a deed that has been done undone.

Would a god who could not do this fail to be omnipotent?]