The logical problem of evil and free will[1]

The problem of evil is widely considered to be the most powerful argument against the existence of God. The central issue is whether evil, as it occurs in this world, either proves that God, as traditionally conceived, does not exist or at least makes the belief in such a God unreasonable.

AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

God is traditionally understood to be supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient. The existence of evil causes problems for believing that such a being exists. Here's the argument:

P1.   If God is supremely good, then he has the desire to eliminate evil.
P2.   If God is omnipotent, then he is able to eliminate evil.
P3.   If God is omniscient, then he knows that evil exists and knows how to eliminate it.
C1.   Therefore, if God exists, and is supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, then God will eliminate evil.
C2.   Therefore, if a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God exists, evil does not exist.
P4.   Evil exists.
C3.   Therefore, a supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient God does not exist.

There are two versions of this argument. The *logical problem of evil* claims that the mere existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God. In other words, the following claims cannot all be true:

1.   God is supremely good.
2.   God is omnipotent.
3.   God is omniscient.
4.   God exists.
5.   Evil exists.

If any four of the claims are true, the fifth *must* be false. On this version, the argument above is deductive.

The *evidential problem of evil* makes a weaker claim. It claims that the *amount and distribution* of evil that exists is *good evidence* that God does not exist. On

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this version, the argument above is inductive, and we need to replace 'evil' with something like 'unnecessary evil'.

TWO TYPES OF EVIL

To understand the argument, we need to be clear on what 'evil' means in this context. 'Evil' usually refers to the morally wrong actions or motives of human beings. So we say that Hitler was evil in trying to eradicate the Jews from Europe or that ethnic cleansing is an evil policy. This is *moral evil*.

But this isn't the only kind of evil the problem of evil is talking about. There is also *natural evil*, which refers to *suffering* caused by natural events and processes, e.g. the suffering caused by earthquakes, diseases, the predation of animals on each other, and so on.

In the first instance, the two types of evil are distinct. What people choose to do to each other is not usually the result of natural events. Sometimes it is: famine may drive people to stealing and killing. And natural events are not usually the result of what people choose to do. Again, sometimes they are – the results of global warming could be an example.

We need to keep both types of evil in mind when we look at responses to the problem of evil. In particular, some responses may solve the problem of moral evil, but don't answer the problem of natural evil.

THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

The logical problem of evil claims that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil.

One response to the logical problem is to give up one or other of the claims. For example, someone might deny that evil exists, arguing that what we call evil isn't really evil. If evil doesn't exist, then there is no problem of evil! An alternative is to deny that God is omnipotent. If God isn't omnipotent, then perhaps he can't prevent evil from occurring.

However, a more common response is to attempt to show that the existence of evil isn't logically inconsistent with the existence of God. We will start with responses based on free will.

FREE WILL

A free will theodicy

Why does God allow evil? If we try to answer this question, to give a reason why God allows evil, we offer a *theodicy*. Perhaps the most famous theodicy argues that the answer is free will.

Free will is a great good. Without it, our lives would not be morally significant, because we could not choose to do what is morally good or evil. Furthermore, we

would be unable to have a meaningful, personal relationship with God, because any relationship would not be willingly and freely entered into. A world without moral significance is not as good as a world which has moral significance. Being supremely good, omnipotent and omniscient, God creates a world with moral significance – and so human free will.

Being morally imperfect, we do not always use our free will for good, but sometimes bring about evil. Evil is the price that must be paid for free will. A world without evil would be a world without free will, which would be a morally meaningless world. So the existence of evil isn't logically incompatible with the existence of God, since it is the result of free will, which is such a significant good that it outweighs the evil that we bring about.

Why, we may object, doesn't God just make us choose what is good? Why not create a world with free will, but without evil? Because, the theodicy responds, this isn't logically possible. To be free is for one's choices not to be determined. If God *made* us choose good, then our choices would be determined, so we wouldn't be free.

Plantinga's free will defence
Is the free will theodicy convincing? Is free will is the reason why God allows evil to exist. Perhaps, we think, we don't, or even can't, know why, in fact, God allows evil. In *God, Freedom and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga argues that to solve the logical problem of evil, we don't need to discover and defend *the true explanation* for why evil exists. All we need to do is show that the existence of God *is consistent* with evil. Two (or more) claims are consistent if they *can* both (or all) be true together. To show this, we don't need to show that the claims *are* true. Plantinga calls this approach a 'defence' rather than a theodicy.

Plantinga begins his argument by clarifying his terms:

1. To be *free* is to be able to do or refrain from some action, not to be causally determined to act in one way or another.
2. A *morally significant action* is one which it is either right or wrong to perform. (An action that is permissible to do or omit, e.g. have a banana for breakfast, is not morally significant.)
3. A creature is *significantly free* if it is free to do or refrain from morally significant actions.
4. Moral evil is evil resulting from the actions of significantly free creatures. (This contrasts with natural evil.)

Plantinga then offers the following argument:

P1. A world containing creatures that are significantly free is better than a world containing no free creatures.
P2. God can create significantly free creatures.
P3. To be significantly free is to be capable of both moral good and moral evil.
P4. If significantly free creatures were caused to do only what is right, they would not be free.

C1.   Therefore, God cannot cause significantly free creatures to do only what is right.

(C2.   Therefore, God cannot create a world containing creatures that are significantly free but which contains no evil.)

C3.   Therefore, God can only eliminate the moral evil done by significantly free creatures by eliminating the greater good of significantly free creatures.

If the conclusion, (C3), is asserted as a true claim, this argument is a form of the free will theodicy. The free will defence, however, only claims that (C3) is *possible* – it *could* be true. If it could be true, and assuming that a good God would not eliminate free will in order to eliminate evil, then the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of God. So the logical problem of evil does not prove that God does not exist.

NATURAL EVIL

In the form we have discussed it so far, the free will theodicy and free will defence only address moral evil. We may grant that moral evil is compatible with the existence of God. But natural evil doesn't seem to have much to do with free will. So can we make the existence of natural evil consistent with the existence of God?

One response, that Plantinga presents, is that natural evil is the result of the free will of Satan and demons. The traditional story goes that the Devil was an angel, created by God, endowed with free will. But he rebelled against God, and since then has sought to bring evil into the world. Natural evil is actually a form of moral evil, the result of Satan's choices. Again, Plantinga does not claim this story is true, but that it is possible.

A different response is this. The logical problem of evil assumes that God has the desire to eliminate *all* evil. But this isn't true if some evil is *necessary for a greater good*. Just as we argued that moral evil was the price that has to be paid for the greater good of free will, we can say the same about natural evil. In particular, there are virtues, such as sympathy, benevolence and courage, that require suffering to exist. Without danger, we don't need or develop courage; without illness and poverty to respond to, we don't need benevolence; without suffering, we don't need sympathy. A universe without suffering would be a universe without these virtues; and a universe without either suffering or virtue would be a worse universe than one in which there is both suffering and virtue. The evil of suffering makes the good of virtue possible.

We may a similar argument regarding human nature, which disposes us to evil. We only develop virtues in the face of temptation and weakness. If we had no fear, while we would act 'well' in the face of physical danger, we wouldn't develop courage as we know it. It would take no more psychological effort than feeding ourselves when we are hungry. Likewise, if we were not tempted by selfishness, benevolence would not be the virtue it is.

Is this persuasive? If not, the theist can retreat from a theodicy to a defence. It is *possible* that what has been said is right, and that shows that natural evil is not

logically incompatible with the existence of God. Because the logical problem of evil makes such a strong claim, this is all we need to show to defeat it.