

The plausibility of the problem of evil through the presentation of mackie and ro...

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This paper will examine the problem of evil as presented by Mackie and Rowe; both versions aiming to present an inconsistency within basic principles accepted by the theologian, from which atheistic conclusions are drawn. By comparing and contrasting the plausibility of the two versions, it can be shown that Mackie's version of the argument is ultimately stronger, and can stand up to a rebuttal given on the basis of the nature of good and evil.

Mackie prefaces his account of the problem of evil by determining that – by and large – the standard arguments purporting to provide proof of God's existence have been shown to be faulty in one way or another. However, Mackie clarifies that the theologian can accept these critiques, admit that there is no way to rationally prove God's existence, and still claim to know God in some other way (Mackie p. 185). While conceding this, Mackie claims to be able to show that religious belief is entirely irrational. This for Mackie is the problem of evil. Mackie puts this argument into an indirect proof, assuming a set of premises and revealing that they lead to an inconsistency, forcing us to reject at least one of them. By adding some points of clarification to the basic propositions that God is wholly good, God is omnipotent, and evil exists in the world, Mackie is able to produce proof that all three premises cannot be simultaneously true. From here he can posit that religious belief on the whole is irrational. In standard form, the argument reads as follows:

1. God is wholly good
2. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can
3. God is omnipotent

4. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything
5. An omnipotent and wholly good god eliminates all evil
6. Some Evil exists
7. 5 and 6 contradict

Therefore, religious belief is irrational (Mackie, p. 186)

For Mackie, this problem is meant to not only cast skepticism on the existence of god, but show that belief in god is entirely irrational (Mackie, p. 186). By revealing that the three basic principles delivered in premises 1, 3, and 6 present a stark incompatibility, it is clear that they cannot all be true at the same time. However, all three are vital aspects of the theologian's belief system. Thus, in order to hold his belief, the theologian must at the same time accept all three principles, and reject at least one of them (Mackie, p. 185). This is clearly an irrational position to take, and shows that belief in god must also be irrational. In order to avoid this claim, it seems that the believer must reject either the omnipotence or the benevolence of god; in other words, he must admit to god either being willing to prevent evil but unable, or able to prevent evil but not willing. Either of these routes it seems, topples the fundamental structures of the theologian's belief system.

An ancient concept reaching back to Epicurus in the 3rd century BC, the problem of evil has been reincarnated in different lights by philosophers over time, and Mackie's version is certainly not the only viable one. William Rowe, in his paper "The Problem of Evil and Some Variations of Atheism", actually rejected Mackie's deductive stance on the problem, claiming that it fails in its purpose (Rowe p. 212). While Rowe's presentation also centers around

this idea of inconsistency, he approaches the argument in a much different way and comes to a much more decisive conclusion. Rowe first posits that there are in the world instances of suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being would be able to prevent without losing some other good or causing some other evil. He then suggests that a wholly good being would prevent such suffering so long as it were not to cause the loss of more good or the production of more evil. Rowe concludes that because this type of evil does exist, this being therefore cannot exist (Rowe, p. 213). He rests the truth of these premises on the fact that any theologian would agree that if an omnipotent, wholly good being did allow some type of intense suffering, it would have to be in order to prevent some greater suffering or bring about some greater good (Rowe, p. 214).

While both arguments are valid versions of the problem of evil, the biggest difference between the two presentations is that Mackie's is deductive while Rowe's is inductive. This means that Mackie uses broad claims about the world to deduce a narrow claim. He begins with general claims about the nature of god and the nature of the world, and through his proposed inconsistencies, concludes that specific religious beliefs are irrational. Rowe, however, uses narrow cases about the world and inductively produces a broad claim. He uses specific instances of suffering in the world and the goods and evils they may be inextricably connected to, to make the expansive claim that god does not and cannot exist. In addition, while Mackie concludes that religious belief is irrational, Rowe uses the problem of evil to go so far as to conclude outright that the type of being in question simply does not exist (Rowe, p. 213). This extreme conclusion along with the

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inductive nature of his argument might leave Rowe's version much more open to critique.

Despite his valid and conclusive argument, Rowe seems to leave open a small window of possibility where a god that is omnipotent and wholly good can exist simultaneously. This is a situation where the omnipotent and wholly good god allows some evil to occur because - had it been prevented - some equal or worse evil would have occurred, or some greater good would have also been prevented. In order to provide support for his first premise, which states that there do exist instances of suffering that an omnipotent and wholly good god could prevent without bringing about some further evil or preventing some greater good, Rowe uses the example of a fawn in a forest fire (Rowe, p. 214). He points out that in the case of a fawn burned horribly and suffering in an isolated forest, it seems that an omnipotent and wholly good god could have prevented this instance of evil without losing any greater good or permitting any greater suffering. Rowe delivers a detailed argument in which he concludes how unlikely it is for each and every individual case of suffering to be what he calls "intimately connected" to a greater good that could not have occurred otherwise or a greater evil that would have occurred otherwise (Rowe, p. 215). Despite this argument and despite this case being extremely unlikely, it still provides an exception. In the case of the fawn, Rowe even concedes to the fact that there is no way to conclusively know that there is not some other greater good or greater evil connected to this case of suffering (Rowe, p. 214). He allows for the possibility of some unforeseen, intimately linked good or evil that would have been halted or permitted if god had spared the fawn, and simply argues that

having “rational grounds” for believing the premise is true is enough, regardless of the lack of knowledge or proof (Rowe, p. 214). Unlike Mackie’s version, this presentation of the problem of evil leaves an open exception and possible scenario where the presence of evil is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, wholly good god. Due to this unlikely but possible scenario, Mackie’s presentation of the problem of evil rises as the more plausible and impermeable presentation of the two. What is interesting about Mackie’s presentation of the problem is that he doesn’t seem to require much support for any of his premises. While Rowe spends time defending the truth of his premises in order to achieve soundness, Mackie strictly uses premises that are basic agreed upon principles of the theologian or brute facts about the nature of the world. This leaves the only contentious part of Mackie’s argument to be the contradiction itself and whether there are ways around it.

In this way, however, Mackie’s version of the problem seems to not be invincible either. A common argument that aims to allow for the consistency of this set of propositions stems from the idea that the universe is better off over all with some evil in it (Mackie, p. 188). This argument asserts that the existence of evil allows for the existence of sympathy, benevolence, and heroism, thus allowing our universe to be progressively good rather than statically good. It is in this way that god is able to be omnipotent and wholly good while still permitting certain forms of evil. The objector argues that god allows first order evils such as physical pain and suffering, in order to produce second order goods like benevolence and heroism. Because the presence of second order goods is more valuable than the absence of first

order evils, the three principles in Mackie's argument can seemingly exist in harmony (Mackie, p. 189). This argument is appealing because it presents what Mackie calls "the best of all logically possible worlds", where it justifies the existence of evil for a better universe (Mackie, p. 189).

However, upon further inspection, it seems that this objection raises further problems. On the surface, the objection paints a picture of a god that is concerned only with promoting good and not with reducing evil. Something about this version of god seems off-putting in some way, and something many theists would not be quick to accept (Mackie, p. 189). Further, in a way this picture of god still lacks complete omnipotence; this god is unable to bring about second order goods without the existence of first order evils. However, the most devastating problem with this counter argument is the regress it produces. The objection lays out first and second order good and evil, where second order good is the good that comes from the overcoming of first order evils like pain and misery. Now, second order evils like malevolence and cruelty are in contrast with second order goods like sympathy and forgiveness in the same way the first order evil and first order good contrast each other in the original problem. In order for God to be concerned with promoting these second order goods, he must be both willing and able to prevent these second order evils. Because these second order evils clearly exist, the belief in an omnipotent, wholly good god is irrational, and the problem of evil is merely restated on a second order level (Mackie, p. 190).

Because this objection and those like it fail, Mackie concludes that the only adequate solutions to his version of the paradox are ones in which the theologian rejects gods omnipotence or benevolence, or reject reason completely (Mackie, p. 186). These solutions clearly weaken the foundation of religious belief and are almost always adopted in only partial manners (i. e. claiming to limit gods omnipotence but continuing to internalize an all-powerful god (Mackie p. 186)), rendering Mackie's initial presentation of the problem of evil a strong and successful one.