

The Problem of Evil I: Some Tools & A Couple Different Versions

Before we get into our discussion of the problem of evil, we need to review and add more tools to our toolkit. Specifically, we need to talk about (i) *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*, (ii) *entailment*, (iii) *counterexamples*, and (iv) *necessary/contingent truths* and *essential/accidental features*.

1 Some logic review

An argument is **valid** just in case (if and only if) IF the premises are true, THEN the conclusion must be true.

Two important valid forms are *modus tollens* and *modus ponens*.

Modus ponens

Form: (1) If P then Q. (2) P. (3) Therefore, Q.	Example: (1) If it's raining outside, then the sidewalk is wet. (2) It's raining outside. (3) So, the sidewalk is wet.
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Modus tollens

Form: (1) If P then Q. (2) Not-Q. (3) Therefore, not-P.	Example: (1) If it's raining outside, then the sidewalk is wet. (2) The sidewalk is not wet. (3) So, it's not raining outside.
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2 Entailments

Christians (and other theists) say that God is perfectly good.

When we say that God is infinitely good, we then have to say certain additional things about God, including the following:

- God is perfectly benevolent.
- God is perfectly powerful.
- God is perfectly knowledgeable.
- The existence of everything else besides God depends on the existence of God.

QUESTION In what sense do we have to say these additional things about God?

ANSWER These additional things are entailed (or, implied) by what we first said about God.

What is it for something to be **entailed**? Here are some ways to illustrate:

ILLUSTRATION 1 This claim:

The shape that Jake drew on the board is a circle.

...entails this claim:

The shape that Jake drew on the board isn't a square.

ILLUSTRATION 2 This claim:

A triangle has 3 sides.

...entails this claim:

The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees.

Notice that it doesn't matter whether there's such a thing as a triangle—i.e., it doesn't matter whether a triangle even exists. We can put the point this way:

If there were a polygon that had 3 sides, the sum of its angles would be 180.

Or, if you prefer, we can put it this way:

The idea of a 3-sided polygon amounts to the idea of a polygon whose angles add up to 180.

Either way, the following holds true:

If we say that something is a polygon with 3 sides, we have to say that the sum of its angles is 180—no matter whether that thing is real or just hypothetical.

Similarly, if we say that something is infinitely good, we have to say that it's infinitely benevolent, infinitely powerful, and so on—no matter whether that thing is real or just hypothetical.

3 Counterexamples

Some claims are **universal**: they say that everything (sometimes within a particular class or grouping) has a feature or characteristic.

Examples:

- All swans are white.
- Every whole number that is divisible only by itself is prime.
- Thes wears a shirt with birds on it every Wednesday.
- All birds can fly
- No carpenters live in Los Angeles.
- Nothing good comes easy.
- Nothing hydrates you as effectively as water.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Why are there some 'no' and 'nothing' statements in the examples?

4 Necessary and contingent, essential and accidental

Two more tools we need to add to our toolkit are the distinctions between *necessary* and *contingent* truths and between *essential* and *accidental features*.

A **necessary** truth is something that *must be true*; a truth which cannot possibly be false.

A **contingent** truth is something that is true, but which could *have been* false or *could become* false.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: For each of the following truths, discuss whether it is **necessary** or **contingent**:

- (i) $2 + 2 = 4$.
- (ii) The Arch is the tallest structure in St. Louis.
- (iii) An object at rest tends to stay at rest, and an object in motion tends to stay in motion.
- (iv) God exists.

Some features of objects are *essential* and others are *accidental*.

An **essential feature** is one that an object must have—otherwise it would be a different kind of object.

An **accidental feature** is the kind of feature something could lack, while remaining the same kind of thing.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: For each of the following, say whether it is an **essential** or **accidental** feature of *humans*

- (i) having red hair
- (ii) being created by God
- (iii) having two arms
- (iv) being *humans*

5 Coping versions and evidence versions

One difference is between what we'll call *coping* versions and *evidence* versions of the problem.

Coping versions arise when people come face to face with evil, perhaps more vividly than they ever have before...

EXAMPLE 1 Their 3-year-old child dies of cancer.

EXAMPLE 2 They witness cruelty that rivals that of the Holocaust.

...and they're shaken by it. If they're theist, they may have a crisis of faith and, in some cases, lose their trust in God. If they're not theist, they may be deeply resistant to becoming theist—quite understandably. Either way, their struggle is to cope with the evil they've seen. By contrast, evidence versions involve strictly this question:

Despite the evil that's in the world, is there enough evidence for theism?

For people who face that question by itself, the challenge is not to cope with hardship but just to assess evidence properly. And we can imagine someone approaching that task with as much emotional detachment as that of scientists who assess evidence in a lab.

Evidence versions of the problem require the expertise of **philosophers** and **theologians**.

By contrast, *coping versions* call for the expertise of skilled **pastors**, **priests**, or **counselors** or the comfort of patient, devoted **friends**.

6 Evidence version 1: God can't create essentially evil things

THE ESSENTIAL EVIL ARGUMENT

- (1) If God exists, he cannot create something essentially evil.
- (2) Evil is essentially evil.
- (3) So, if God exists, he cannot create evil.
- (4) If God cannot create evil, then evil couldn't exist (after all, God creates everything).
- (5) But, evil does exist.
- (6) So, God does not exist.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 4: Three questions:

(i) Is this argument valid?

(ii) Why does premise (1) say that if God exists, he can't create something *essentially* evil? Why doesn't it just say that God can't create something evil?

(iii) Which premise is false and why?

7 Evidence version 2: The classic and simple version

LACTANTIUS (313 AD): “God, [Epicurus] says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?”¹

THE CLASSIC VERSION

- (1) No morally good being would allow evil things to happen if able to prevent them.
- (2) God would always be able to prevent any evil thing from happening.
- (3) So, if God exists, nothing evil would ever happen.
- (4) Evil things do happen.
- (5) So, God does not exist.²

DISCUSSION QUESTION 5: Is there a *counterexample* to (1)?

8 Refuting a problem versus a defense

We’ve seen that two versions of the problem of evil have serious issues and probably don’t work.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 6: Have we thereby shown that God and the existence of evil things are compatible with each other?

¹ *De ira Dei*, Chapter 13, trans. William Fletcher

² This formulation is borrowed from Louise Antony.

The answer is ‘no.’

Just because we refuted THE ESSENTIAL EVIL ARGUMENT and THE CLASSIC VERSION of the problem of evil doesn't mean that we've shown evil things are compatible with the existence of God.

For that, we need what is called a *defense*.

“Defense” is a technical term in philosophy. Suppose we have two claims **A** and **C**, and we want to know whether **A** is compatible with **C**. In order to show that **A** is compatible with **C**, we need to find a third claim, **B**, such that **B** is consistent with **A** and also entails **B**.

EXAMPLE: Suppose we want to know whether the two following claims are compatible:

Claim A:

John was last seen 30 miles away from the murder at 5 pm. The murder was committed at 5:35 pm. John does not own a car.

Claim C:

John committed the murder.

To determine whether **Claim A** and **Claim C** are compatible, we need something like this third claim, **B**:

Claim A:

John was last seen 30 miles away from the murder at 5 pm. The murder was committed at 5:35 pm. John does not own a car.

Claim B:

John stole a car, drove to the scene of the crime, and committed the murder.

Claim C:

John committed the murder.

Some clarifications:

- Defenses don't show that both claims are true.
- Defenses don't even necessarily show that both claims are *likely* to be true (though sometimes a really good defense will show that both claims are likely)
- Defenses don't need to be true; they just need to be possible.