Logical Problem of Evil - James R. Beebe, 2016

The existence of evil and suffering in our world seems to pose a serious challenge to belief in the existence of a perfect <u>God</u>. If God were all-knowing, it seems that God would know about all of the horrible things that happen in our world. If God were all-powerful, God would be able to do something about all of the evil and suffering. Furthermore, if God were morally perfect, then surely God would want to do something about it. And yet we find that our world is filled with countless instances of evil and suffering. These facts about evil and suffering seem to conflict with the orthodox theist claim that there exists a perfectly good God. The challenged posed by this apparent conflict has come to be known as the problem of evil.

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Journalist and best-selling author Lee Strobel commissioned George Barna, the public-opinion pollster, to conduct a nationwide survey. The survey included the question "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The most common response, offered by 17% of those who could think of a question was "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" (Strobel 2000, p. 29). If God is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good, why does he let so many bad things happen? This question raises what philosophers call "the problem of evil."

It would be one thing if the only people who suffered debilitating diseases or tragic losses were the likes of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin or Osama Bin Laden. As it is, however, thousands of good-hearted, innocent people experience the ravages of violent crime, terminal disease, and other evils. Michael Peterson (1998, p. 1) writes,

> Something is dreadfully wrong with our world. An earthquake kills hundreds in Peru. A pancreatic cancer patient suffers prolonged, excruciating pain and dies. A pit bull attacks a two-year-old child, angrily ripping his flesh and killing him. Countless multitudes suffer the ravages of war in Somalia. A crazed cult leader pushes eighty-five people to their deaths in Waco, Texas. Millions starve and die in North Korea as famine ravages the land. Horrible things of all kinds happen in our world— and that has been the story since the dawn of civilization.

Peterson (1998, p. 9) claims that the problem of evil is a kind of "moral protest." In asking "How could God let this happen?" people are often claiming "It's not fair that God has let this happen." Many atheists try to turn the existence of evil and suffering into an argument against the existence of God. They claim that, since there is something morally problematic about a morally perfect God allowing all of the evil and suffering we see, there must not be a morally perfect God after all. The popularity of this kind of argument has led Hans Küng (1976, p. 432) to call the problem of evil "the rock of <u>atheism</u>." This essay examines one form the argument from evil has taken, which is known as "the logical problem of evil."

In the second half of the twentieth century, atheologians (that is, persons who try to prove the non-existence of God) commonly claimed that the problem of evil was a problem of logical inconsistency. J. L. Mackie (1955, p. 200), for example, claimed,

> Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.

H. J. McCloskey (1960, p. 97) wrote,

> Evil is a problem, for the theist, in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil on the one hand and belief in the omnipotence and omniscience of God on the other.

Mackie and McCloskey can be understood as claiming that it is impossible for all of the following statements to be true at the same time:

> (1) God is omnipotent (that is, all-powerful).
> (2) God is omniscient (that is, all-knowing).
> (3) God is perfectly good.
> (4) Evil exists.

Any two or three of them might be true at the same time; but there is no way that all of them could be true. In other words, (1) through (4) form a logically inconsistent set. What does it mean to say that something is logically inconsistent?

> (5) A set of statements is logically inconsistent if and only if: (a) that set includes a direct contradiction of the form "p & not-p"; or (b) a direct contradiction can be deduced from that set.

None of the statements in (1) through (4) directly contradicts any other, so if the set is logically inconsistent, it must be because we can deduce a contradiction from it. This is precisely what atheologians claim to be able to do.

Atheologians claim that a contradiction can easily be deduced from (1) through (4) once we think through the implications of the divine attributes cited in (1) through (3). They reason as follows:

(6) If God is omnipotent, he would be able to prevent all of the evil and suffering in the world.

(7) If God is omniscient, he would know about all of the evil and suffering in the world and would know how to eliminate or prevent it.

(8) If God is perfectly good, he would want to prevent all of the evil and suffering in the world.

Statements (6) through (8) jointly imply that if the perfect God of theism really existed, there would not be any evil or suffering. However, as we all know, our world is filled with a staggering amount of evil and suffering. Atheologians claim that, if we reflect upon (6) through (8) in light of the fact of evil and suffering in our world, we should be led to the following conclusions:

(9) If God knows about all of the evil and suffering in the world, knows how to eliminate or prevent it, is powerful enough to prevent it, and yet does not prevent it, he must not be perfectly good.

(10) If God knows about all of the evil and suffering, knows how to eliminate or prevent it, wants to prevent it, and yet does not do so, he must not be all- powerful.

(11) If God is powerful enough to prevent all of the evil and suffering, wants to do so, and yet does not, he must not know about all of the suffering or know how to eliminate or prevent it—that is, he must not be all-knowing.

From (9) through (11) we can infer:

(12) If evil and suffering exist, then God is either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not perfectly good.

Since evil and suffering obviously do exist, we get:

(13) God is either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not perfectly good.

Putting the point more bluntly, this line of argument suggests that—in light of the evil and suffering we find in our world—if God exists, he is either impotent, ignorant or wicked. It should be obvious that (13) conflicts with (1) through (3) above. To make the conflict more clear, we can combine (1), (2) and (3) into the following single statement.

(14) God is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.

There is no way that (13) and (14) could both be true at the same time. These statements are logically inconsistent or contradictory.

Statement (14) is simply the conjunction of (1) through (3) and expresses the central belief of classical theism. However, atheologians claim that statement (13) can also be derived from (1) through (3). [Statements (6) through (12) purport to show how this is done.] (13) and (14), however, are logically contradictory. Because a contradiction can be deduced from statements (1) through (4) and because all theists believe (1) through (4), atheologians claim that theists have logically inconsistent beliefs. They note that philosophers have always believed it is never rational to believe something contradictory. So, the existence of evil and suffering makes theists' belief in the existence of a perfect God irrational.