

Responding to Arguments against the Existence of God Based on Evil

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of western thought, numerous philosophers and great thinkers have struggled with what is known as The Problem of Evil. A number of influential philosophers have posited the incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil. A number of theists have defended their co-existence. Former Oxford professor of Philosophy J.L Mackie took the theist to task by attempting to expose their arguments as invalid and unpersuasive. Mackie represents a number of non-theistic criticisms of theistic arguments for The Problem of Evil.¹ Because of this, I will examine Mackie's arguments from a theistic perspective and demonstrate that it is Mackie who has failed to be persuasive in his arguments against the positions that reconcile the existence of God with evil.

ATHEIST REJECTION

The basic argument of J.L. Mackie is that the God of theism is incompatible with evil in the world. In summarizing the theist's position, Mackie correctly portrays God as omnipotent and perfectly good. Mackie then goes on to state the apparent contradiction that good is opposed to evil in such a way that the good would always eliminate all evil. If there are no limits on God, then surely God would eliminate all evil. But evil does exist, hence God must not exist.

1. J. L. Mackie, "Evil shows that there is no God," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) , 581-591.

Mackie explains that it is possible for evil and God to co-exist, but they cannot coexist if God is both omnipotent and benevolent. Mackie attempts to demonstrate that each argument fails to successfully defend God's omnipotence or benevolence. As a result, Mackie hopes to demonstrate that the theistic God does not exist. I will now look at Mackie's rejections of the theist arguments that attempt to reconcile the existence of God with evil.

At first glance, Mackie's arguments seem to be persuasive. But as we look closer, it becomes apparent that the emperor is wearing no clothes.

God Cannot Exist Without Evil

In this first argument, Mackie challenges the argument of theist that there can be no good without evil, or that evil is a necessary counterpart to good.

Mackie argues that if this is the case, a number of problems arise. One, this would deny that God is omnipotent. If God cannot create good without also creating evil, then this is an obvious limit that an all-powerful being would not have. Two, this would deny that evil is really opposed to good. True good, according to Mackie, would not tolerate and completely get rid of all evil.

In response to Mackie's first argument, Mackie never actually explains what he means by 'evil.' It appears that he views evil as a thing in and of itself with its own existence. This is by no means the only view of evil. For instance, Augustine of Hippo, also known as St. Augustine, has a very different view of evil. According to Augustine, evil is not a thing that exists in itself. Instead, evil is a corruption of good.² Current Oxford professor, Herbert McCabe, elaborates by saying that everything that God created is good. However, when things do not operate as designed, they have a defect. Evil is a defect in good things designed by God. When we call a

2. Augustine of Hippo, "What is evil?," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 592-598.

person bad or evil, we are saying that that person does not measure up to the standard of humanness. That person has a defect. So it is not what something *is* that makes it evil, it is evil because of what it is *not*.³

Evil is Necessary as a Means to Good

In this second argument, Mackie challenges the argument of theists that good is necessary for evil as a *means* to good or that God allows evil in order to bring about good.

Mackie argues once again that this would imply a limit on God. If God had to introduce evil as a means to good, then God is somehow bound by evil. If God cannot create good without evil, then there must be some type of causal law to which God is subject. Hence, God cannot be omnipotent.

In response to Mackie, I would first like to say something about omnipotence. Although God is omnipotent, this does not mean that He can do anything. It means that He can do anything that is *logically* possible. So for instance, God cannot create another eternal being nor can He create a square circle. It may not be logically possible to do what Mackie suggests. As McCabe points out, some kinds of evil and suffering is a necessary concomitant of certain kinds of good. We live in a material world which calls for certain interactions. Thus, when I suffer from a disease, it is because the bacteria or whatever is fulfilling themselves and behaving exactly as good bacteria should behave. Someone might point out that God could have changed things to where they didn't act in this way? Sure, but then we would have a world in which God is constantly intervening to overcome the natural laws of a material world. As McCabe would argue, the evil that we have is the necessary effects of a material world, no more, no less.

3. Herbert McCabe, "God, evil, and divine responsibility," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 614-624.

Some Evil Makes for a Better Universe

In this third argument, Mackie challenges the argument of theists that some evil may contribute to the goodness of the whole. God could permit evils such as sickness and disease, so that it can allow greater goods such as benevolence and sympathy.

Mackie responds to this argument with three objections. One, it would be “absurd for God to keep misery in existence in order to make possible the virtues of benevolence.”⁴ Two, this would mean that God is not all loving, since it would indicate that God is not concerned with ridding evil or even minimizing evil. According to Mackie, God’s main objective would then be promoting the good over eradicating evil and this would question God’s benevolence. Three, allowing evil to produce greater good, in turn produces even greater evils. According to Mackie, for each level of good, there will be an increasing level of evil *ad infinitum*. So no matter how much good result from evil, there will also result a greater evil to cancel out any increase in good. As a result, evil will always overshadow good.

In response to Mackie’s first objection, he never explains why it would be “absurd” for God to allow some evils which would produce higher goods. This could very well be a reason for God allowing evil. As Oxford Professor of Philosophy Richard Swinburne writes “A world without evils would be a world in which men could show no forgiveness, no compassion, and no self-sacrifice. And men without that opportunity are deprived of the opportunity to show themselves at their noblest.”⁵ In fact, the most noble, forgiving, and self-sacrificing act in history came as a result of evil. It is because of the evil of man, that God sacrificed his son Jesus to die on the Cross for the sins of mankind. Out of all the misery in the world came a much higher good.

4. Mackie, 605.

5. Richard Swinburne, “Evil does not show that there is no God,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) , 605.

In response to his second objection, Mackie does not explain how the existence of evil is contradictory to the existence of a benevolent God. As I just mentioned, God demonstrated His ultimate love through the sacrifice of Jesus. God did not just sit idly by and helplessly watch evil. He did something about it and that something showed mankind true love.

In response to Mackie's third objection, it should be clear that his position is false. If it were true that greater good automatically generated greater evils *ad infinitum*, then throughout history there would be ever increasing evil to the point where people would be running around in our streets, randomly committing acts of evil at every turn. This is obviously not the case. There is clearly a cap on evil. There is enough evil to accomplish God's purposes and no more. Of course we all want less evil, but that would be the case no matter how little evil there were. God alone completely knows His purposes, so only He knows how much is enough and how much is too much.

Evil is Due to Human Free Will

In this fourth argument, Mackie challenges the position that evil is not God's doing, instead it is a result of free will. People use their free will to do evil. God could not destroy evil without destroying free will.

Mackie makes a couple of objections. One, God could have made men free who would always choose good. Mackie writes "if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?"⁶ According to Mackie, if it is logically possible for man to freely choose good sometimes, then there is no reason why God could not make it so they will freely choose good all of the time. After all, Mackie argues, if God made man, then our actions are determined by God. So God can determine for men to have good actions. Man's

6. Mackie, 588.

actions cannot be truly free, however, since that would imply that God cannot control them, which would also mean that God would no longer be omnipotent.

Two, Mackie also rejects the theist argument that free will prevents God from controlling their actions. Mackie sees no reason why God could not simply allow men to do those things which are good, yet intervene when they decide to do wrong. If God can do this but does not, then God values free will more than preventing evil.

In response to Mackie's first argument, I would challenge Mackie's understanding of free will. If what we do is determined by God, as Mackie seems to think, then there is no such thing as free will. God knows our future actions, but He does not determine them. So in response to Mackie's first suggestion that God could make men freely choose good, this is simply not possible. If God determined all of the actions of man, they would be nothing more than sophisticated robots. They would be incapable of neither good nor evil. They would simply be following their programming. Not only would God not be able to hold them accountable for their actions, neither could society. A person who is a murderer ultimately had no choice. It was not his fault. Subsequently, we could not punish him for something he had no control over. But we do punish murders. The reason we do is because we know that men do have a choice.

The God of Mackie is clearly not the God of Christianity. The God of Christianity allows us to make our choices because He does value free will so much. Although God hates evil, man must be given the option to choose Him or reject Him. We see this in the Garden of Eden. Why would God put a tree in the Garden and then command Adam and Eve to not eat of it? It sounds bizarre at first glance. But it is not once you have a better understanding of the nature of God. They had to make a choice to either follow God or reject God. This is the same cause of evil today. When man chooses himself over God, the result is evil. But there is no way around it without destroying free will. I could never enjoy my daughters telling me they love me if I knew

they had no choice. It is only because they *can* tell me that they hate me that make their expression of love worthwhile. Furthermore, if I never knew hate, I could never appreciate their love.

In response to Mackie's second objection, there is very little difference between allowing men to only make right choices and preventing them from making bad choices, so my response is similar. I once again reiterate my previous point with a quote from Swinburne "It is not logically possible that a creator create free creatures 'such that necessarily they do not do evil actions.'" ⁷ If I present to person *p*, the options *a* and *b*, but tell them that they can only chose *b*, then *a* was never really a choice.

In addition to this, let's imagine a world in which Mackie's suggestion is a reality. A writer, such as Mackie, sits down to write a sentence such as 'God is evil.' Immediately a cosmic hand comes out of nowhere and smacks him upside the head. In such an instance, God prevented Mackie from doing evil, but at what cost? I would suggest that this God would have far less respect for free will and human dignity than the God of Christianity. And Mackie would have far less respect for this God than the God of Christianity. Instead, God allows us to do evil. However, at some point we will be held accountable for the evil that we do. This is a God that not only values our free will, but also respects us as valuable creatures, made in His image, and worthy of His love.

THEIST DEFENSE

There are a few responses that apply to Mackie's overall argument. By acknowledging evil, Mackie unwittingly must also acknowledge God. The existence of evil, rather than

7. Swinburne, 603.

disproving God, does the exact opposite. Also, Mackie makes a number of assumptions in his evaluation of theists that are baseless.

Evil Assumes God

Without God there is no such thing as the evil about which Mackie complains. If there were no objective standard of right and wrong, then our acts would simply be morally neutral acts committed by morally neutral people. If my actions were to violate the sensibilities of another person, so what! The person I violated would simply have a different view of right and wrong or evil than I do. But there would be nothing that we could really point to outside of ourselves as a standard by which we should both agree. One might say we should all abide by the golden rule. My response would be why? If evolution is our maker, then survival is our objective, not harmony with my fellow human. So, even the idea of evil is incomprehensible without the objective standard of a morally perfect God.

Mackie's Assumptions

As part of Mackie's argument, he assumes good would always eliminate evil. Maybe it is true that good would always eliminate evil and maybe Christianity is God's way of achieving just that. The God of Christianity is not only omnipotent, but omniscient. He knows things about human actions that no human could ever know. It might be completely possible that God's way of allowing evil in the short run, achieves the ultimate goal of destroying all evil in the long run. We should also take into consideration that God's view of time is very different from ours. God is not in time viewing each sinful act as they occur. Instead God stands outside of time viewing everything in one eternal now. All things are present to him. So even though we see

evil and wonder when it will be destroyed, God sees its destruction at the same time as the evil itself. So from God's perspective evil would have been dealt with from the beginning of time. Just because it has not happened in time yet does not mean that it never will.

On the other hand, maybe Mackie is wrong. Maybe a good omnipotent God would allow evil. In Mackie's view, banishing evil should be God's top priority, even at the expense of free will. But why should we assume this? After all, evil is only a temporary condition of this world. It has no place in eternity. If it is God's ultimate purpose to reconcile man to Himself, then maybe God will use evil to obtain this ultimate goal of reconciliation.

J.L. Mackie is also under the assumption that God is somehow negligent by not stopping evil. However, as McCabe points out, this would only be true when "you have some kind of obligation to do something and you do not do it."⁸ Why should we assume that God has this obligation? God is under no obligation to stop evil. If that were the case then something would be greater than God as McCabe writes "There can be no sense in the idea that God has *any* job or is under any obligation; if he were, there would be something greater than God which constrained him."⁹ So ironically, according to McCabe, it is a sign of God's omnipotence to *not* destroy evil due to some type of obligation.

CONCLUSION

Mackie never demonstrates why the existence of evil and the existence of God are a contradiction or why they are incompatible. Instead he attempts to make the case that they are incompatible based on his understanding of what an omnipotent being would do. But how can Mackie or anyone else know what an omnipotent being would do?

8. McCabe, 624.

Mackie portrays God as some type of moral monster who sits idly by while the world suffers due to His inaction. This is far different from the God of the Christianity. The God of the Christianity abhors evil, yet He respects free will more than He hates evil. This does not mean that He left us alone to suffer. He provides ultimate relief from all suffering through his Son Jesus. But even more amazingly, He is with us in our suffering. He comforts us and points to our ultimate deliverance. He even shared in our suffering upon the Cross. In the words of Swinburne

God knowing the worthwhileness of the conquest of evil and the perfecting of the universe by men, shared with them this task by subjecting himself as a man to the evil of the world. A creator is more justified in creating or permitting evils to be overcome by his creatures if he is prepared to share with them the burden of the suffering and effort¹⁰

Surely God is compassionate, benevolent, as well as omnipotent; even in a world such as ours, where evil exists.

9. Ibid.

10. Swinburne, 612.

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