The Problem of Evil

The traditional problem of evil can be expressed in a variety of ways. But, as Mackie, claims (103a-b), in its simplest form it consists of pointing out the apparent inconsistency of three claims:

(α) God is omnipotent.
(β) God is wholly good.
(γ) Evil exists.

It would seem to be the case that one cannot hold all three propositions to be true. What to do?

First, a little terminology. Philosophers often distinguish between moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil is when people (who are said to be free) do awful things to each other: rape, murder, etc. Natural evil is when bad stuff happens in the world because of natural phenomena: e.g., tornadoes, earthquakes, etc. So, you can ask two different questions: How could an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God allow the Holocaust? How could an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God allow the Asian Tsunami?

Leibniz

Leibniz was famous for holding that the world (i.e., not just the Earth, but the universe, the whole shebang) in which we live is the “best of all possible worlds.”

Here is a reconstruction of Leibniz’s implicit argument:

(1) Suppose this world is not the best of all possible worlds. (i.e., “The world could be better.”) (This is to set up a reductio ad absurdum argument.)
(2) God is omnipotent and omniscient and benevolent and the free creator of the world. (Def.)
(3) Things could have been otherwise – i.e., there are other possible worlds. (Premise)
(4) If this world is not the best of all possible worlds, then at least one of the following must be the case:
   (a) God was not powerful enough to bring about a better world; and/or
   (b) God did not know how this world would develop after his creation of it (i.e. God lacked foreknowledge); and/or
   (c) God did not wish this world to be the best; and/or
   (d) God did not create the world; and/or
   (e) there were no other possible worlds from which God could choose.
(5) But, any one or more of (4)(a)-(e) contradicts (2) and/or (3).
(6) Therefore, this world is the best of all possible worlds.

If you believe that God fits the bill in (2) above, then it seems you must believe the conclusion (6).
Consider Leibniz’s arguments in the anthologized piece. The first objection runs as follows:

(7) Whoever does not choose the best is lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.
(8) God did not choose the best in creating this world.
(9) Therefore, God has been lacking in power, or in knowledge, or in goodness.

Leibniz denies (8), which has the following argument behind it:

(8a) Whoever makes things in which there is evil, which could have been made without any evil, or the making of which could have been omitted, does not choose the best.
(8b) God has made a world in which there is evil; a world which could have been made without any evil, or the making of which could have been omitted altogether.
(8c) Therefore, God has not chosen the best.

Leibniz’s response here is to accept (8b) and deny (8a), for “it may happen that evil is accompanied by a greater good.” (p. 92a) What do you think?

Pike

According to Pike, there is a way out of the problem of evil, if one recognizes that “a being who permits (or brings about) an instance of suffering might be perfectly good providing that there is a morally sufficient reason for his action.” (p. 94a)

Pike wishes to show that there need not be a contradiction in the sharper form of “Problem of Evil Triad”:

(10) The world contains instances of suffering.
(11) God exists – and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
(12) An omnipotent and omniscient being would have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of suffering.

The reason there need not be a contradiction is that (12) might not be necessarily true. Why not? “If instances of suffering were necessary components of the best of all possible worlds, then an omnipotent and omniscient being would have a morally sufficient reason for permitting instances of suffering. Thus, if it is possible that instances of suffering are necessary components of the best of all possible worlds, then there might be a morally sufficient reason for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit instances of suffering.” (p. 99a)


Mackie

J. L. Mackie will have none of this. In his view, the presence of evil in the world renders religious belief irrational. Ultimately, Mackie thinks, proposed solutions to the problem of evil depend upon “equivocation with the use of ‘good’ and evil,” or upon some vagueness about the way in which good and evil are opposed to one another, or about how much is meant by ‘omnipotence’.” (p. 104b)

“Good cannot exist without evil”: Here look at Mackie’s example (p. 106a). What if everything in the world were red? We probably would not begin to have words for colors, for there would be no need to differentiate things. But there would still be red. [Note: this may not be the greatest response because the theist can always say that it is essential that we know the difference between good and evil. Of course, the desire to know the difference between good and evil is what got Adam and Eve in such hot water.]

“Evil is necessary as a means to good”: This implies a restriction on the God’s power. Consider Pike’s case of the parent giving the child bitter medicine. If the parent were omnipotent, presumably s/he would have improved the health of the child without causing discomfort in the form of bitter medicine.

“The universe is better with some evil in it…”: Mackie argues that this implies levels of good and evil and that this then gets us into difficulties. Why? Because the claim that there is a greater good means that evil (1) – instances of pain and unhappiness – is justified in terms of good (2) – benevolence, well-being, and so on. But, ultimately, there are grounds for believing in an evil (2) – malevolence, cruelty, cowardice, and so on – which would have to be taken care of by recourse to good (3). Not only is there the problem of an infinite regress, but this means that one could reformulate the “Problem of Evil Triad” so as to include evil (2), and the existence of good (2) would not be a solution.

“Evil is due to human free will”: Mackie asks, “…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? If there is no logical impossibility in a man’s freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion.” (p. 108a) Ultimately, this leads Mackie to formulate the “Paradox of Omnipotence”: “Can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control?” (p.109a)