

A New Logical Problem of Evil

J. L. Schellenberg

Abstract

This paper shows that the logical problem of evil is far from dead. It does so by producing a new problem entirely distinct from the old problem of Epicurus, Hume, and Mackie, which was so influentially addressed by Plantinga. The theistic claims utilized by the new problem are claims about God's unsurpassable greatness, ontological independence from the world, and prior purity. What its two versions share is the idea that if there is no evil before creation, there can be no evil after. They are distinguished by the fact that one takes a *modeling* approach, arguing that the goods of a created world would necessarily model goods in God, while the other takes a *motives* approach, observing that if God is motivated to share the good as God knows it, which is good-without-evil, then no evil can arise when God does so.

Keywords

Logical problem, evil, greatness, prior purity, motives, Plantinga, van Inwagen

The old logical problem of evil, a problem familiar from Epicurus and Hume and formalized by Mackie (1955, 1982), utilizes certain alleged consequences of omnipotence and omnibenevolence to argue that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God. [see chapter 2] This problem is often held to have been solved in our own day by Alvin Plantinga (1974). Plantinga cuts a wide swath through contemporary philosophy of religion, and most agree that with his famous Free Will Defense he carries the old logical problem of evil away with him.

Of course the problem isn't *called* old by many or any who feel this way. That is my term, used to highlight the fact that even if Plantinga's efforts against the problem as set out by Mackie were to be entirely successful (and I don't believe they are), there might still be some other way – perhaps there are many ways – of producing the relevant inconsistency result. To show that this is indeed a fact, it would be useful to have before us a vivid example of a new logical problem of evil. I have therefore decided to provide one. And since the most interesting new version of the problem would approximate the *generality* of the old (though with greater resistance to Plantinga-style solutions), it is on such a problem that I have set my sights.¹

We can find it, so I suggest, by focusing on the transition theists must rationalize from God *without* evil *prior* to creation – 'prior' here may be taken logically or temporally or in both senses – to God *with* evil *after*. No such transition, so it may be argued, is metaphysically possible. The key thought can be put in the form of a slogan: in any possible world including God, once purely good, always purely good. (What we have here is something like a theological analogue of Newton's First Law of Motion.) Another way of putting it is: no evil before creation, no evil after. Let us consider now how such slogans may be turned into reasoning.²

Three commitments of theism

I begin by identifying three claims about God which traditional theists uncontroversially must regard as necessary truths. These claims have us starting ‘farther back’ metaphysically and axiologically – with more fundamental matters – than the old logical problem’s claims about God’s maximally great power and benevolence. But, as we shall see, they can play a similar role in an inconsistency proof.

The first of the three concerns the *unsurpassable greatness* of God:

UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS: God is the greatest possible being.

This claim is generally upheld by contemporary theistic philosophers. We can get clearer about it by considering some comments made by one of them, Peter van Inwagen, in his recent Gifford Lectures. In Lecture 2, which addresses “The Idea of God,” van Inwagen says this: “In the strictest sense, the concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible being” (2006, 34). He adds the following in a note: “The concept of God should be understood in this way: the concept of God is the concept of a *person* who is the greatest possible being.” Quite properly, van Inwagen points out that this “is not the same as saying that the concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible person,” (2006, 158). Of course, God has to be the greatest possible person *too*, but the idea of a greatest possible being has priority; theism is what you get when this more general religious idea is filled out personalistically, with all the references to unlimited power, knowledge, moral goodness, and so on, that this requires.

The second theistic commitment I have in mind concerns God’s *ontological independence* from any created reality:

ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE: No world created by God (or any part thereof) is a part of God.³

Religious views that are theistic regard God as *one* thing and the world as *another*. The world, for theism, is limited (even if it may sometimes also be regarded as infinite in certain respects, e.g., in duration) and surpassable, at least by God, whereas God, as we have seen, is unsurpassably great. The world depends on God; God does not depend on the world. The world is created by God; nothing creates God. And so on.

The third theistic commitment I want to expose is in some ways the most important here. I call it a commitment to *prior purity*:

PRIOR PURITY: Prior to creation (whether ‘prior’ be taken logically or temporally) there is no evil in God of any kind.

Eventually in the reasoning to come we will reach a claim we might speak of in terms of *posterior* purity. But the theist’s commitment to PRIOR PURITY will shape some of the premises of that reasoning. Though neglected – its neglect is one of the things I hope to remedy – this claim too should upon reflection seem entirely uncontroversial to any theist. And it too has to be regarded as necessarily true. For it is surely true by definition that God realizes the unblemished ideal of a reality unlimitedly and exclusively good.⁴

Now some theists – though not all – will want to say that God *suffers* in response to *our* suffering, and that this contributes to God’s greatness. [see chapter 18] Perhaps God’s righteous

wrath will also be cited, which, even if righteous, could hardly be pleasant. So if you think of the usage of ‘evil’ in philosophy as covering all suffering and any unpleasantness, you may think that there will be doubt, for at least some theists in the audience of my argument, as to whether my claim concerning no evil in God is a necessary truth. But PRIOR PURITY avoids entanglement in this issue precisely through the qualifier ‘prior.’

Developing the proof: the modeling approach

We may now try to show how one could argue that the conjunction of these three claims is implicitly inconsistent with a fourth, to which theists are equally committed:

EVIL: There is evil in the world.

There are at least two ways of pursuing this aim. Each introduces propositions additional to the four already mentioned, but in accordance with the usual procedure for establishing logical inconsistency, I shall seek to ensure that each additional proposition is (or can be made) clearly recognizable as a necessary truth. In many cases – but not all – this will be a matter of teasing out implications of UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE, or PRIOR PURITY.⁵ I shall likewise seek to ensure that all of the inferences made in the proofs are simple ones and obviously deductively valid.

The first of the two ways takes what I call a *modeling* approach, arguing that the goodness of any world created by God would model God’s goodness. Let’s begin by identifying a logical consequence of UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS and ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE taken together. (We might think of it in terms of ‘prior completeness.’) What I have in mind, to a

first approximation, is that prior to creation *all goods are already contained in God*.

The central idea here is common among Anselmians – those most closely associated with perfect being theology. Here is an Anselmian as good as any, Anselm himself, endorsing it: “Now, one thing is necessary, viz., that one necessary Being in which there is every good – or better, who is every good, one good, complete good, and the only good” (1974 [1077], chap. 23). Clearly it is UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS that makes Anselmians speak thus. Peter van Inwagen, whom we found emphasizing that proposition earlier, puts the point this way: “All goods are already contained – full and perfect and complete – in God” (2006, 30). The religious experiences and reflections of many confirm that the idea of God is the idea of a reality whose greatness is *unlimited* in a sense that would be hard to endorse were we to think that in *no* sense are *all* goods in God. (Anyone denying this but still purporting to use the idea of God in philosophy is not doing philosophy of *religion* but, at best, metaphysics.) But how should we understand this common view that all goods are in God?

What people who accept the view may sometimes have in mind is the following: if God is unsurpassably great, then every *type* of good is realized in God. Presumably we should not expect to find every *token* – God, one might think, has not felt the pleasure I feel by riding a bicycle full tilt down a gravel road on the Manitoba prairie, with the wind whistling in my hair. But one wonders whether there isn’t a type of good here too – pleasurable bike riding – that God can’t in the relevant way exhibit. If so, it is hard to see how our first interpretive suggestion could be correct.

However a more modest suggestion about types can still be made, and it will be perfectly sufficient to represent at any rate a significant part of the content of the view we are interpreting –

and sufficient also for my argument: *for every possible good, among the distinguishable good-types it tokens or instances is at least one instanced in God*. This should strike the reflective theist as clearly true. For suppose it is not true. Then there is a possible good such that, no matter how far one goes in sorting through the various types of goodness to which it belongs, no matter how general and fundamental a form of goodness is reached, never will one find a type of goodness that is in God. And this seems absurd, if God is unsurpassably great and if – in some pertinent sense – all goods are in God. Whatever one says about other goods, surely the most general and fundamental goods could not be thus *independent* of God's goodness on the theistic conception of God's greatness. God would not be the ultimate reality but rather just one good thing alongside others if that were so. Apply this to the bike-riding example. Perhaps pleasurable bike riding is never experienced by God, but goodness in God still shares something with any instance of that good by virtue of the fact that goodness in God includes an instance of some general type of goodness to which the instance of pleasurable bike riding also belongs – perhaps this type is that of pleasure or excitement, or perhaps we need to speak here of some even broader type of positive state of mind which goods of *those* types exemplify (maybe one representing distant reaches of unsurpassable greatness no human being could ever survey).

Now given ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE, the view I have been explaining clearly must apply to God *prior to creation*. This should be kept in mind as I briefly fill out a point suggested by the previous paragraph, one entailed specifically by UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS and needed, I think, to bring out a vital part of what is meant when theists say that all goods are in God. This is that the instancing in God of the relevant type of good is *far better* than any other possible instancing. And so a theist will say, for example, that the good of the rich

green of his freshly cut lawn belongs to a more general good-type – beauty – that is also instanced in God prior to creation and in a manner that is unsurpassably great, greater far than the good instanced by his lawn. I shall take this point, as well as that of the previous paragraph, to be summarized in the following proposition, which gives us the refined version of (at any rate a significant part of) the idea that all goods are in God, as well as the first premise of our proof:

(1) Every possible non-Divine good is greatly exceeded by a good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

Given ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE, it evidently follows from (1) that

(2) Every good *in a world* is greatly exceeded by a good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

Notice that the goods referred to by (2) must include both individual isolated goods as well as total arrangements of goodness in a world. I add now a central premise of the proof, which follows from PRIOR PURITY:

(3) All goodness found in God prior to creation is pure goodness: goodness-without-evil.

This premise allows us to conclude, from the conjunction of (2) and (3), that

(4) Every good in a world is greatly exceeded by a *pure* good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

And from (4) it clearly follows that

(5) Every worldly good *that permits or requires evil* is greatly exceeded by a pure good of the same type existing in God prior to creation.

This is interesting. What it forces us to notice and take seriously is that since (say) instances of courage and compassion presuppose evil or its permission, *these* goods cannot exist in God prior to creation. And yet God is then unsurpassably great! Moreover, God's greatness includes instances of certain general sorts of good realized by instances of courage and compassion that are far greater than the latter goods, and these Divine goods can get along just fine without evil ever in any way coming into the picture. But then we might start to think about how the unsurpassably great goodness of God, which is pure, could be made to infuse a *world*, and about how, given (5), God could hardly do better than to create such a world. Certainly there would be no reason to weep for the absence of courage and compassion.

What I have in mind here is that a world could contain goods that 'model' Divine goods both in richness and purity: any good that purely resembles or images or mirrors or reflects a pure good in God we might think of as *modeling* that good. (I understand this notion broadly. Note especially that while every worldly good instances a higher goodness in God, the modeling goods need not be instances *of the goods they model*: the latter is but one way in which modeling can occur.) Now just which goods we are speaking about here – goods that are modeled and goods

that do the modeling – may of course be difficult to say. This is in part because the higher goods in God may be impossible for us to specify, since not at all a part of our experience. So how can we get so much as a sense of how good worlds with modeling goods would be? But even without being able to identify particular relevant goods, we can still quickly identify at least three ways in which a world with finite creatures but without evil could be made to grow *ceaselessly* in its pure reflection of the higher goods that exist without evil in God: through creatures' propositional understanding of the pure nature of God being ever more enlarged; through their experiential 'knowledge by acquaintance' of God's pure reality being ever more enriched; and by the higher goodness that is in God being ever more fully embodied by creatures through what they do to become like God and to make their world reflect God's pure goodness. And we can add a fourth way if we think of these three combined. Accordingly let us assume hereafter that any world whose goods are modeling goods attains a level of goodness no less pure or rich than would result from the realization of this fourth way.

What the defender of our new logical problem of evil can now say is that any world so purely and richly modeling goodness in God must -- given what (5) has told us -- be greater than any world with goods of the same type that are evil-involving. In other words:

(6) If every worldly good that permits or requires evil is greatly exceeded by a pure good of the same type, existing prior to creation in God, then any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God.

And (6) in conjunction with (5) entails that

(7) Any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God (call the latter a ‘greater world’).

This too is interesting! Finite persons with access to those higher features of the Divine nature would more closely approach the Divine nature than persons with access only to such qualities as courage and compassion. Of course the persons I have mentioned might not be us, but unlike theologians, philosophers surely cannot presume that the finite beings who would exist if there were a God would be human beings!

But can God ensure the existence of greater worlds? (Are they even possible?) To some extent we have already seen that the answer is yes. But to help us see this with perfect clarity, and to help us see, indeed, that God can in an important sense ensure the existence of greater worlds *limitlessly*, I will offer some (as we may call them) therapeutic observations. These are needed because, for humans, goodness is rarely encountered cleanly: most of us have to cobble together what value we can in the midst of considerable suffering; evil is always near at hand in our world. On account of this fact it can be hard for us to imagine creaturely good without evil. We say – of some instance of courage or compassion, perhaps – “how could this good exist without evil or the possibility of evil?” And we suppose that the possibility of having such great goods would be reason enough for God to permit evil. We suppose that there may be many unknown evil-permitting or evil-requiring goods we would feel similarly about should we come to know them. In general, we imagine that a world without such goods would be somewhat flat and uninteresting and unchallenging – a “toy-world,” as one prominent theistic philosopher has put it (Swinburne 2004, 264).

But if we resist prejudice, and think a bit longer about what we have already seen in the

foregoing reasoning, we will achieve some interesting insights – ones normally overlooked. Restricting ourselves in thought to worlds without evil is no restriction at all if we are talking about the creation of a God who intends to open up avenues, for finite persons, leading to the experience and embodiment of supreme value. Given PRIOR PURITY together with UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, there is no limit to the richness of value assimilable, without evil, by finite persons in pursuit of the infinite.

The point is that to improve itself, a finite world must, as it were, seek to close the distance between itself and God – an incompletable task, to be sure, and one that could find limitlessly many forms, but this is nonetheless the direction such value-related endeavour must take, and in this direction there is no evil to be encountered. Finite created persons could grow infinitely, developing knowledge and experience of God and the world ever more comprehensive and finegrained. The greatness of God could be reflected in them and in the content of their growing awareness. What one has to try to imagine here is the following sort of thing: an eternal process, limitless in its variations (perhaps the one world created by God will be a conjunction of worlds), with each one featuring new finite persons starting at different levels (and entering into different dimensions) of genuine and pure awareness, experience, and embodiment of the Divine Person, from the least fully formed and moving up the ladder infinitely, with each finite person *growing* from there infinitely. There can, to coin an expression, be new infinities of finite pure goodness infinitely, if their source is God and their task is to reflect the glory and richness of God.

That concludes my explanation and defense of the idea that

(8) God can ensure the existence of greater worlds, and can do so limitlessly.

Obviously what we now need, in the proof, is something about whether we should ever expect God to do *otherwise*. The proof's defender will say that the answer is clearly no. We can see what I have in mind by taking (7) and (8) together and letting them form the antecedent of another, rather important conditional proposition:

(9) If any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God and the existence of greater worlds can limitlessly be ensured by God, then for any world X that requires or permits evil, there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y.⁶

Of course the conjunction of (7), (8), and (9) yields

(10) For any world X that requires or permits evil, there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y.

Let's pause for a moment and see just how plausible (9) is. There are some important conceptual distinctions to take account of in understanding the content of its antecedent. It is one thing for X to be less great than Y, another for X to contribute less well than Y to representing the good that is in God, and yet another for X, unlike Y, to permit or require evil. (Of course these things may be related in various ways.) If the antecedent of (9) is true, then for any world X that requires or permits evil, there is always some world Y God can produce in relation to which it

falls short in *all three* of these ways. In such circumstances, God could not acquire a good reason to create X rather than Y.

For a lesser world is indeed lesser, and this fact about it is not obviously made less noteworthy by recent discussions of whether God must choose the best or the better. [see chapter 16] Giving due attention to Robert Adams when he writes that the relevant Divine disposition “is grace, in the sense that it is not grounded in the comparative degree of excellence of its object but finds its reasons in a noncomparative appreciation of its object,” (1999, 170), we may still want to respond with a “Yes, but....” Yes, but comparative judgments are inevitable given omniscience, and we shouldn’t expect God to ignore the defeaters for any alleged reasons to permit evil provided by them. Indeed, we seem to have something like a false either/or here and no reason to permit finite goods involving evil at all, since both comparative judgments *and* grace may be exercised simultaneously even where evil is nowhere to be found: God, we must expect, will be aware of the comparative worth of greater worlds and also noncomparatively appreciate them, and the latter disposition must *always* involve grace, if, as Adams himself says (1999, 151), “no finite excellence could deserve the love of such a transcendent being.”

Furthermore, shouldn’t we expect less appreciation for lesser worlds than for greater ones? Noncomparative appreciation presumably still comes in degrees; some objects will be capable of evoking less of it than others. And if a world X is less great than a world Y, won’t a rational and appropriately sensitive omniscient being who noncomparatively appreciates all goods nonetheless appreciate X less than Y? Won’t the texture of God’s love be in the relevant way matched to the texture of its object? Notice we don’t have to say that X’s comparative inferiority is taken as a *reason* to appreciate X less deeply than Y. No, we can say instead that in

a well-functioning omniscient appreciator, X's noted inferiority (inevitable, as we have seen) or simply awareness of the facts that would justify such a judgment will naturally *cause* a less deep non-comparative appreciation for X. And it seems we must endorse a parallel point in relation to evil: in a well-functioning omniscient appreciator, the properties making something evil will just naturally *cause disappreciation*. Thus we appear to have a couple of points to add to the three we have already identified in connection with (9)'s antecedent: world X will also win a less deep noncomparative appreciation from God than Y, and, unlike Y, which warrants no disappreciation at all, X or its conditions must furthermore win some *disappreciation*, insofar as they are bound up with evil. Such facts contribute to the overwhelmingly powerful defeater that a God would have for any reason apparently supporting the permission of evil.

As for less faithfully representing the pure goodness of God: how could this quality fail to be given weight by a theist who has reflected sufficiently on UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS and who is devoted above all to appreciating *God*? And there is a deeper point here too: the good of finite beings in a world including God is bound up with growing more fully into a multifaceted awareness of God, and this, given PRIOR PURITY, evil could only hinder.

The reference to X's being bound up with evil deserves its own paragraph(s). Perhaps some philosophers would contest the idea that the presence or possibility of evil is something that would in itself be given weight by a Divine mind. But consider the infinitely good life of God, as imagined by theism. Suppose – perhaps *per impossibile* – that there could be a counterpart life *as* valuable though included in it was some evil-turned-to-good. If the relevant facts about evil weren't independently forceful, shouldn't it be a matter of indifference *which* life God led? And yet for the theist it emphatically is not. God, as we have seen, realizes the unblemished ideal of a

reality unlimitedly and exclusively good.

There appears to be an intuition about purity, and perhaps also about simplicity, operating at a meta-level here. God is a less pure reality if evil as well as good is realized in God – and God is a less simple being if, of the available options, evil and good, both appear in God. The logical argument from evil can make use of these ideas. For isn't the presence or possibility of its diminished purity and simplicity, in these senses, going to detract at the meta-level in question from what God sees when God considers X?

A point about moral agency strengthens this as a conclusion that not just theists should accept. Evil is evil. That one situation includes it or makes it possible when a second does not should matter. Here we have *a* reason at any rate for a perfectly good person not to bring about the existence of X. Notice that when we positively evaluate her refraining from doing so, our positive evaluation applies to *the disposition of the agent* as opposed to the state of affairs that results from her possession of this disposition.

With these points I hope to have clarified and adequately defended (9) and (therefore) (10). (9) is of course a central premise of the proof. That is why I spent so much time displaying its plausibility! The advocate of our proof may hope that by now we have made it obvious, since we have found both comparative and noncomparative grounds aplenty that jointly must prevent God from having any good reason to seek to realize, of the two worlds mentioned, X rather than Y. But surely the following is a necessary truth:

(11) If for any world X that requires or permits evil there is some world Y that models pure goodness in God such that God has no good reason to create X rather than Y, then

God has no good reason to permit evil in the world.

And of course it follows from the conjunction of (10) and (11) that

(12) God has no good reason to permit evil in the world.

This sets up the final premise of the proof, according to which

(13) If there is evil in the world, then God has a good reason to permit it.

Here we are reminded of something emphasized by philosophers of religion when, in the wake of Plantinga's influential Free Will Defense, they turned from the logical problem of evil to the 'evidential' problem of evil: namely, that it is necessarily at least a necessary condition of God's permitting evil that there be *justification* for doing so. That it would be a good world God creates is evident. But that it would include evil has to be Rationalized. Virtually everyone who reflects on the matter will accept this immediately. Evil needs justification; good doesn't.

Now from the conjunction of (12) and (13) it follows that

(14) There is no evil in the world.

But (14), taken together with the fourth commitment of theism from the beginning of this section, namely EVIL, generates an explicit contradiction:

(15) There is evil in the world and there is no evil in the world.

Having derived this contradiction in the way that we have, it follows that the conjunction of the three commitments of theism mentioned at the beginning of our discussion, viz.,

UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE, and PRIOR

PURITY, is logically inconsistent with the fourth, viz., EVIL – which is what was to be proved.

Developing the proof: the motives approach

Although we have assumed, with theism, that God would create, and would create a world with finite persons, we still haven't explored the theist's answer to the question *why* God would do so.

The central proposal to be considered in this section will be that the answer to which theism is committed, even when irenically stated as a disjunction, with reference to more than one motive, leads inevitably to the conclusion that the world God creates must be empty of evil.

Here are the motives standardly ascribed to God. God, it may be said, creates to share the good with finite beings. Or, more specifically, God may be said to create finite beings to enter into a relationship of love with them and to facilitate their love for each other. Somewhat differently, it may be said that God's creation amounts to an overflowing or diffusion of the good that is in God (the motive here would presumably be something like a desire to expand the range of the good for its own sake), or that God creates to display the glory of God.

These answers have been quite popular in the various theological traditions of theism, and it seems that an inclusive disjunction referring to them all will be necessarily true. For either God

creates for its own sake or for the sake of created things or for God, or else God is motivated in all of these ways. There are no other options. But now we have another way of seeking to prove that theists are committed to a contradiction. Let me display and defend the central points informally before fitting the latter out in the garments of a logical proof.

Suppose we say God creates to share the good. What good are we talking about? Well, obviously, the good *as God experiences it*. But that good, given the nature of God, is good-without-evil. It follows that God creates to share good-without-evil. And it certainly seems impossible that evil should appear in a world created by an unsurpassably great and thus omnipotent being to satisfy this motive! Or suppose we say the creation is an overflowing of the good that is in God. What good is in God? Well, good-without-evil, naturally. So the creation must be an overflowing of good-without-evil – with similar results. I leave it to the reader to finish the story. The ending is always the same.

I have left the motive-claim referring specifically to love for separate treatment, since it is in relation to love that the most ardently defended criticisms of this new logical problem of evil are likely to arise. Might not a God intending to facilitate for finite persons relationships of love give those persons an evil-permitting brand of libertarian free will?

Return with me, for a moment, to the therapeutic observations of the last section. There we find the notion of a ‘toy-world,’ which nicely captures the typical theistic philosopher’s view of a world without evil-permitting free will. But there we also find an answer to it outlined. Take away free will as we (seem to) know it, with all the concomitant possibilities of evil, introducing more acquaintance with the purity of God, and what do you have? A flat insipid existence? Hardly! Finite persons at whatever level, in terms of capacities, could in such circumstances

strain *everlastingly* to reach new levels in the experience and embodiment of God, potentially achieving new glories with every step through the pertinent exercise of free will. As my word ‘strain’ suggests, we have significance and dignity aplenty – in part because of innumerable opportunities for jubilant and invigorating work, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, imaginatively, and so on – in a scenario of the sort I have laid alongside the theodocist’s over-familiar picture involving free will and evil. Nor do we need a physical world as the theatre for such activities. Philosophers – even atheistic philosophers – commonly assume that if God exists and creates, the result will be a physical world. But why suppose that God would see any special value in a *physical* world? *God* isn’t physical, and yet most fundamentally embodies everything good. Thus everything good that we experience physically must be even more fundamentally realizable in a nonphysical form, if God exists. It doesn’t matter if we cannot see how this is so; it *must* be so.

Now add the central point I have been emphasizing, about the prior purity of God, and it will become clear both how an evil-permitting free will apparently cannot be part of any good that God is motivated to share with finite persons in creation, and how love of the deepest value is and must be possible even so – or, at least, why theists are committed to accepting these views. Before creation the only free will there *is* operates independently of evil, and it does so compatibly with the instantiation of unsurpassable greatness. Whatever good God may experience in connection with it, and be motivated to share, must therefore be good-without-evil. Likewise, if God is loving before creation (perhaps in the context of something like a Trinity) the love of God must be a love operating without any possibility of the evils of rejection. How, then, if God is motivated to share in creation the wonders of love as known by God, could the thought of building that possibility into finite love even arise? Notice also that, given

UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, *God's* love for *finite creatures* must be unremitting and incapable of failure; such love, theists will say, is indeed the *paradigm or standard* of what love is. In this context, there is clearly no room to say that the love God would be motivated to facilitate among creatures could come with the possibility of rejection.

I am now ready to put all of this into the form of a logical proof. Instead of referring to each of the motives we have been talking about, I will, for simplicity's sake, refer explicitly only to the first of them, accommodating the others with the expression 'and/or relevantly similar motives.'

I begin with the proposition we have seen to be (when correctly interpreted) a necessary truth:

(1) God's motive in creating the world is the motive to share the good with finite beings (and/or relevantly similar motives).

From here the proof unfolds smoothly. Our three theistic commitments, in conjunction, entail

(2) The unsurpassable good God experiences pre-creation – the only good God might wish to share in creation – is good-without-evil.

And from (1) and (2), taken together, it follows that

(3) God's motive in creating the world is the motive to share with finite beings good-without-evil.

Now from UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, given the maximally great ability to realize its intentions that an unsurpassably great personal being must possess, we have that

(4) If God's motive in creating the world is the motive to share with finite beings good-without-evil, then there is no evil in the world.

And the conjunction of (3) and (4) entails that

(5) There is no evil in the world.

But (5) in conjunction with EVIL yields a contradiction:

(6) There is evil in the world and there is no evil in the world.

Thus again we see what was to be proved: logical inconsistency between the conjunction of the first three theistic commitments, UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS, ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE, and PRIOR PURITY, and the fourth, EVIL.

Some final objections

I will conclude the paper by considering several objections to my reasoning that are, I think, representative of those likely to occur to philosophers.

Traditional theists may object in terms of the Augustinian idea that God's glory is

wonderfully displayed when God performs the feats of immense *resourcefulness and ingenuity* involved in turning evil into (or toward) good. Mightn't God include evil in creation in order to do just that? But bringing to bear PRIOR PURITY, we have to say that, prior to creation, God is unsurpassably and unlimitedly great *without* evil, and so whatever it is that such resourceful and ingenious acts might contribute to the Divine greatness must be expressible then too – just in other ways. Resourceful and ingenious activity is a type of thing, of which there are many possible instances or tokens. Acts of turning evil into good are some such, but surely there are others; there *must* be others – and others even more impressive – if God can be unlimitedly great without evil, and if resourceful and ingenious activity contributes to God's greatness.

“Well,” says a philosopher who remains undeterred, “why shouldn't – or mightn't – God nonetheless make the choice that you are trying to put out of reach *just because it is thought interesting?*” Here, again, I think we are in danger of conflating our own perceptions with those of the Divine. I see how natural it is for *us*, none of whom has ever lived or ever will live in a purely good world, to vote for an evil-including world on grounds of (such things as) interest. But we have already agreed that there is no evil in God prior to creation and that, even so, God is the greatest possible – which surely entails the most *interesting* possible – reality. This bears thought. To select evil for inclusion in a world, God has to, as it were, *reach outside* what is most great and interesting and rich, capable of being more deeply experienced and developed by finite beings unlimitedly. How could it be other than arbitrary and perverse, and thus signally unGodlike, to do so?

A similar reply is suited to the thought of those who insist that a love that comes with radical freedom and therefore the possibility of rejection and other evil possibilities has its own

distinctive excellence – one that Divine love lacks. [see chapters 14 and 15] We must be careful here. That Divine love lacks such excellence doesn't imply, or even suggest, that it would be desirable for reality to include both forms. We have already seen that the type of good in God connected to the good idealized here must be *far greater* than the latter good is. As indicated in the 'modeling' proof, we should be thinking about how those higher goods could continually and ever more deeply be reflected in a world. When we do think thus we will see how God must always lack reason to introduce the evil-involving excellence we, with our limitations, are inclined to think of as desirable rather than a good-based excellence modeling God.

Perhaps it is starting to become clear just *how* prejudiced we may be in favour of familiar goods involving evil in some way. Our problem is that we cannot properly bring into a comparison with the familiar goods involving evils that impress us the more impressive goods modeled on God that might be realized instead. If we could do so, we would immediately lose our prejudice. But just seeing *that* such would be the case, given more favourable circumstances, should itself help us to lose it! I think by following such ideas far enough, advocates of the new logical problem of evil will gain invaluable help in the answering of such objections as may be raised.

This holds also for the final objection I shall consider. It stems from the thinking to which Alvin Plantinga was drawn when, recently (2004), he returned to the logical problem of evil after a long time away. Plantinga's tendency today is to speak even more explicitly in terms of Christian ideas, particularly the ideas of the Incarnation and the Atonement. He wants to make use of what he calls the incomparable good of God coming close to us in our humanity and taking upon himself our sin. Such a happening obviously presupposes that there is evil. Thus God

can be found in possible worlds containing evil.

But Plantinga only illustrates our tendency to focus on familiar goods – in this case, goods made familiar by Christian theology. The Christian story of God’s self-humbling and self-sacrifice can, I think, be told in a way that is properly called beautiful. [see chapter 18] But whatever beauty is found here must, as we have seen, be considered alongside the idea of an instantiation of beauty that can exist without any evil at all if certain commitments of theism are to be accepted. It is the *latter* beauty that we should call ‘incomparable.’ Presumably Plantinga himself, good Anselmian that he is, would concede that in the depths of the Divine, realized without evil, are goods too stunning for any human being to behold. These could be approached by finite persons in worlds entirely lacking evil. And we might add that in a world without evil we could even imagine an event of Incarnation taking place, as the personal God displays the Divine love for finite persons and facilitates new ways of being bonded with them. The Felix Culpa approach therefore is too weak and too human – all too human – to perform the task required of it here.

Conclusion

“You cannot see my face, for no one may look upon me and live,” says the God of the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 33:20, NIV). Ironically, the danger of looking deeply into the nature of God may be of another sort. By cultivating *even more religiously sensitivity than apparently is possessed by many philosophers of religion, reflecting in detail on the purity and greatness of God*, we can find a door that opens to new versions of the logical problem of evil. Plantinga’s work in the philosophy of religion should not prevent us from noticing them (or from looking for others,

which may be waiting behind other doors). Whether the new arguments I have detailed will prove successful only time will tell. But should that turn out to be the case, then the story of God is not, as many militant atheists today would have one believe, too bad to be true, but rather too *good* to be true. Though it sounds odd to say so, perhaps only a certain (admittedly uncommon) atheistic sensibility can allow one properly to appreciate just how good it is.

But the point about religious stories being ‘too good to be true’ can be overstated. It is only because of its own special way of filling out the more general religious proposition I have elsewhere called ultimism – the idea that there is a reality triply ultimate: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically – that theism gets into such trouble. Take away the assumptions of ONTOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE and PRIOR PURITY and the game is on again – though it is likely to be a very different game.

This option, of beginning again, perhaps more humbly, with UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS alone, is not one that atheists often mention. That is because atheists are usually also metaphysical naturalists, and thus opposed to all religious ideas. I think this orientation is mired in error. In part this is because I think we humans are still at the very beginning of what may be an extremely long process of religious adventuring on our planet.⁷ If that is so, and if I am right about the seriousness of the problem evil presents for theism, then not only should we be prepared to let go of God. We should also gird ourselves for religious explorations and discoveries not yet dreamt in any philosophy.⁸

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Notes

1. By generality I mean reference to the existence of *any evil at all*. (A version of the logical problem of evil focused more specifically on horrors is developed in chap. 11 of Schellenberg 2007.)

2. A similar slogan can be extracted from a subtle and interesting paper by Nicholas Everitt (2006). But Everitt's argument is not an argument from evil – it focuses on the contingency attaching to any world – and his way of moving from slogan to argument is different from mine.

3. In this essay 'world' normally refers to an imagined or actual reality that would be or is ontologically distinct from God and that, if God exists, depends or would depend for its existence

on God's creative activity. 'The' world (or 'this' world or 'our' world) is the world in which we live. When instead I have in mind the larger notion of a possible world such as the actual world, which for theists includes both God and any created reality, I shall make this clear through the relevant use of such words as 'possible' or 'actual.'

4.It may be that PRIOR PURITY follows from UNSURPASSABLE GREATNESS. But even if so, it is a neglected entailment, and it will be doing important work for me, sometimes on its own. And these points justify treating it separately.

5.Certain of these propositions, just like the three commitments, would not rightly be regarded as necessary truths *by non-theists* without the addition, at the appropriate place, of the phrase 'if God exists.' But because it would be awkward to continually employ this phrase, and because theists will regard the relevant propositions as necessary truths without it, I have left it tacit.

6.Here I have been much helped by an anonymous reviewer of the paper.

7.For more on these matters, see my recent trilogy from Cornell, especially the final two volumes: Schellenberg (2007) and Schellenberg (2009).

8.Many thanks to Justin McBrayer, Klaas Kraay, and also to an anonymous reviewer for detailed and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Alexander Pruss's online commentary prompted me to notice areas of insufficient clarity. I am grateful.

