The Gap in the Evil God Challenge

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1. Introduction

Philosophical defenses of theism face a number of challenges. Among them are the evil-god challenge and the gap problem. The evil-god challenge is roughly the challenge of showing it's reasonable to believe there is a good God and not an evil-god. The gap problem, on the other hand, confronts many theistic arguments which aim to show e.g. there is a necessary being, a first cause, or a designer of the natural world. These arguments often leave us wondering whether the being they arrive at is God—an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being—as opposed to something more limited. In this article, we show that the evil-god challenge is not an additional challenge for theists above and beyond the (much older) gap problem. One version of the evil-god challenge is merely a specific instance of the gap problem, and another is dependent on that specific instance of the gap problem. For this reason, the various solutions

to the gap problem that theists have developed double as responses to the evil-god challenge, placing the evil-god challenge in a more vulnerable position than anyone has previously acknowledged in the literature.

2. The Evil God Challenge

Say that *theism* is the view that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being exists—call this being "God." And say that *maltheism* is the view that an omnipotent, omniscient, and maximally *evil* being exists—call this being "evil-god." Broadly speaking, the evil-god challenge is a challenge to theists to show that belief in God (as opposed to evil-god) is reasonable.[1] There are (at least) two different versions of this challenge.

The first version of the evil-god challenge—call it Evil-god Challenge I—goes like this. Say the problem of evil is the problem of reconciling the existence of God with known facts about evil (its distribution, intensity, pattern, etc.). And say the problem of good is the problem of reconciling the existence of evil-god with known facts about good (its distribution, intensity, pattern, etc.).

Theists have given theodicies in response to the problem of evil: they cite various goods (e.g. free will, character building, etc.) that purport to explain why God allows the various known facts about evil. However, proponents of the evil-god challenge (e.g. Law 2010 and Collins 2019) argue that these same theodicies can be *reversed* and used by maltheists to respond to the problem of good. In light of this, proponents of Evil-god Challenge I claim the problem of good and the problem of evil are roughly equally powerful arguments—they cut with equal strength against theism and maltheism.

The next step is to claim that most arguments for the existence of God equally support both theism and maltheism (Law 2010: 359). This is because most arguments for theism don't tell us anything about God's character. So

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[1] See Law (2010) for an initial defense of the evil-god challenge, and Collins (2019), Lancaster-Thomas (2018a, 2018b) for subsequent developments and defenses of it.

theism and maltheism are roughly equal in terms of evidential support, and therefore they are roughly equally reasonable.[2]

So the challenge is for theists to justify belief in God *over* belief in evil-god. The thought is something like this: since most arguments for theism equally support maltheism *and* the problem of good is roughly as powerful an argument against maltheism as the problem of evil is against theism, belief in God and belief in evil-god are roughly equally reasonable. But then why should we think God is good as opposed to evil? Or, why should we believe that God, and not evil-god, exists? (see Lancaster-Thomas 2018b: 1).

The second version of the evil-god challenge—call it Evil-god Challenge II—adds an additional step to Evil-god Challenge I. The additional step is to claim that the problem of good is *decisive* evidence against maltheism. Given our above assumptions that (a) the problem of good and the problem of evil are roughly equally strong and (b) theism and maltheism have roughly equal evidential support, it follows that if the problem of good renders the existence of evil-god unreasonable, then the problem of evil renders belief in God unreasonable (Law (2010: 353).

3. The Gap Problem

Many theistic arguments attempt to show there's a being with at least some of the traditional divine attributes, such as necessary existence or the power and knowledge required to create our universe. If they get this far, they must then show that the being in question has the other traditional divine attributes as well, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. This challenge for theistic arguments—showing that this being has the traditional divine attributes—has become known as *the gap problem*.[3]

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[2] To be clear, we're not affirming this view ourselves. Rather, we're outlining the approach taken by proponents of the evil-god challenge. (One concern here is that even if *most* arguments for theism equally support maltheism, there might be an argument for theism that (i) does not equally support maltheism and (ii) is decisive evidence for theism. We set aside this complication since it isn't relevant for our paper.)

[3] Pruss (2009: 25 footnote 1) attributes the name "the gap problem" to Richard Gale.

The gap problem is perhaps most closely associated with cosmological arguments, such as the contingency argument. The contingency argument aims to show that there's a necessary being—a being that couldn't fail to exist—which explains the existence of contingent things (e.g., Pruss 2009, Rasmussen 2021). But even if the argument succeeds in showing there's a *necessary being*, it remains unclear whether the necessary being is *God* as traditionally conceived, rather than, say, an initial state of the physical universe (e.g., Oppy 2013). Teleological arguments also face a version of the gap problem. As Hume famously contended in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, a designer of the natural world need not be much at all like the God of traditional theism.

There are also many theistic arguments that aim to show, not that the universe has a supernatural creator, but merely that theism explains certain features of the universe better than some alternative hypothesis, such as naturalism. Recent examples include Crummett and Swenson (2020), Page (2020), Hildebrand and Metcalf (2022), and Crummett and Cutter (2023). These arguments—insofar as they are successful—are useful for constructing a case that theism is more probable than naturalism. But they often leave untouched the question of whether theism is more probable than other rivals, such as the imperfect deity hypothesis, the multiple deity hypothesis, and so on. So these arguments face their own version of the gap problem.

4. Solving the Evil God Challenge

The evil-god challenges don't pose an additional challenge for theists beyond the challenge posed by the (much older) gap problem. Here's why. We've just seen that the gap problem is the problem facing arguments for theism that get us to a designer but not God (fine-tuning arguments), a necessary being but not God (cosmological arguments), and so on. That is, even if these arguments are successful, there remains a gap that needs to be filled—at least, if we are to conclude theism is true. The proponent of the gap problem challenges the theist to show why we should think theism is

true rather than any of the various alternatives that theistic arguments leave open. One of the alternatives left open is maltheism. The proponent of the Evil-god Challenge I zeroes in on maltheism in particular and challenges the theist to show why we should think theism is true rather than that particular alternative. So Evil-God challenge I is just a specific version of the gap problem.

Evil-god Challenge II is dependent on Evil-god Challenge I, and therefore it is dependent on a specific version of the gap problem. This is because Evil-god Challenge II requires there to be an evidential parity between theism and maltheism. Although the proponent of Evil-god Challenge II goes on to conclude that theism is false, and not merely that we have no reason to endorse theism rather than maltheism, the argument only succeeds if the case for theism is no stronger than the case for maltheism. And the charge that the case for theism is no stronger than the case for maltheism is the charge that a proponent of Evil-god Challenge I levels against the theist—the charge which we have seen is a specific instance of the gap problem.

So if theists can solve the gap problem by showing there's good reason to prefer theism over non-theistic rivals, they will have not only solved the gap problem but also successfully answered both versions of the evil-god challenge. Therefore, the evil-god challenges don't pose an additional challenge for theists beyond the challenge posed by the gap problem.

We will illustrate these points by sketching an existing solution to the gap problem—Richard Swinburne's solution—and then applying it to the evil-god challenge. Our aim here isn't to defend Swinburne's solution to the gap problem. Rather, our aim is to show how that solution, if successful, doubles as a solution to both evil-god challenges.

Swinburne (2004 and 2010) argues that theism offers a simpler—and therefore more probable—explanation of the universe than rival views do, including finite deity hypotheses and views on which the initial state of the physical universe is explanatorily fundamental. Roughly, his argument goes as follows.

Theism does its explanatory work with just one substance (God), as opposed to multiple substances. This means theism is ontologically parsimonious, and to that extent, it is simple. Moreover, theism attributes to that one substance *unlimited* degrees of power and knowledge. Swinburne suggests that unlimited values of degreed properties are simpler (*ceteris paribus*) than finite (but non-zero) values of those same degreed properties. He supports this contention primarily by appealing to scientific precedent: historically, scientists have gravitated toward values of infinity and zero when formulating hypotheses about velocity and mass, respectively (Swinburne 2004: 110-132). In a similar vein, Miller (2016) compares the divine omni-properties to universal generalizations in science, such as the generalization that all electrons are negatively charged.[4] So Swinburne concludes that, *ceteris paribus*, an omnipotent being is simpler than a being with finite power, and an omniscient being is simpler than a being with finite knowledge.

Swinburne also argues that an omnipotent and omniscient being that is perfectly free is simpler than one that is not perfectly free. A perfectly free being is a being whose will is not influenced by any non-rational forces such as non-rational desires. Perfect freedom, then, is the *absence* of properties, such as non-rational desires. Hence, it's simpler to postulate a perfectly free omnipotent and omniscient being than to postulate a less-than-perfectly free omnipotent and omniscient being: the former is the absence of properties while the latter is the presence of properties (i.e. non-rational desires).

Finally, Swinburne argues that the rest of the traditional divine attributes can be inferred from God's being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free. Since it will be especially relevant for our purposes, let's consider his argument for perfect moral goodness. An omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free being will *know* what the best action is (in virtue of its omniscience), and it will be able to perform that action (in virtue

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[4] See also Draper (2016).

of its omnipotence).[5] And if it knows what the best action is and is able to perform that action, then it will perform that action *unless* it has non-rational desires: it would be *irrational* not to do the best action—the action one has most reason to perform—and so if it were to perform any other action there would have to be non-rational desires that are causing it to act this way. But a perfectly free being has no non-rational desires. So it will perform the best action.

In short, Swinburne argues that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free being is simpler, and therefore more probable, than an omnipotent, omniscient, and less-than-perfectly free being. Furthermore, an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly free being will be morally perfect, since it will always do what is best, and what's best will always be in line with what's moral. And so an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being is simpler, and therefore more probable, than an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally imperfect being.

If Swinburne is right about theism's simplicity, then theism has an edge over rival hypotheses. The theistic God is simpler than finite deities, who have limited degrees of power, knowledge, freedom, and goodness (Swinburne 2004: 145-147). Theism is also simpler than primitive physical states of the universe, which have limited degrees of power and, indeed, the specific dispositions required for a universe like ours to evolve (Swinburne 2004: 150ff). And we therefore have a solution to the gap problem: God is the simplest, and therefore most probable, explanation of the universe.

Again, our purpose isn't to defend Swinburne's approach here. Instead, we will just *assume* for the sake of argument that Swinburne's approach is correct and show that—*assuming it's correct*—it answers both evil-god challenges.

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[5] If there isn't a best action, it will know which actions are part of the set of best or good enough actions to perform.

According to Evil-god Challenge I, the overall case that God exists is no stronger than the overall case that evil-god exists. But, assuming Swinburne's solution to the gap problem is successful, this turns out to be false. That's because the simplest way for an omnipotent and omniscient being to be is perfectly free and therefore also perfectly morally good. But maltheism entails there's a being that's omnipotent and omniscient but *not* perfectly morally good. So maltheism is a more complex hypothesis: since evil-god isn't perfectly morally good, he isn't perfectly free, and that means that he has properties, namely, non-rational desires, in addition to his omnipotence and omniscience, thereby making him less simple than God. So, God is simpler, and therefore more probable, than evil-god. And therefore we have an answer to Evil-god Challenge I.

And if Swinburne's solution to the gap problem answers Evil-God Challenge I, then it also answers Evil-god challenge II. Given Swinburne's solution, the prior probability of theism is greater than the prior probability of maltheism, since theism is simpler than maltheism. But if this is the case, *even if* the problem of good and the problem of evil are equally strong *and* the problem of good renders belief in evil-god unreasonable, it doesn't follow that the problem of evil renders belief in God unreasonable. This only follows if we assume theism and maltheism have roughly equal prior probability. But—given Swinburne's solution—they don't. And so we've answered Evil-god Challenge II.

So, if Swinburne's solution is successful, we have solved the gap problem and have an answer to both versions of the evil-god challenge. Importantly, this point is generalizable: *any* solution to the gap problem will be an answer to both versions of the evil-god challenge. This is because, roughly, a successful solution to the gap problem means that we have reason to favor the God hypothesis over all other competitors. Evil-god— the postulate doing the work in the evil-god challenge—is a competitor with theism, i.e. the God hypothesis. Therefore, any solution to the gap problem is a solution to the evil-god challenge, i.e. any solution to the gap problem gives us reason to favor theism over maltheism. And hence once we've solved the gap problem, we've also solved the evil-god challenge.

5. Why It Matters

So, the evil-god challenge is superfluous: it doesn't pose a challenge to theism beyond what the gap problem does, because the evil-god challenge is just a specific version of the gap problem. Moreover, the gap problem, unlike the evil-god challenge, has been around for as long as the traditional arguments for theism have been around. So the evil-god challenge amounts to a mere repackaging of a much older idea. This has at least two important consequences.

First, if the evil-god challenge is just a special version of the gap problem, it follows that once we have a successful solution to the gap problem, we don't need a further response to the evil-god challenge. Solutions to the gap problem are *ipso facto* solutions to the evil-god challenge as well. However, solutions to the evil-god challenge aren't *ipso facto* solutions to the gap problem, since a solution to the evil-god challenge might only show theism should be preferred to maltheism, not that it should be preferred to other non-theistic hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that the universe was created by a limited (though not maleficent) deity. Therefore, theists would do well to focus their attention on solving the more general gap problem rather than answering the more specific evil-god challenge.

Second, it turns out there are many more candidate responses to the Evil-god Challenge in the literature than it might at first appear. A number of authors have explicitly responded to the evil-god challenge: Alvaro (2022), Bergmann and Brower (2007), Byron (2019), Forrest (2012), Hendricks (2018 and 2023), Keltz (2019), Lougheed (2020), Miksa (2022), Miller (2021), Page and Baker-Hytch (2020), Ward (2015), Weaver (2015), and Wilson (2021). But if solutions to the gap problem are also solutions to the evil-god challenge, then there are several other implicit responses to the evil-god challenge in the literature as well. That's because there are several candidate solutions to the gap problem in the literature: in addition to Swinburne's (2004 and 2010) appeal to simplicity, there's Draper's (2016)

uniformity-based recasting of Swinburne's approach, Miller's (2016) appeal to simplicity, Rasmussen's (2019 and 2021) appeal to limits, and Byerly's (2019) and Mooney's (2019) appeal to the explanatory power of universal generalizations. As far as we know, none of these approaches to the gap problem have yet been applied to the evil-god challenge.[6] But if we're right about the relationship between the evil-god challenge and the gap problem, all of them are implicitly answers to the evil-god challenge. So, insofar as any of them are plausible, the evil-god challenge is in a more precarious position than has been supposed.[7]

6. References

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[6] Weaver (2015) makes use of something like Swinburne's (2004 and 2010) approach, though he doesn't make the connection that we have made here—he doesn't argue that solutions to the gap problem will also be solutions to the evil-god challenge.

[7] Thanks to an audience at the 45th anniversary Society of Christian Philosophers conference and to various anonymous readers for comments on this material.

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