

This is a sample of a undergraduate student research paper in philosophy. Although it is offered here as a model of good philosophical writing, the reader should note that it is an example of only one type of paper: an argumentative paper. Comments on good practices of scholarly writing are placed in the margins below, but not all such practices are required in all types of papers.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil has been a perennial thorn in the side of theistic-minded philosophers and theologians for centuries. The particular troublesomeness of this problem is that it arises from the simultaneous belief in contradictory religious propositions. It seems that this problem presents a painful choice to the theist: either to give up a cherished belief (which is anathema to theists) for the sake of a logical consistency, or to give up logical consistency (which is anathema to most philosophers) for the sake of cherished beliefs. The problem is stated by J. L. Mackie in his essay "Evil and Omnipotence."

And that simplest form the problem is this: 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....

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 premises are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates

evil as far as it can,¹ 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.²

Thus we have three main propositions ("God is omnipotent, wholly good, and evil exists") and what Mackie calls "quasi-logical rules," which I would prefer to consider "definition rules," since they prescribe how the terms found in the problem shall be defined and use. Thus the definition of "good," for example, entails that it "always eliminates evil as far as it can."

Note that the author defines the issue in a precise manner with the help of Mackie.

Thus we have the problem set before us. The obvious solution is that of simply denying one of the three propositions. But, as I have said, this is repugnant to the faithful theist. In this paper I shall try to offer a solution to this age-old problem, show how it offers a solution, trace some of its consequences, and show how it faces up to criticism. It should be noted at the outset that I am in no way arguing for the truth of the solution I am proposing. That would be a mighty task indeed! I am only attempting to eradicate the implicit contradiction within the problem, and freedom from contradiction in no way implies truth. With this understood, let us proceed.

The author carefully states the aim of his paper, and warns the reader of the limitations of his argument.

The central proposition of this solution is that God cannot create a world which allows contradiction. This is the one limitation of God. This calls into question the ascription of omnipotence to God. Why shouldn't an omnipotent being be capable of creating a contradictory world? The only answer to this question is that if God could create a contradictory world, if we allow this proposition, then the problem of evil is indeed unsolvable while holding to the propositions and definition rules as described by Mackie above. Indeed, if God could create a contradictory world anything would be possible, since anything, any proposition, follows from a contradiction. Thus it would be absurd to hold that an all-good, all-powerful God can exist and create evil. If he is truly good, and the definition rules above are held, then there should be no evil, since all things would truly be possible for God.

Thus what is called for is a redefinition of omnipotence and so one of the definition rules above such that we would hold that an omnipotent being has no limits within the limits of logical possibility. Thus God can do anything except create a contradiction.

The second position which this solution to the problem

of evil shall take is that there are two supreme goods: that of creation (or creativity) and free will. These two goods are the highest, that is, any world without these two principles would be greatly depleted, so much so that any possible world devoid of these two principles would be quantitatively less good than any possible world with them. Let me further define these two principles.

The principle of creation is that of change and making anew in nature. Thus mountain building, the spring of a new river, and the glacial carving of valleys are all instances of the principle of creation. We can find confirmation of this principle in the first chapter of Genesis. After each creation which God performs at the beginning of the world he "saw that it was good."³ Yet tumultuous creation is not something which was performed once and then ceased. Creation is an ongoing process of the world.

Again, our second principle, the principle of free will, is implicit in Genesis. The forbidding of Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge and their subsequent eating of it shows that God gave the first man, according to Genesis, free will. And indeed Genesis would seem absurd if we did not hold that God considered free will as a supreme good, for if freedom was not a supreme good why

wouldn't God sacrifice it in order to prevent the fall of man, the original act of evil? For our purposes here I shall define free will as the ability to choose any course of action which is humanly possible for that individual at any particular time.

It is now necessary to offer an analysis of the concept of evil in order to show how this concept is manifested from the human standpoint. Here I shall offer a two-fold concept of evil: evil as subject and evil as object. They both stem from the position that evil is a humanly-based phenomenon and is intricately tied to the status of the human being as a freely choosing subject.

The first evil, evil as subject, is one that Martin Buber explains in his work Images of Good and Evil.⁴ This evil stems from the human consciousness of the world as possibility. This awareness of the possibility of different future states dawns on us as a possibility of different actions, in essence a consciousness of humanity's free condition. So, as Buber explains,

... everything which appears or happens to man is transformed into motor-energy, into the capacity and desire for action, so too the chaos of possibilities of being, having forced an entry, becomes a chaos of possibilities of action.⁵

From this consciousness there are two ways to act. One can,

The author defines explicitly key terms and concepts of his argument. Above the term "omnipotence" was defined. Here we have the beginning of an analysis of the concept of evil.

The author makes use of the ideas of an established philosopher to develop the conception of evil. It is good practice when developing one's own argument to make good use of the work of other philosophers. Setting out on one's own when addressing a philosophical question is rarely a good idea.

as Buber says, "clutch to any object,"⁶ that is, one can take any direction, any possibility, open to one in a haphazard, random manner; or one can "set about the audacious work of self-unification,"⁷ that is, find a unified direction by which one can choose an order series of possibilities towards a goal. The former is an indecisive mode of action, "a setting out upon no path, pseudo-decision which is indecision."⁸ The latter is "the path."⁹ Upon retrospect, says Buber, we see the latter action as good, the former as evil.

The anthropologic retrospective view of the person ... announces to us as evil all ... indecisions, all the moments in which we did no more than leave undone that which we knew to be good.¹⁰

I call this "evil as subject" since one sees oneself in this way as evil: as an active, choosing subject one is evil through indecision. Thus the realization of possibility in action, which is the realization of free choice, can throw one into evil action.

Yet after the fact of self-unification, or human direction, evil does not cease to be reality. One overcomes one evil, yet is met with another. Through the process of self-unification and finding direction one attaches sight on a goal which is one's self-fulfillment. This goal is what

Quotations are well-chosen to support the author's interpretation, but also not extended beyond what is necessary to support the offered interpretation.

Buber calls "the person purposed for me,"¹¹ the end-state of being by which all subsequent choices are aligned. The direction which one takes on this path is thus seen as an act of creating, the creation of a future goal. With this direction, this becoming aware of a path, certain other values are accepted by the individual as good. Thus, for Buber, "every ethos has its origin in a revelation ... of human service to the goal of creation, in which service man authenticates himself."¹² From this path and these values arises the second type of evil. This evil consists of barriers which one experiences as hindrances in one's path towards one's goal, one's authentication, and which deny or oppose the values which append to the path one has chosen. Buber mentions this type of evil and describes it as, "negative experiences with our environment, which denies us the confirmation of our being that we desire..."¹³

I call this type of evil "evil as object" since evil here is experienced as a "something out there" which hinders him, an object preventing one as a freely acting subject.

We have, then, evil as subject when indecision causes one to randomly choose from one's possibilities, and evil as object which is the hindrances to one when taking a path of action towards a goal. The common denominator in both of

these evils is that they are a matter of human recognition and naming of a particular human experience as evil. There is no evil "out there" in the sense of being a totally independent force, but evil is a way we categorize our experience. Further, evil is a direct result of our condition of being a freely acting agents. With evil as subject it is a random choosing of possibilities open to one; with evil as object it is the consequence of a chosen path which one takes towards a goal, a future state.

The solution to the problem of evil is now ready for proposal. First we shall consider evil as subject. For God to give us the ability for free choice is for us to see our situation of chaotic possibility. We have many ways to go. The easiest way to go is simply to make random choices, grasp to any particular action. This random choice, what Buber calls an "undirected reality"¹⁴ is a natural consequence of the human condition of freedom--it is within the nature of the human condition that undirected reality and indecision shall arise. This indecision is what we have called evil as subject. Thus it would be contradictory for God to make the world with freedom of choice and without evil as subject, the latter being the consequence of the former.

With evil as object we are faced with the world. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, etc., become a deterrent in so far as they oppose our direction, our goals, and the values which are consequences of those goals. Yet this type of catastrophic evil is precisely what is implied by the good of creation. Thus the flood in the story of Noah's ark is catastrophic yet creative, for it creates the new world. For God to allow the good of creation in the world is for the world to be a hindrance to us, and evil as object, at times in our lives. Since this opposition is a direct consequence of human free will and worldly creation then to have these two goods without evil would involve a contradiction.¹⁵

As has been proposed before, creation and free will our supreme goods. This, once again, means that any possible world without these two goods would be quantitatively less good than any possible world with them. Thus, to give these two goods to his creative world is for God to ultimately create the best world and still be wholly good, even with evil. To create a world with these two goods and without evil is not a path open to him, since this is contradictory and, as I said already, God cannot create a contradictory world.

Thus I come into agreement with Leibniz that this is "the best [world], which is disclosed to him [God] by his wisdom."¹⁶ Yet I disagree with Leibniz on two important points. According to Leibniz the evil that we see in our lives is translatable into good once the whole universe is contemplated. Thus, as a small revealed part of a painting looks confused in itself yet fits in perfectly with the whole, also our small confused corner of the universe actually fits well with the whole if viewed in that way. What seems evil to us actually is good.¹⁷ Yet my position allows for no such translation. Evil is evil whether from our perspective or (since he is omniscient) from God's. Yet evil is simply unavoidable for this world in order to include two supreme goods, creation and free will.

Here the author carefully notes the relationship of his own solution to the problem to one of the most famous solutions historically: that of Leibniz. Drawing out implications, and situating one's ideas within the broader history of philosophy, aids the reader's understanding of one's own position.

Also, as a consequence of the "pre-established harmony" of the world, Leibniz seems to unavoidably become a determinist. Yet the proposition that human beings are free is central to the position I have taken in this paper. We are free, and it is a genuine as well as a humanly felt freedom.

How is my solution to the problem of evil a real solution? Returning to the problem as stated by Mackie, the

problem of evil involves the seeming contradiction of three propositions: God is all good, God is omnipotent, and yet there is evil. As Mackie stated (see page 1) if any two of these propositions are held to be true the third seems impossible. Yet the solution I have proposed holds, first, that there is evil, and this evil is a real and, as I have stated, not translatable into good. Secondly, God is all good, for he created the best (ie the most good) world possible. The only proposition of the three which had to be qualified was God's omnipotence. God cannot create a contradictory world. Yet as I have said above, this is justified since I believe the problem of evil would be unsolvable without this qualification. Thus to say God is omnipotent is to say that he can do anything which is logically possible.

It is doubtless that now that the reader has the solution before his eyes some objections might be raised. Therefore, let me try to answer two of the possible objections which might be raised against the solution.

Possibly the strongest objection is this: why doesn't God intervene when man is going to choose an action or direction of action which is evil or will lead to evil? There are several answers to this question. One is that

Anticipating and responding to possible objections to one's argument is an excellent practice in philosophical writing.

this intervention would not allow for free choice. This brings us back to the definition of freedom given on page 3: the ability to choose any course of action which is humanly possible for an individual at any particular time. For God to intervene would be for him to suspend free will, one of the supreme goods. It seems that the writers of the Old Testament felt that God would not suspend a supreme good such as free will, even to prevent evil, for Adam and Eve freely chose to eat the forbidden fruit, which God in all his omnipotence and omniscient did not prevent.

Further, Martin Buber calls the choice towards direction, as opposed to that of randomness, as "the path, for there is only one."¹⁸ This implies that at any point where people must choose, there is only one choice which is along this path which is good, and all others are random and therefore evil. Thus if God prevented an evil choice there would be only one way for the agent go; and since this basic choice is always present, "re-encounter[ed] in innumerable situations in our later lives,"¹⁹ there would be only one possible destiny for the agent, which is tantamount to determinism. Thus God, in preventing evil, would also eradicate free will from his world, and deplete it of freedom's supreme goodness. The value of free choice and

the agent's chosen path is that the agent freely chooses this path repeatedly against all other possibilities. Thus does free will have meaning for humanity, and thus is God's goodness in providing for the freedom of choice.

Another objection which might be raised is this: if for God to limit humanity's freedom would mean a lessening of the world's goodness, and God is all-good, is not God then limited in the actions open to him and thus not omnipotent? First it should be pointed out that this is not the question about the problem of evil per se; that is, it doesn't involve the question of evil at all but only brings into question the consistency of God goodness and his omnipotence. Nevertheless since the consistency between these two divine attributes is presupposed in my solution I need to answer this objection.

The answer to this question is simply this: that taking a particular course of action repeatedly does not imply being determined in this course of action. Thus since God always chooses not to interfere with humanity's free choices does not imply that he could not do this. A parallel can be drawn between God and the person who chooses a path in his or her life. Above I said that the value in such a person's choice is that he or she repeatedly chooses a certain path

(and so the good) against all other possible actions. Thus although this person chooses thusly, this does not imply that other choices are not possible. Thus God also chooses repeatedly not to limit humanity's freedom. An implication of this position is that God could render himself less good. That is he could choose to limit humanity's freedom thereby making the world less good, also making himself less good since he would have unnecessarily depleted the world. Yet simply because this possibility is always before him does not mean that he is not all-good, and having this possibility before him is necessary for him to be omnipotent.

In closing let me repeat that in this paper I have not attempted to argue for what in fact is the case, but have only tried to relieve the contradiction which constitutes the problem of evil. There are still questions to be asked and answered. Chief among these is whether creation and evil are actually good and, if so, is it true that any possible world sans creation and free will would be less good than any possible world with them. These propositions are extremely important to the solution that I have proposed, yet their truth is not implied by the fact that they work within the solution. Thus the truth of

The author concludes the paper by once again reminding the reader of the limitations of the paper's argument, and suggesting what more is required for a fuller consideration of the issue.

this solution is an independent problem in itself, and a broader metaphysical system is required to support it.

Endnotes

1. One critical limitation of ability to eradicate evil is knowledge of evil. Since God is considered within the religious tradition to be omniscient, or all-knowing, we will presume in this paper that there is no such limitation with respect to God.

Footnotes or endnotes can be used not only to cite texts, but offer additional points that are helpful but not central to the discussion in the text.

2. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in The Philosophy of Religion, Basil Mitchell, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 92-93.

3. The Jerusalem Bible, Alexander Jones, ed., (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1968), p. 5.

4. Martin Buber, "Images of Good and Evil," in Good and Evil (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

5. Ibid., p. 126.

6. Ibid., p. 127.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 128.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., pp. 129-130.

11. Ibid., p. 141.

12. Ibid., p. 142.

13. Ibid., p. 134.

14. Ibid., p. 127.

15. This argument may be symbolized for clarification. "F" stand for the proposition "there is free will."
"C" stands for the proposition "there is creation."

"E" stands for the proposition "there is evil."

The argument is symbolized as follows:

1.	$(F \cdot C) \supset E$	
2.	$F \cdot C$	$\therefore E$
3.	E	1,2 MP

Therefore, the argument $(F \cdot C) \supset E$
 $F \cdot C$
 $\therefore \sim E$ is contradictory.

16. Gottfried Leibniz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, Paul and Anne Martin Schrecker, tr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), p. 156.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

18. Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

19. *Ibid.*