

# The Problem with the *Problem of Evil*

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Current discussions of the 'problem of evil' vary greatly in at least two ways. First, those involved in such discussions often differ on the exact nature of the problem. Some see it as primarily logical (deductive), some as primarily evidential (inductive), and still others as primarily psychological (personal, pastoral). Second, those involved in such discussions differ radically on what is required of the theist in response. Some claim that unless the theist can offer an explanation for evil (a theodicy) that is satisfying to rational individuals in general, theistic belief is rendered unjustified. Others agree that the theist must offer a theodicy, but deny that such an explanation must be found convincing by most if theistic belief is to remain justified. And still others deny that the theist is required to offer any sort of explanation (theodicy), arguing instead that the theist need only defend the logical consistency of simultaneous belief in the existence of evil and God.

But almost all current philosophical discussions of the relationship between God and evil are similar in one respect. Almost all such discussions center around (begin with, emphasize) a very serious logical tension that allegedly faces those theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good. The specific wording of this alleged problem -- which we shall label the GENERIC PROBLEM -- varies greatly, but the basic conceptual tension in question remains constant:

- (1) An omnipotent being could ensure that no evil occurred.
- (2) A perfectly good being would never desire (seek to bring about) the occurrence of evil.
- (3) But evil occurs in our world.
- (4) Therefore, the theist cannot justifiably affirm the existence of a being who is omnipotent and perfectly good.

The primary purpose of this essay is to argue that the GENERIC PROBLEM does **not** pose a challenge to theists who believe in the existence of an all-powerful, perfectly good being and thus that it is **counterproductive** to continue to center discussions of evil around this alleged tension.

## I

Why do so many philosophers center their discussions of the relationship between God and evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM? One rather obvious possibility is that they do so because they believe that all theists who hold the same or very similar beliefs about evil and God's attributes are **equally** subject to any tension that the affirmation of these beliefs might produce and that the GENERIC PROBLEM outlines a very significant prima facie tension of this sort. Such a response, however, is unacceptable. It **is** true that all theists who do in fact hold the same or very similar beliefs about God's power and goodness are equally subject to whatever tensions the affirmation of these beliefs might produce. However, it is simply **not** the case that all theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good hold the same, or even similar, beliefs concerning the nature and extent of God's power or the type of value that a perfectly good being places on various states of affairs. Specifically, it is simply **not** the case that all theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good hold anything close to similar beliefs with respect to (1) and (2) -- hold anything close to similar beliefs with respect to the contention that a perfectly good God would not desire evil or the contention that an omnipotent God could ensure its nonexistence if he so desired. In fact, they do not even hold similar beliefs with respect to (3) -- the contention that evil exists.

Let us first consider the concept of divine omnipotence. What exactly does it mean to say God is omnipotent? To the average religious layperson, it has often meant that God can do **anything**. But what exactly does it mean to say that God can do anything? Some theists appear to believe that God's power is not restricted even by the laws of logic -- that is, appear to believe that God could bring about even **logically impossible states of affairs** such as the creation of square circles. But most philosophers and theologians have agreed with Thomas V. Morris that "to say that God is so powerful that he can do the logically impossible is not pious or reverential; it is just confused."

Others have agreed with Leibniz that to say that God is omnipotent is to say that God can bring about **any logically possible state of affairs**. But this contention has come under increasing attack. For instance, it has become fashionable in some circles to maintain that God cannot both grant a person P significant freedom with respect to an action and yet also bring it about that P **freely** make the choice God desires, although either choice (either state of affairs) is **logically**

**possible.** Or, put in simpler terms, many now hold that if God gives us significant freedom, he cannot control how it will be used.

Still others have approached this issue differently yet. As they see it, to say that God is omnipotent is to say that he possesses every power that it is logically possible to possess. But others have pointed out that while the power to sin is a power that it is logically possible to possess -- we as humans surely possess it -- it is not a power that God can possess. Thus they suggest we maintain only that an omnipotent God has every power it is logically possible for a being perfect in every respect to possess.

Exactly what powers, though, is it possible for a perfect being to possess? Classical theists have normally held that God possesses, and has utilized the power to create the world **ex nihilo** -- out of nothing. But some theists -- for example, process relational theists -- continue to believe that since other self-determining entities have co-existed eternally with God, the power to create **ex nihilo** is **not** a power that it is logically possible for any being to possess, even if this being is perfect in every respect.

And so the debate continues. Will there come a time when most theists who believe that God is omnipotent finally agree in principle on what this means? Perhaps. However, the key point for our present purpose remains: neither in the past, nor at present, has there been anything close to general agreement on what it means to say that God is omnipotent. Accordingly, it should not be surprising that there exist diverse perspectives on the relationship between God's power and the evil, even among those theists who maintain that God is omnipotent. Specifically, it should not be surprising that theists who believe that God is omnipotent hold quite divergent beliefs with respect to (1) -- hold quite divergent views with respect to the contention that an omnipotent God could ensure that no evil occurs.

Those theists who believe that God, as an omnipotent being, can actualize any logically possible state of affairs affirm (1) in the strongest sense. They believe, of course, that God could have ensured the existence of a world containing no evil simply by actualizing a possible world containing no entities with the capacity to produce evil. But since they believe that worlds in which **free creatures** never produce any evil are logically possible, they also believe that God could have created (ensured the existence of) a world of this type.

Not surprisingly, those theists who deny that God, even though omnipotent, can unilaterally actualize every logically possible state of affairs respond differently to (1). Such theists, of course, still affirm (1) in one sense. They, too, maintain that God could have ensured that this world contained no evil simply by actualizing a possible world containing no entities with the capacity to produce evil. However, since they deny that God can both grant an entity significant freedom and unilaterally control its use, they acknowledge that, **to the extent that God has chosen to grant creatures meaningful freedom**, God cannot ensure that this freedom will not generate evil. Or, stated in terms of the premise under consideration, theists of this type deny (1) in the sense that they deny that an omnipotent being **who has chosen to grant other entities freedom** can ensure the existence of a world in which no evil occurs.

Finally, those theists who maintain that God does not have the capacity to guarantee unilaterally that **any** desired state of affairs will come about deny that there is any sense in which God could have ensured a world without evil -- deny that there is any sense in which (1) can be affirmed. Ambiguity also surrounds the concept of perfect goodness. What exactly does it mean to say that God is perfectly good?

For most, it has meant at the very least that God is morally praiseworthy in every case -- that there is no context in which God's actions and attitudes are deserving of anything less than the highest moral praise. But what exactly is it about God's actions and attitudes that make them worthy of such praise? For most, it is at least the fact that God always does what ought to be done -- that "God never acts in a way contrary to true moral principles." But what is the exact nature of the moral principles which guide God's behavior? Specifically, what approach to ethical decision-making do such principles demand?

Here, not surprisingly, a significant difference of opinion appears. Some philosophers and theologians view ethical decision-making primarily as a **deontological** enterprise. That is, although they believe that moral agents should never become emotionally indifferent to the consequences their actions, they deny that such consequences are **morally** relevant, arguing rather that the right action is that which is done in accordance with the relevant moral rules, regardless of what may or may not occur as a result. Thus, when they maintain that God, as a perfectly good being, will never act "in a way contrary to true moral principles" they mean that he will **never** fail to act in accordance with the relevant moral rules, even if very significant goods were to come about if he did so.

Other philosophers and theologians view ethical decision-making as primarily a **teleological** (consequential) enterprise. That is, although they believe that certain types of behavior are normally inappropriate, they reject the absolute, **a priori** prohibition of such behavior, maintaining instead that the right action is always that which produces the best

consequences overall. Thus, when they maintain that God, as a perfectly good being, will never act "in a way contrary to true moral principles" they mean that he never fails to bring about the best state of affairs overall, even if this means he must at times act in ways a morally perfect being would not normally act.

It should not be surprising, accordingly, that even among those theists who believe that God is perfectly good, there is no single, straightforward response to (2) -- to the contention that a perfectly good being would never desire (seek to bring about) the occurrence of evil. This is especially true of the perceived relationship between God's goodness and human suffering.

Some strict theistic deontologists, for instance, contend that a perfectly good God would **never** desire (seek to bring about) a world which contained even one instance of unrecompensed suffering by an innocent person, even if such suffering were a necessary means to accomplish a very good end. This position is perhaps most poignantly stated in the rhetorical question posed by Dostoyevsky's Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . , would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?

Other, less strict theistic deontologists, do not wish to argue that God could never justifiably desire (seek to bring about) any unrecompensed suffering. But they do maintain that a perfectly good God would **never** desire (seek to bring about) a world containing persons whose "lives, through no fault of their own, are on balance an evil . . . for them rather than a good," even if each instance of evil suffered by such persons were a necessary condition for some very good end within this world.

Finally, still other theists are of a more teleological persuasion. They believe that a perfectly good God is committed only to bringing about the best state of affairs overall, and thus they do not rule out the possibility that a perfectly good God could justifiably desire (seek to bring about) a world containing not only a great deal of unrecompensed suffering but even individuals whose lives will not, on balance, contain more good than evil.

Thus far we have seen that ambiguity surrounds premises (1) and (2) -- contentions related to divine omnipotence and divine goodness. Does it also surround premise (3) -- the contention that evil exists? At first glance, it might appear that the answer is no. While some theists maintain that evil is an illusion, most theists are quite willing to acknowledge that evils -- defined as inherently undesirable states of affairs -- exist in this world.

However, theists often make a distinction between **gratuitous** and **nongratuitous** evil. Those evils -- inherently undesirable states of affairs -- whose occurrence is necessitated (required) on teleological or deontological grounds are considered nongratuitous. For teleologists, they are those evils that stand as necessary conditions for the occurrence of some greater good or the avoidance of some greater evil. For instance, a teleologist who lets her small child touch a hot stove in her presence might argue that, although the pain the child is going to experience is inherently undesirable (an evil), it is a necessary if her child is to avoid even more painful experiences in the future and thus nongratuitous. For deontologists, nongratuitous evils are those evils that are required by adherence to a moral rule. For instance, a deontological parent might argue that, although the punishment she is inflicting on her son is an inherently undesirable state of affairs (an evil), it is necessary (nongratuitous) because wrongdoing must always be punished.

On the other hand, those inherently undesirable state of affairs that have no such teleological or deontological justification are considered to be gratuitous.

Moreover, while some theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good maintain that only nongratuitous evil exists in our world, others maintain that our world contains (or at least may contain) both gratuitous and nongratuitous evil. Thus, if the contention in (3) is that this world contains **gratuitous evil** -- which is what is intended by almost all who discuss the GENERIC PROBLEM -- then there simply is no agreement among theists as to whether this contention is true.

We must, of course, be careful not to make too much of the fact that theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good do **not** hold similar beliefs with respect to what God can do or how he should behave or exactly what type of evil exists in our world. For instance, it doesn't necessarily follow from the fact that theists hold divergent perspectives on these issues that some of these perspectives are not more plausible than others or even that there is not a given perspective that **all** such theists **should** hold. But since it is **not** in fact the case at present that **all** (or even **most**) theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good believe (1), (2) or (3) to be true in anything close to the same sense, we **can** justifiably conclude that those who center their discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM because they assume that it does pose a serious prima facie challenge for such theists are seriously misguided.

But perhaps some (or most) philosophers don't center their discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM for this reason. It is certainly true, it might be acknowledged, that the GENERIC PROBLEM is itself hopelessly ambiguous -- that the GENERIC PROBLEM does not set forth in clear terms beliefs about evil and how it relates to God's power and goodness which all of the theists in question affirm. But there is little reason to believe that most philosophers center their discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM because they naively believe this to be the case. A more reasonable assumption, it might be argued, is that they utilize the GENERIC PROBLEM simply as a heuristic device. That is, a more plausible explanation is that most philosophers center their discussions around the GENERIC PROBLEM because they believe that forcing all theists to respond to the same basic argument is an effective way to help clarify in a useful comparative manner the differing theological perspectives on the relationship between God and evil.

And if this is the basis for the current emphasis on the GENERIC PROBLEM, it might be concluded, then there is nothing wrong with continuing to approach discussions of evil in this manner. Such a response has an initial ring of plausibility. It may be that some (or many) who center their discussions around the GENERIC PROBLEM are well aware of the diversity in theistic perspectives related to the key concepts involved. And it may be that the GENERIC PROBLEM can at times be used heuristically to help identify these divergent perspectives. However, as we see it, to center discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM -- even for heuristic purposes -- is normally quite counterproductive.

First, and foremost, to approach the relationship between evil and God's nature in this fashion allows both sides to avoid consideration of the real issues of significance. Even though the GENERIC PROBLEM, itself, poses no significant challenge to theists who believe God to be omnipotent and perfectly good, such theists are not necessarily immune from every *prima facie* challenge related to evil. It remains perfectly justifiable for anyone to inquire of a given theist how evil is viewed **within the theistic system she affirms** and then **assess** the adequacy of this perspective. That is, it remains perfectly justifiable for anyone to ask a theist in what sense she believes that God is omnipotent and perfectly good and then **assess** whether belief in the existence of a being with these characteristics is compatible with the belief that this world contains the amount and types of evil that she acknowledges it does. Moreover, it remains perfectly justifiable for anyone who believes the simultaneous affirmation of these beliefs is problematic to ask the theist in question for a response.

But when discussions of evil are centered around the GENERIC PROBLEM, it is easy for the consideration of these issues to be overlooked or set aside. On the one hand, centering discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM allows the critic to assume that there exists a standard, unambiguous theistic meaning for each of the key concepts involved -- omnipotence, goodness and evil -- and therefore to feel justified in claiming that any specific theistic attempt to clarify the relationship between evil and God's nature is actually an **ad hoc, clandestine** attempt to salvage theistic belief in the face of the serious challenge the GENERIC PROBLEM poses. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that it is primarily because most discussions of evil at least implicitly support the assumption that all theists have the same basic understanding of what it means for God to be omnipotent and perfectly good that atheologian J.L. Mackie feels justified in boldly charging theists with proposing "half-hearted or temporary" solutions in which "one (or perhaps more) of the constituent propositions is given up but in such a way that it has appeared to be retained." Only when it is finally recognized by all that the GENERIC PROBLEM is hopelessly ambiguous, and thus does not pose a challenge to theistic belief, will critics be forced to consider seriously the actual relationship between evil and God's attributes within specific belief systems.

*On the other hand*, centering discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM -- for whatever reason -- offers *theists* the opportunity to avoid consideration of any serious challenge that evil might pose. Since the GENERIC PROBLEM is based on concepts for which there exist no uniform theistic meanings, theists need not in response say **anything** about the adequacy of the beliefs they actually hold. For example, it is at least in part the hopelessly ambiguous nature of the GENERIC PROBLEM that allows theist Ronald Nash to state boldly that "if there really is a deductive problem of evil, it still remains for some atheologian to prove it." Only when discussions of evil center on the relationship between evil and God's attributes within **specific** theistic belief systems will theists be forced to consider seriously the adequacy of the beliefs they actually affirm.

Of course, this is not something with which those philosophers who utilize the GENERIC PROBLEM for heuristic purposes will necessarily disagree. They might even maintain that one of their ultimate goals is to help clarify this very point. But unless such philosophers explicitly state at some point in their discussions that their use of the GENERIC PROBLEM is purely heuristic -- unless they explicitly state that they do not believe that the GENERIC PROBLEM actually poses a challenge to the theists in question -- there is little reason to believe that their discussions will motivate either the critic or the theist to consider the real issues of importance. It is much more likely that those on both sides will simply continue (consciously or not) to play on the ambiguities in the GENERIC PROBLEM for their own advantage.

Furthermore, to center discussions of evil around the GENERIC PROBLEM -- for whatever reason -- makes it appear that the crucial debate is primarily between theists and nontheists -- primarily between those who believe in the existence of an omnipotent, perfectly good God and those who do not. But we are now in a position to see that this assumption is

misguided. Since only specific theistic perspectives are open to legitimate challenge, what we actually have are a number of distinct debates between those who affirm specific theistic systems and those (both **theists** and nontheists) who do not.

Moreover, this fact is of practical significance. Since almost all nontheists continue to focus their discussions of evil primarily around the GENERIC PROBLEM, while at least some theists do not, what follows is that we are more likely at present to find meaningful consideration of the real issues of significance in those (few) philosophical discussions of evil in which **theists** challenge the beliefs of other theists.

### Conclusion

It is important is closing to emphasize what we have and have not been arguing. We have **not** been arguing that theists need not be as concerned about evil as they have been in the past. Evil may well present serious challenges to specific theistic understandings of what it means for God to be omnipotent and perfectly good.

Nor have we argued that theists cannot justifiably be required to respond to actual tensions within their belief systems. Nor should our discussion be viewed as an attempt to set forth a 'new' way in which theists can respond to evil. But we have argued that if the goal of the philosophical community is to discuss the relationship between evil and God's nature in the most fair, objective **and useful** manner possible, then it ought no longer be made to appear, even for heuristic purposes, that there is **one** basic problem to which **all** theists who believe that God is omnipotent and perfectly good must respond. We have argued, rather, that the philosophical community would be better served if it concerned itself primarily with the relationship between evil and the actual characterizations of evil and God's omnipotence and goodness that exist within **specific** theological systems.

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