
LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations

1999

Atheism & Evil: A Fatal Dilemma

Gary R. Habermas

Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary R., "Atheism & Evil: A Fatal Dilemma" (1999). *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 34.

https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/34

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

From *Why Believe God Exists?! (College Press Publishing (1999))*

Chapter XX

Atheism & Evil: A Fatal Dilemma

The world can certainly be a painful place to live. We can insulate ourselves from the daily reports, but we tend to hear and see them even when we do not desire it. We don't have to look very far--just to live in a world with others is to be involved. We are all distressed by the suffering we endure, and by what we observe around us. We are confronted by adversity and affliction--or it confronts us!--whether we call ourselves atheists, agnostics, pantheists, or theists. All of us labor under these burdens.

So far, we have treated the problem of pain and evil as if it affected theists alone. In particular, we have asked how such problems are consistent with belief in God. Theists just seem to take a defensive posture rather than go on the offensive when questioned about their faith. But in this chapter we want to turn the issue around. Strangely enough, atheists have their own conceptual problems with suffering--and several of them are major, indeed. We will look at some of dilemmas here.

A. Are There Contradictions in Theism?

We have said that some atheologians, taking a harder line than their colleagues, hold that the orthodox concept of God is actually contradictory. They maintain that one or more of God's attributes conflicts with the presence of evil in the world. But is this actually the case?

We will begin by distinguishing between two sorts of epistemological(1) predicaments: logical dilemmas and those that only appear to be so. Mavrodes refers to the first as a "hard" dilemma, one where the core beliefs are logically incompatible with each other. "Soft" dilemmas occur when someone falsely believes that these beliefs are irreconcilable.(2)

Based on a similar distinction, Nash addresses the atheologians' objection by summarizing Plantinga's "theistic set" as follows:

1. God exists.
 2. God is omnipotent.
 3. God is omniscient.
 4. God is omnibenevolent.
 5. God created the world.
- and
6. The world contains evil.(3)

Specifically, where is the contradiction in this "theistic set"? It would appear to be difficult to prove one here. Prominent atheologian J. L. Mackie actually admits "that there is no explicit contradiction between the statements that there is an omnipotent and wholly good god and that there is evil." Yet he thinks that if additional premises are added, the contradiction will become obvious. He suggests appending "the at least initially plausible premises" that an omnibenevolent being would eliminate evil as far as he can and that such a being has no limits.(4)

The theist might respond in a twofold manner. (1) There are apparently no direct contradictions in the theistic set above, at least according to Mackie. This is significant in itself. (2) The premises that the atheologian would like to add in order to force a contradiction also fail to do an adequate job, as we argued in the last chapter. We will briefly review some of our conclusions.

Using Mackie's examples, should God eliminate evil as far as He can? The theist might ask how such would be possible without limiting human freedom? Moreover, might such action actually have the negative consequence of reducing the good that results from the suffering? Further, and perhaps most difficult of all, how could finite beings ever know whether God already accomplishes just what Mackie suggests?

Or can an omnipotent God do anything, as per Mackie's second question? Orthodox theology has long insisted that there are things that even an omnipotent God cannot do--such as contradictory actions. So again, the issue concerns whether God could remove the evil without contradicting the free will of His creatures. We are right back at our earlier point. No one has shown how either of these options involves a contradiction.(5)

Nash mentions another possible atheological objection: couldn't God eliminate all the evil that He can without either forfeiting a greater good or allowing a greater evil? But once again, how could it ever be determined that this is not the very case we have at present? Arguing against the type or amount of evil in the world gets us back to the options entertained and dismissed in the last chapter. So this creative suggestion does not eliminate evil or otherwise cause us to reformulate our theistic set above, failing to do the job for the critic. In fact, Nash asserts that "our new proposition is totally consistent with the existence of evil in God's creation."(6)

Besides, as Mavrodes counters, the theist is certainly justified in offering a counter argument to the existence of evil in God's universe. Mavrodes explicates it this way:

If God is omnipotent and benevolent, then He cannot allow evil unless there is a justification for allowing it. But He obviously does allow it. Consequently, if He is omnipotent and benevolent, then He has a justification for allowing evil. He is benevolent and omnipotent. Therefore, He is justified in allowing evil.(7)

In other words, although atheologians are fond of juxtaposing the actual existence of evil over against the orthodox doctrine of God, theists can just as well counter with the above argument. The logical form of the first argument is no more valid than that of the second.(8)

So atheologians reach a roadblock here. They have been unsuccessful in discovering the "missing premise" that would prove the theistic set stated above to be contradictory. Nash concludes the matter this way: "Even though atheologians have been claiming for decades that the theistic set is self-contradictory, none of them has yet produced the required missing proposition that will prove the claim . . . we are still waiting for him to show that his claim is true."(9)

B. Evil is Position- and Person-Related

Most people speak of the quandary we are discussing in our last three chapters as the problem of pain and evil. Even most scholars appear to think of the overall subject as if it were primarily one, major issue. Our readers might even have noticed that, up until this point, that is how it has been discussed in this book, too. But while we have been satisfied until now to deal with the more general features, it is time to be more specific. The answers that one gives to the problem of evil largely depend on the perspective from which one is answering--the general world view and the specific "twists" contained in one's position, as well as one's personal outlook.

The first matter is nicely summarized by John Feinberg:

the notion that there is one and only one theological/philosophical problem of evil is mistaken . . . 'the theological/philosophical problem of evil' does not refer to one problem, but to a series of problems that arise in regard to various theological positions as such positions are coupled with their respective normative ethical views.(10)

Then how are we to judge whether the problem of evil actually causes a predicament with regard to a particular view? Again, Feinberg is helpful. As encountered within a particular philosophical or theological system, the presence of a dilemma "always" depends on the logical consistency of propositions internal to that view.(11)

Accordingly, the problem of evil involves a host of issues, depending on the particular system of thought being addressed. In order to see if any specific position is adversely affected, one must view the charge against the logical consistency of the whole. Such is a question of internal congruity, especially since we already saw that there is no explicit contradiction in the theistic set.

When such distinctions are made, it is entirely possible that certain theistic views will appear to be inconsistent, while others may pass the test just fine. Feinberg investigated eight theistic responses to evil and concluded that six of them were internally consistent.(12)

There is another significant consideration that follows from this perspective. The atheologian may continue to utilize the problem of evil to object to theistic systems (often without making any distinctions between them). But as long as a system links the notions of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence with the presence of evil in a way that is logically consistent, then the atheologian must object on other grounds.(13)

This last consideration is a crucial one. There is no explicit contradiction between theism and evil. Therefore, if the theistic system in question is internally consistent, then the atheologian must utilize a critique other than juxtaposing the problem of evil over against a specific species of theism. This potentially removes much of the sting of the atheological objection from pain and suffering.

But there is still another aspect to this situation. Not only must the matter of evil be evaluated against a specific theological system, but we can break the inquiry down even further. There appears to be a very personal feature in

discussions on this subject. Not all sensitive, knowledgeable theists are bothered by the issues involved. In short, many just don't perceive the force of the objection.(14) While it is quite true that one's feelings on this subject are not determinative, this is precisely the point. The problem is not a conflict between logically-irreconcilable positions, but one involving the beliefs and tastes of the individuals themselves.

George Mavrodes expands on this last suggestion, indicating that the issue of evil does not exist in a vacuum. There must be a person who thinks that there is a problem. However, just because someone experiences such a dilemma, this provides no logical reason to conclude that someone else ought to have the same problem. In short, the problem of suffering is person-related. The matter of pain and evil fails to involve any objective conflicts, and there is a strong subjective element.(15)

In fact, Mavrodes makes some rather direct comments on the logical nature of the dilemma. He says: ". . . one person's belief in a core that someone else takes to be inconsistent constitutes no dilemma for the believer."(16) Some skeptics will argue that the theist is simply avoiding a difficult quandary--that he is, in effect, "copping out" of the problem. But Mavrodes answers again:

The important point is that the critic who makes a truth- or logic-oriented objection is not in a privileged position In particular, the fact that the critic is unconvinced by the theologian counts for no more than the fact that the theologian is unconvinced by the critic. Of course, the theological defender is almost uniformly charged with the burden of proof, while critics of his views are often thought to have no such obligation. But this is merely an accidental feature of the current state of culture and philosophy; it has no basis in logic and reason. In particular, if the claim that the problem of evil involves no real contradiction obligates its proponent to prove this claim, then the claim that the problem does involve a real contradiction should place an analogous obligation on its proponent.(17)

Thus we conclude this second consideration. There is no such thing as the problem of evil. There is only a dilemma in theological or philosophical systems that are internally inconsistent in terms of the logic involved.

Further, in systems where there is no logical contradiction (of which there are probably a fair number), the issues are person-related. Some believers think they have a perfectly good response and will not be bothered by this problem at all. But the critic's lack of convincing counts nothing against the theistic position, any more than the believer not being convinced counts against the atheological position. This all seems to place the atheologist in the unenviable position of having to prove that there are logical conflicts in every theistic system.

C. Recognizing Evil

In spite of the two difficulties for the atheologist that we have already mentioned, perhaps the worst of their problems is an inherent dilemma in their own system. The charge was eloquently leveled by C. S. Lewis, as a telling argument against his own naturalism. How can atheists even question the existence of a Creator based on the pain and evil in the world? Since atheists seldom recognize the existence of any absolute right or wrong, they have no basis for identifying the presence of evil. Lewis explains it like this:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? . . . Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too--for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist--in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless--I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality--namely my idea of justice--was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple.(18)

We need to expand upon Lewis' point a bit, for there appears to be a hidden assumption or two here. He is charging that the atheist has a very serious dilemma. If there is no absolute standard of right and wrong, as most atheists appear to believe, then the atheist has no right to utilize the presence of pain and evil in the world against the orthodox view of God. The reason is straightforward--in the absence of ethical absolutes, then even the real presence of profound suffering is not actually something that is objectively wrong. So while the pain would still be real (not an illusion) it is simply a reality devoid of any ethical consequences.

To say it another way, the atheist's objections to the suffering in the world amount to little more than their personal dissatisfaction with certain aspects of reality. In the absence of objective ethical standards, then Lewis appears to be correct: atheistic complaints to evil constitute some "private idea" of right and wrong, and evil is simply something that "did not happen to please my private fancies," nothing more.

How might the atheist respond to this argument? One option is to assert that there really are ethical absolutes in the universe. But such an alternative is unpalatable to the majority of atheists.(19) Not only does it conflict with their widespread notions of human freedom and lack of objective values, but it seems to backfire into the major premise of the moral argument for God's existence (see next chapter). In brief, if absolute, objective ethical standards exist, then it is very difficult to explain them as being the result of chance evolution.

To summarize briefly, the atheist can only use the problem of evil to object to the orthodox conception of God if there is some standard by which to recognize the evil in the first place. Apart from such a standard, suffering is reduced to unfortunate feelings of dislike for the pain. On the other hand, if there is such an objective criterion, then the question must include the existence of such a measurement in a chance universe. In short, if evil objectively exists, then God would appear to exist as well, with some sort of relationship between such a Being and the evil.

D. The Theistic World View Versus Naturalism

The atheologian could very well make another sort of response to the dilemma we just outlined for her. It could be asserted that atheists don't have to recognize objective values in order to advance the issue of evil against Christian theism. Rather, they can raise the problem from within theism as an internal problem for this world view to solve, since it does recognize an absolute standard of right and wrong.

Here's another way to look at the objection. We said above that the question of evil is an internal matter of consistency within a system, and this response questions that coherence. To say it popularly, the atheologian basically issues the challenge to stage the contest in the theistic ball park, since she cannot play in her own.

The theistic reply might first be to point out that, at worst, she is in the same place where she began two chapters ago. Thus the atheologian response doesn't change anything. It only reasserts the former position, which we have answered in much depth. In short, God allows evil for the greater goods that are potentially achieved, particularly regarding creaturely free will, natural laws, and soul-making.

Then theists might assert, as we did above, that the atheologian has not been successful in pointing out any actual contradictions in the theistic system. Further, the atheologian must also specify which theistic perspective she is referring to, since this is only a problem for systems that are susceptible to the criticism and for individuals who "feel the crunch."

But there is still another reply that will put the issue in a broader context. If the atheologian insists on playing in the theistic ball park (since the atheologian has, in effect, no home field!), then we need to look at the two starting line-ups. It is seldom recognized that naturalism, per se, offers comparatively few positive arguments in favor of its position. The naturalist primarily features the problem of evil and responses to contrary positions. As Trueblood asserts concerning the case against God's existence, "The chief negative evidences constitute the problem of evil." (20)

But naturalists cannot even offer evil as an argument that favors their position, since they cannot officially recognize its nature. Thus, if we are correct here, naturalism is largely a world view that must resort to objecting to theism's arguments (including proposing evil as an internal problem) rather than supporting their own system. From the outset of the "ball game," this severely limits their offensive "punch."

On the other hand, theism (and Christian theism in particular) can offer a multitude of arguments in its favor. Some of these evidences have been included in this book. The existence of God (Sections I and II), the origin of life (Chapters 15), the trustworthiness of the New Testament (Chapter 26), the historicity of Jesus' resurrection (Chapter 27), the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (Chapter 28), and God's personal involvement with His people (Chapter 30) are some examples. Other theistic evidences might include a carefully constructed case from fulfilled prophecies of various types, (21) and several arguments for life after death. (22)

Now here's the point of analyzing the naturalistic and theistic "starting line-ups." While we have said that the former relies chiefly on critiques of opposing positions, theism offers both numerous positive arguments in its favor, as well as excellent critiques of naturalism itself. (23) There's nothing wrong with naturalists desiring to utilize evil in order to offer an internal critique of theism, but they cannot expect theists to play by naturalistic rules, since they have none by which to judge the existence of suffering.

Therefore, to play in the theistic ball park is fine, but naturalists must be prepared to view evil as an internal problem for theism. But as such, the problem must be viewed in light of the many arguments which both evidence theism and argue against naturalism. In other words, it is certainly true that evil exists, sometimes in great quantities. And we don't always know why we suffer (Chapter 22). But it is also true that this is a universe where God exists, and where He created life, predicted the future, directed the writing of the New Testament, sent His unique Son Jesus Christ, raised Him from the dead, gets personally involved with His people, and offers them eternal life in His glorious, eternal Kingdom. (24)

To see all this from a different angle, it is undeniable that suffering and evil really exist. But it is comforting to know that it also happens in a universe where God raised Jesus from the dead, confirming His unique message. Therefore, even when we don't know why certain things happen as they do, we still have the assurance that there is a reason for all of it. This is what we mean by playing in the theistic ball park. Evil cannot be taken in isolation from the other relevant data, and that data explain evil much easier than evil can explain away all the evidence.

E. Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we went on the "offensive" in favor of the theistic answer to the problem of evil. This is a seldom-used tactic, but is well warranted by the evidence. Strangely enough, naturalism has plenty of problems with the suffering in the world. We addressed four such predicaments. In the end, we even think that their struggles prove to be fatal.

First, no contradictions in the theistic set have yet been proven. Atheologians have tried to do so, but have not generated the missing premise that would prove that theism is internally inconsistent. In fact, in addition to other responses, theists are always able to reply that since God does have certain attributes, there must be an adequate reason for the evil in the world.

Second, atheologians have generally failed to recognize that there is no single problem of evil. Separate theistic systems respond differently to the various issues. Moreover, these are not external difficulties, but internal ones, affecting the consistency of a particular perspective. Additionally, suffering is a subjective, person-related issue; it bothers some theists, but not others. Just because critics are still not convinced does not count against theism any more than the reverse counts against naturalism.

Third, naturalists are not able to raise the objection concerning evil either from their own system or as an argument in favor of naturalism. The reason for this is that naturalists who do not recognize the objectivity of ethical values have no basis from which to protest the presence of suffering. From their viewpoint, it is only an unfortunate consequence of life. While they may not like it, their own system does not allow them to recognize any objective complaints to lay at the theist's feet.

The seemingly few naturalists who do accept objective values have the greater problem of explaining this phenomenon in a chance universe, especially since it is the major premise in the moral argument for God's existence. Thus, it would appear that, if evil really exists, so does God.

Some atheologians have therefore been satisfied to offer evil as an internal critique of theism, pointing out that its views are inconsistent. But, fourth, we argued that such an internal charge does not exist in a vacuum, but must be evaluated along with the distinctive evidences for theism. It is a contest between world views. And it is easier to explain evil by the arguments for Christianity than it is for evil to eliminate all of these excellent evidences.

This last point has interesting implications. Whereas theists seldom deny the reality of evil, admitting it along with all the other evidences, naturalists must deny virtually all (or perhaps even all) of the major evidences for a theistic universe. (25) This is another indication of the untenable nature of this world view.

Endnotes--Chapter xx

1. Epistemology is the area of philosophy that deals with how we know what we do, including various theories that claim to offer the best means of gaining such knowledge.
2. Mavrodes, *Belief in God*, p. 106.
3. Nash, *Faith and Reason*, p. 181. For further details, see Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Part 1.
4. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 150.
5. Very interestingly, atheist William Rowe presents an influential argument against the theistic position, but still freely admits that there is no contradiction in theism. He even concludes that theists can rationally affirm their position. Cf. William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1978), p. 94 with Nash's evaluation of it (pp. 212-215). C. Stephen Evans agrees with Nash that no one has proven a contradiction in theism at this point in his book *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking About Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 137. See Chapter 19 above for many details concerning such atheological counter-arguments. Nash provides other problems for alternative formulations like Mackie's on pp. 183-186.
6. Nash, p. 186.
7. Mavrodes, p. 95.
8. It seems that Rowe allows a similar formulation to count toward the rationality of the theistic position. See endnote number 5 above.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
10. Feinberg, *Theologies and Evil*, pp. 147-148.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 148. Mavrodes responds similarly (pp. 105, 110).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
14. I can illustrate this last thought with a personal reflection. I (Habermas) spent ten years as a skeptical believer with severe questions about the Christian faith, even being involved in heated debates with Christians. But during this time, the problem of evil never struck me as a very worthwhile complaint. While I was impressed with certain factual objections to Christianity, and brought these up regularly in my arguments, I thought that theists had too many possible ways to answer the presence of evil, and so I never used it.
15. Mavrodes, pp. 101-104.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
18. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), pp. 45-46. The italicized words are those of

Lewis.

19. The humanists who signed the First Manifesto in 1933 explained: "Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values." Those who endorsed the Humanist Manifesto II in 1973 said: "We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures." Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Buffalo: Prometheus Press, 1973). For these quotations and other details, see Norman L. Geisler, "The Collapse of Modern Atheism" in *The Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, edited by Roy Abraham Varghese (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984), pp. 129-152.

20. Trueblood, p. 231.

21. For example, see Robert C. Newman, Editor, *The Evidence of Prophecy: Fulfilled Prediction as a Testimony to the Truth of Christianity* (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1988). Many of the authors of this volume are trained in some aspect of both science and Scripture studies.

22. See Habermas and Moreland, *Immortality*, Chapters 1-6.

23. For the latter, see Chapters 3 and 10 here, plus the entire volume edited by Varghese, *Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, for a scientific, philosophical, and theological reaction against naturalism from a wide variety of perspectives.

24. For an argument from Jesus' resurrection to the Christian theistic model of heaven, see Habermas and Moreland, Chapters 9-10.

25. For this last argument in more developed form, see Gary R. Habermas, "Paradigm Shift: A Challenge to Naturalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 146, number 584 (October-December, 1989), pp. 437-450.