

BETTER THAN NOTHING: A FREE WILL DEFENSE OF THEISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a defense of theism that addresses the arguments made by J.L. Mackie on the topic of God's existence. Mackie and some other philosophers allege that the beliefs in both the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God and evil are contradictory. I aim to show that there is no contradiction. In this paper, I will argue that some of the evil that exists in the world may be allowed because of justifying reasons in the form of free will and feelings like sympathy and courage that come from both freedom of choice and the existence of evil. Evil in its most basic form is anything that causes suffering, injustice, or displeasure, such as famine, murder, and disease. God would need a good reason to allow any evil, and the purpose of this paper is to present the modest claim that God would be justified in allowing at least some evil to occur. I will also respond to Mackie's intervention argument, his saints objection, and the argument against creation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some philosophers claim that the existence of evil is a conclusive reason to deny the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God. This is what philosophers call the “logical problem of evil.” Some others contend that the nature and extent of evil constitutes a good, but not conclusive, reason to affirm atheism. This poses what has been called the “evidential problem of evil.” Many believers, who might otherwise rely on faith, want to show that their faith is not self-contradictory. That is what I intend to argue here. I shall set aside the evidential problem of evil and address the logical problem of evil exclusively, arguing that the belief in both God and evil is logically consistent.

II. MACKIE’S ORIGINAL ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

To show that the belief in the existence of both God and evil is consistent is to argue that logical arguments from evil are unsuccessful. In his much-discussed article, “Evil and Omnipotence”, J. L. Mackie (1955) points out that theists believe:

“God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three 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: the theologian, it seems, at once must adhere and cannot consistently adhere to all three” (200).

Mackie adds:

“However, the contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'. These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent

thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.” (200-201).

In short, Mackie’s argument is:

1. Theists believe that God exists, and that He is all-good and all-powerful.
2. Good is opposed to evil, in that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
3. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
4. If 1-3, then theistic beliefs entail that God would eliminate all evils and that there is no evil.
5. According to 1-4, if God exists, then there is no evil.
6. Therefore, according to theism, there is no evil.
7. However, theists also contend that evil exists.
8. Therefore, theistic beliefs are contradictory.

Omniscience, or the quality of being all-knowing, is essential to Mackie’s argument, but is left out in his original version. Mackie may have left it out because he believes that omnipotence implies omniscience, as you have to know of everything in order to be able to do or have control over everything. Even if this reason is not the case, it still has to be included in the argument; otherwise theists could use it as an objection to Mackie’s argument. They could claim that, if God was ignorant of the evil that exists in the world, then it would not be His fault for not stopping it. Theists believe that God is omniscient, and since it is important for Mackie’s argument, it will be included in God’s properties. Mackie contends that an adequate response to his argument from evil must do away with

at least one of the theistic propositions, such as reducing God's liability by restricting His omnipotence, giving up His all-goodness, or now, limiting His knowledge.

Mackie does not distinguish between pointless and justified evil in his argument. Justified evil is any evil that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God would allow or bring about because of a morally sufficient justifying reason, while pointless evil is evil that such a God would abolish. While Mackie acknowledges the concept of justified evil, he believes that any bad thing that occurs would be pointless evil.

A good example of a morally sufficient reason for a human to allow evil would be a mother having her child vaccinated. The pain of the injection is a bad thing on its own, but it is also a necessary requirement for the vaccination itself, which is good because it prevents future suffering for the child. This example is only morally sufficient for humans, though, as we require an injection in order to prevent the child's future suffering from diseases and other potential health issues. However, this example of the good of vaccination is not a morally sufficient reason for an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God to allow the pain of the injection, as He could simply have made humans such that we are naturally immune to all diseases, or that there are no diseases in the first place.

The goods presented here fall into two different categories: outweighing goods and defeating goods. An outweighing good is where a good thing G is greater in its goodness than a bad thing B is in its badness, but G does not need B to be good. For example, the future health and prevention of suffering caused by a vaccine is a good that we bring about through a needle injection. This is an outweighing good because God could simply make us naturally immune to all ailments, thus removing the excess

suffering. Meanwhile, a defeating good is where G is greater in its goodness than B in its badness, but it instead requires B in order to exist. An example of a defeating good might be compassion and sympathy for a man who has undergone a relatively mild amount of suffering, such as spraining his ankle. The good of the compassion is directly tied to the man's suffering and cannot exist without it. Some atheists might object that only perceived suffering is necessary for sympathy, but Richard Swinburne (2011) replies that God would be deceiving us if He was making us perceive this false suffering, which would be bad and not fit with His all-goodness. In other words, a defeating good is one that is necessarily connected to the evil state of affairs, while an outweighing good is a good thing that justifies a bad state of affairs but does not require the evil to exist.

However, outweighing goods cannot be used as a morally sufficient reason for God to allow evil to exist because they do not require evil to exist, and are thus vulnerable to the objection: If the good thing could exist without the bad thing, then why would God not create or bring about just the good thing, and not the bad? Thus, a morally justifying reason to allow evil must contain a defeating good, and not an outweighing one. Under this, God would have a morally justifying reason to allow evil only if a good thing could not be achieved without a bad thing. G would also have to be greater in its goodness than B in its badness. Using this, I will be disputing the good opposed to evil premise in Mackie's argument with the idea that some greater goods come as a result of evil and defeating them is a morally sufficient reason for an evil to be justified. With that, we will change 2 to 2R (2 Revised), stating:

2R. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, unless it has a morally justifying reason not to do so.

This means that an all-good being would eliminate all pointless evil and that an omnipotent one could eliminate evil. As previously stated, Mackie does not deny the concept of morally justifying reasons for God to allow evil, but also does not believe that any exist. A further revision of Mackie's argument would then come from how 2R and 3 entail:

4R. If both God and evil exist, then God has a morally sufficient reason to allow it.

This inclusion of morally sufficient reasons means that the rest of Mackie's original argument would also need to be changed in order to account for it. These revisions would be along the lines of:

5R. Therefore, if God exists, then there would be no evil that He did not have a morally sufficient reason for allowing.

6R. Therefore, according to theism, God might allow or bring about some evil if He had a morally sufficient reason for allowing it.

7R. Theists contend that evil exists.

8R. Therefore, God must have a morally sufficient reason for allowing evil, or theistic beliefs are contradictory.

The task at hand then, for theists, is to show that God might have a morally sufficient reason to allow at least one bad thing to occur. This would argue the idea that Mackie's original 5 and 6 could be false, as then both God and justified evil might exist together. If God might have a morally sufficient reason to allow or bring about evil, then Mackie's original 8, that theistic beliefs are contradictory, would not be proven to be true.

A possible morally sufficient reason some theists might argue for, then, might come from the free choices made by humans. If it is granted that humans have free will, wherein God cannot cause, restrict or alter our free choices and have them still be free, and there is a necessary possibility of evil in free choices, then God could not grant us free will without also allowing the possibility of morally wrong actions. Omnipotence is the ability to do anything that is logically possible, so the creation of logically impossible scenarios, like a square without corners or a single married man will not be considered states of affairs, meaning that an omnipotent being still technically has no limits on what it can do. Mackie supports the idea of a soft determinist design for the world, which means that it is possible for all events to be brought about, altered, or prevented, including free choices. Accordingly, in this design, free choices would still be free, even if they were influenced. This is different from the free will that I will be using in this paper in that God has already chosen what we will freely choose before we make the decision, which is not free will by my version's standards.

A potential reason why God might allow us to have free will then, could be that free will and noble acts, like compassion for a man who sprained his wrist falling down, are defeating goods for at least some of the wrong choices that come of our having the possibility of doing so. For free will to be a defeating good, it must make the whole state of affairs that it is involved in good, while the evil being defeated cannot be separated from said state of affairs. What I mean by this is that one reason free will may be a defeating good is because free choices are more valuable than forced ones, as the latter would just be God bringing it about good through another medium.

III. THE INTERVENTION ARGUMENT

While God bringing about good is a necessarily good thing, moral good created by free agents, like humans, is more valuable than good actions that He forces upon us because it is something that we must create on our own, lacking omnipotence and having to overcome temptation, as He cannot cause free choices. Free will may also be a defeating good because, as I stated earlier, it contains and enables some noble acts. A noble act like successfully nursing a child with a mild fever back to health requires free will in order to be a moral good. At the same time, this treatment also requires suffering in the form of the child being sick, which is bad, to have taken place. The idea here is that God might allow at least some evil to exist if it has a morally sufficient reason, such as having free will in the case of smaller wrong decisions like white lies, which would disprove Mackie's premise that there are no morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil to exist. If God may allow some evil under certain circumstances, then Mackie's statement that an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God would have no morally sufficient reason to allow evil might not be necessarily true, thus meaning the idea that theists would then believe no evil exists is not necessarily true either. If all of this is the case, then free will and the noble acts that come as a result of it may be potential morally justifying reasons for God to allow at least some of evil in the world. This would mean that the requirement for there to be no morally justifying reason for allowing evil in the logical problem of evil would fail.

Mackie's response to this is,

“But why, we may ask, should God refrain from controlling evil wills? Why should he not leave men free to will rightly, but intervene when he sees them beginning to will wrongly? If God could do this, but does not, and if he is wholly good, the only

explanation could be that even a wrong free act of will is not really evil, that its freedom is a value which outweighs its wrongness, so that there- would be a loss of value if God took away the wrongness and the freedom together. But this is utterly opposed to what theists say about sin in other contexts. The present solution of the problem of evil, then, can be maintained only in the form that God has made men so free that he cannot control their wills” (210).

In other words, Mackie’s likely response to these claims would be that the response that theists would need to make to the problem of the evil caused as a result of free will is inconsistent with other theistic beliefs, as they would be rejecting either God’s omnibenevolence or His omnipotence in the process. Mackie contends that if theists want to claim that God would never intervene, then that would go against God’s all-goodness in preventing heinous acts. This leaves theists with having to claim that God would not intervene because He could not, which would go against His omnipotence. This is called The Intervention Argument. Mackie would claim that God preventing the wrong acts and allowing the right ones to be freely made would not restrict the freedom of the right choices, and that this would be a better state of affairs than allowing wrong choices to be actualized.

In response to this, as Mackie would agree, God would need a morally justifying reason to allow for an evil, such as wrong acts. It is no secret that at least some of the evil that exists in the world is the result of moral evil, whether it be cruelty, deceit, or any other number of other evils brought about by free humans. We may be allowed to commit some moral evil because free will and noble acts are defeating goods that allow moral good to be created in the world, and possibly even some moral evil. Going back to the task of theists in the logical problem of evil, even if some wrong choices occur and are not defeated with noble acts, the point is not to justify all evils, but rather, to show the

possibility of at least one bad thing being morally justifiable to God. Free will and noble acts may provide this justification, which may be reason enough for God to allow us to make free choices. Essentially, what I am saying is that if God granted us free will, then, even though Mackie has a point, and He might intervene in order to stop heinous evils, He may not always intervene when a bad thing would occur. If free will and the other good things that come from it can justify at least one bad thing's existence, then that may be enough of a reason for God to allow it, and that would show Mackie's premise that God and evil cannot exist together to not be proven.

Moral good can only be created by the free choices of free agents, like humans, and since God is not human and cannot cause free choices under this form of free will, it would be impossible for Him to bring about moral good on His own. If a good being seeks to eliminate unjustifiable evil, then it would also make sense for it to seek to enable as much good as possible, such as by creating humans with free will which sometimes choose right, thus creating moral good. Under these circumstances, it is possible that God might allow us to have free will in order to allow moral good to come about, possibly allowing some of the milder moral evil that might come with it to exist if it is defeated by a morally justifying good. Mackie's Intervention Argument requires God to always intervene when a free human would choose wrong, but if God finds a morally sufficient reason to allow the wrong choice, then it might be allowed, thus disproving Mackie's more extreme claim of all-encompassing intervention. It is true that there exist some terrible acts committed by humans that God should intervene on, but that is not necessarily the case for every wrong act that occurs. If God might not intervene in every case, then God's existence would be compatible with those justified evils. Thus, the

possibility of moral evil is necessary as a means to bring about defeating goods such as free will, as well as moral goods in the form of noble acts, which fits in with greater good theodicies.

IV. THE SAINTS OBJECTION

If God were to allow us to have free will, this would still only justify the latent possibility of wrong choices when we make morally significant decisions, and not the evil of actually making them, as only the possibility is entailed in my version of free will. This means that I have to establish that not only the possibility of wrong actions, but also their actualization, must be morally justifiable to God. Now, freely made right choices are morally good, but I have not really said anything about the scope of free will being a good thing in and of itself other than a brief claim earlier. There, I stated that free will is a defeating good, meaning that it is inseparable from the possibility of evil that is a part of it, while having the possibility of being better in its goodness than some moral evils is in their badness. By no means can every wrong act be easily justified, or even justified at all, for that matter, but it is reasonable to believe that at least some smaller cases might be. It may then be better for us to make some wrong decisions than never make any, so as to enhance the moral significance of our free will, which lends more to the goodness of increasing the scope of free will, all of which God might allow in some situations. To this end, free will and the noble acts that come with it may be defeating goods that justify some of the times when we fail to choose right.

Mackie would likely argue that even if moral evil is incredibly highly likely to occur under morally significant free will, it is still only a possibility, or something that

might happen but does not necessarily occur. Mackie expounds upon this counter to free will theists by contending that,

“I should ask this: 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. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good” (209).

Unlike the Intervention Argument, where moral evil is prevented, this argument, the Saints Objection, completely circumvents the issue by proposing a world in which God would never have to prevent wrong decisions because they would just never occur.

Accounting for the wrong choices that we make does not matter if the wrong choices never actually happen. Mackie proposes that if moral good is as good as free will theists claim it to be, then why would not God just create free humans who always choose right and never choose wrong, which I will hereafter call saints. Saints completely avoid any possible world issues that may arise from operating under the assumption of libertarian free will because they would always choose good over evil in their world, and God simply would not actualize the possible worlds in which they would choose wrong. Saints would never have their free choices limited by God because they would always be good and would have just as much say in what decisions they make as we do in our world, as choosing right is part of their design, and not a component of the free will they are endowed with. Due to these factors, Mackie believes that saints would be a better option than the morally imperfect humans that exist in the real world.

Mackie's Saints Objection presents a very strong argument that my position of some evils having the possibility of being justified does not fare well against. While it could be said that the free humans in a world with no evil might have a distorted view of wrong choices, as they are something that never happens, despite the presence of temptations for them, this does not change the perfect state of affairs wherein there is no evil and only good. The most that I could reasonably say against the argument would be that a world where the evil that exists is justified by defeating goods would be similarly good to the world presented in the Saints Objection, as there is no pointless evil in either world. You could say that the people in the justified world would have a better perception of evil and be able to learn from their mistakes, but in Mackie's world, they do not make wrong decisions in the first place, and thus their only character growth comes from resisting temptation, and not from taking responsibility for their actions. Mackie proposes a very strong argument for a potentially better use of free will in a more controlled environment in his Saints Objection, and while it could be argued that a world where all evil was justified by defeating goods might be just as good, my argument only states that some of the evil in the world might have morally sufficient reasons for God to allow it, and while it is possible that all of the evil in the world is justified, and thus possibly just as good as the saints world, I must admit that I find that state of affairs highly unlikely.

V. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST CREATION

Moving away from the Saints Objection and other free will-related arguments, there is still one more argument from evil that I will address in this paper. Mackie's is not the only argument for the conclusion that if God existed, then no evil would exist. All the discussion of the free will defense presupposes that God would have created a world in

the first place. The opposition could claim that this very assumption is questionable at best, and possibly even false. These objectors argue that if only God existed, then everything that exists would be all-good. They then claim that an all-good universe would be better than a world with both good and evil. They would turn one of my previous points against me, stating that an all-good God would bring about the maximum amount of good possible, and that this goal would be achieved if God never created anything in the first place. According to these skeptics, since things only become worse by creating, if God existed, then He simply would not create anything.

I like to call this objection the argument against creation, and I believe that it fails to account for the moral good that is a result of the free will given to some of God's creations. The idea of a perfectly good ratio loses some of its value when confronted with some of the evils that God might allow because they are defeated, which means more total good for the world. They said it themselves when they claimed that an all-good being like God would want to maximize goodness. This way of addressing evil, where God would seek to minimize the amount of evil and maximize the amount of good in the world, views the logical problem of evil as more of a pie chart between good and evil, with the less evil represented, the better, as its main idea. It does not account for justified evil or greater goods like noble acts because the nothingness of the void (with God) is better than a greater good by this argument's logic. The issue with it comes more when we step away from the pie chart and towards the meters that would show the net good versus evil in the world. If some evils are being defeated and the value of freedom of choice and the moral good that we bring about contribute to the grand scale of things, then there would be more total good when the world and free humans have been created

and God exists, rather than the proposed state of affairs where only God exists. The issue, then, arises from the evil that is allowed and justified, of which none exists in the objectors' world. I argue that if at least some of the evil that exists is justified, then it should not count as evil because the state of affairs it is involved in has been defeated and made good. This comes back to the idea that even if a man felt sympathy for a family member that eventually died from cancer, then the sympathy he felt is good, but his family member still died, which is arguably a defeating evil for the good of the sympathy. In the non-creation world, though, none of this ever happened and neither of them ever even existed. I believe that while the existence of more evil in the universe makes the argument against creation superior in the good to evil ratio department, we are still creating more good than what would exist if the universe was only God in the vacuum. Some of the evil that exists may be justified, making it so that the situation concerning the ratio might be a bit more favorable, and the argument against creation fails to maximize the amount of good that can exist in the world.

VI. CONCLUSION

The logical problem of evil is the idea that theists believe God exists and is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing, and that evil exists. Mackie argues that God would and could prevent all evil, eliminating it before it ever happens by preventing wrong choices at the cost of reducing the free will of those decisions, or by only allowing saints that never choose wrong, even when they have the possibility to do so. Free will entails the possibility of wrong actions that God would not be able to remove and still have them be free, and God cannot force free actions, so if He grants free will, then it is necessary that at least some of the evil that comes from it might be justified by a morally sufficient

reason in the form of a defeating good, which would make for a successful modest argument that disproves Mackie's argument that if God exists, then there would be no evil.

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