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The evil-god challenge

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Abstract: **This paper develops a challenge to theism. The challenge is to explain why the hypothesis that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and all-good god should be considered significantly more reasonable than the hypothesis that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and all-evil god. Theists typically dismiss the evil-god hypothesis out of hand because of the *problem of good* – there is surely too much good in the world for it to be the creation of such a being. But then why doesn't the problem of evil provide equally good grounds for dismissing belief in a good god? I develop this *evil-god challenge* in detail, anticipate several replies, and correct errors made in earlier discussions of the problem of good.**

The evil-god challenge

Let's call the central claim classical of monotheism – that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely benevolent creator – *the good-god hypothesis*. Typically, those who believe this hypothesis, while perhaps insisting that it is a 'faith position', nevertheless consider it not *un*reasonable. Believing in the existence of God, they maintain, is not like believing in the existence of Santa or fairies. It is much more reasonable than that.

In response, critics often point out that, even if most of the popular arguments for the existence of God do provide grounds for supposing that there is some sort of supernatural intelligence behind the universe, they fail to provide much clue as to its moral character. Suppose, for example, that the universe shows clear evidence of having been designed. To conclude, solely on that basis, that the designer is supremely benevolent would be about as unjustified as it would be to conclude that it is, say, supremely malevolent, which clearly would not be justified at all. Critics may add that there is, in addition, ample empirical evidence *against* the existence of such a supremely benevolent being. In particular, they may invoke the evidential problem of evil.

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The problems of evil

There are at least two problems of evil. The *logical problem* begins with the thought that the claim:

(1) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient and maximally good god,

is logically inconsistent with the claim:

(2) Evil exists.

Under 'evil' I mean to include both suffering and morally blameworthy actions. The argument then proceeds as follows. Clearly, (2) is true. Therefore, (1) is false. Note that the amount of evil is irrelevant to this version of the argument – all it requires is that there is some, no matter how little. Perhaps the logical problem of evil does not pose such a great challenge to theism. To deal with it, it would suffice to show that an all-powerful, all-knowing and maximally good god might allow some evil for the sake of a greater good.

A second problem – the *evidential problem* – rests not on the thought that (2) is logically incompatible with (1), but on the thought that (2) provides us with good evidence against (1). The amount of evil does now become relevant. Even if we acknowledge that God might have reason to allow some evil, surely there can be no good reason for quite so much? We can sharpen the problem by noting that God will presumably not allow any gratuitous suffering to exist. There must be a good reason for every last ounce of it.

Many argue that not only is there little reason to suppose that the god of classical monotheism exists, the sheer quantity of evil that exists provides us with overwhelming empirical evidence that he doesn't. Those theists who maintain that belief in God, if not proved, is at least not *un*reasonable, are mistaken. Far from being a question reason cannot decide, the claim that the god of classical monotheism exists seems to be straightforwardly empirically falsified.

Theodicies

Faced with this objection, theists may respond in various ways. They may suggest we possess good grounds for believing that, not only is there a creator, this being does indeed have the properties attributed to him by traditional monotheism. I will return to that suggestion later. They may also suggest that the problem of evil can, to a significant extent, be dealt with. Many theistic explanations of evil have been offered, including the following.

Simple free-will solution We are not blind automata, but free agents. As a consequence of God having given us free will, we sometimes choose to do wrong. Suffering ensues. However, free will allows for certain important goods, such as the possibility of morally virtuous action. God could have created a universe populated with puppet beings that always did as God wants. But the behaviour

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of such puppet beings lacks the dimension of moral responsibility that makes our actions morally virtuous. By cutting our strings and setting us free, God inevitably allowed some evil. But this evil is more than outweighed by the important goods that free will allows.

Character-building solution This is, to borrow John Hick's phrase, a 'vale of soul making'.[1] We know that a bad experience can sometimes make us stronger. People who have suffered a terrible disease sometimes say they gained greatly from it. Similarly, by causing us pain and suffering, God allows us to grow and develop both morally and spiritually. It is only through our experiencing this suffering that we can become the noble souls God wants us to be.

Second-order goods require first-order evils Theists may remind us that God had inevitably to include quite a bit of suffering in His creation in order that certain important goods could exist. Take, for example, charity. Charity is a great virtue. Yet we can only be charitable if there exist others who are needy. Charity is a so-called *second-order good* that requires *first-order evils* like neediness and suffering (or at least their appearance) to exist. The second-order good outweighs the first-order evils, which is why God allows them.

When offered in response to the evidential problem of evil, such explanations are sometimes called *theodicies*. It is on the evidential problem of evil and on theodicies that I focus here. Of course, as theodicies, these explanations have obvious limitations. For example, even if the simple free-will solution succeeds in explaining the evil we bring about by our own free action, it fails to explain so-called natural evils – such as the suffering brought about by natural disasters. Arguably, all three theodicies fail to explain why there is quite so much suffering in the world. True, other, sometimes more sophisticated, explanations have been also offered, as we shall see. Some believe these theodicies, if not individually, then at least collectively, largely take the sting out of the evidential problem of evil. The problem, they suppose, may not have been entirely solved, but it has at least been brought down to manageable proportions.

Still, there remains an acknowledgement by many serious-minded theists that it certainly isn't easy to explain quite why an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely benevolent being would unleash so much horror on the sentient inhabitants of this planet over hundreds of millions of years. This leads some to supplement these explanations with a further appeal – to *mystery*. God works in mysterious ways. Because God is infinitely intelligent and knowledgeable, His divine plan is likely to be mostly 'beyond our ken'[2]. In which case, the fact that the reason for much of the evil that exists is beyond our understanding is not good evidence for His nonexistence.

As I say, the three theodicies outlined above have been challenged. I too intend to challenge them, and also several others, but in an unusual way. I intend to take

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a step back and question the character and plausibility of such explanations collectively, by means of an analogy.

The evil-god hypothesis

Consider a different hypothesis. Suppose the universe has a creator. Suppose also that this being is omnipotent and omniscient. But suppose he is not maximally good. Rather, imagine that he is maximally evil. His depravity is without limit. His cruelty knows no bounds. There is no other god or gods – just this supremely wicked being. Call this the evil-god hypothesis.

How reasonable is the evil-god hypothesis? I have already pointed out that, certainly in their simplest versions, most of the popular arguments for the existence of God fail to provide any clue as to our creator's moral character. In which case, to the extent that they support the good-god hypothesis (that's to say, not very much, if at all), they also support the evil-god hypothesis.

The problem of good

Still, isn't there overwhelming evidence against the evil-god hypothesis? I am referring, of course, to what might be called the *evidential problem of good*. The problem is that of explaining why an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely evil being would allow quite so much good into his creation. Why, for example, would an evil god:

(i) Give some of us immense health, wealth and happiness?
(ii) Put natural beauty into the world, which gives us pleasure?
(iii) Allow us to help each other, thereby reducing suffering and increasing the amount of things evil god despises, such as love?
(iv) Give us children to love who love us unconditionally in return?
(v) Equip us with beautiful, healthy young bodies?

Surely, if a supremely evil being is going to introduce sentient beings into his creation, it will to torture them and have them do evil. Surely he won't allow love, laughter, and rainbows. Nor will he permit us to perform the kind of selfless and courageous acts that ennoble us and reduce the pain and suffering of others. So, yes, the world contains much evil. But there is also a great deal of good – far too much good, in fact, for this plausibly to be the creation of such a limitlessly powerful and malignant being.

Notice how the evidential problem of evil mirrors the evidential problem of good. If you believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, and maximally good god, then you face the challenge of explaining why there is quite so much evil in the world. Similarly, if you believe in an omnipotent, omniscient and maximally evil god, then you face the challenge of explaining why the world contains quite so much good.

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Some reverse theodicies

Of course, few, if any, of us believe the evil-god hypothesis. Prima facie, not only is there little reason to suppose such a being exists, there is also overwhelming evidence against his existence. When presented with the evil-god hypothesis, most of us immediately dismiss it as absurd, typically because we consider the problem of good decisive.

But notice that, just as there are moves theists make to try deal to with the problem of evil, so there are similar moves we might make to try to deal with the problem of good. Here are some examples.

Simple free-will solution Evil god gave us free will. Having free will means we sometimes choose to do good, which evil god hates. However, it also introduces the possibility of evil acts for which agents can be held morally responsible. An evil god could have created a universe populated with puppet beings that he ensured always behaved unpleasantly. But the behaviour of such puppet beings lacks the dimension of moral responsibility that transforms such acts into actions of the most depraved and despicable kind. To maximize evil, an evil god will want us to perform cruel and selfish acts of our own volition.

In response to this first suggestion, some may object: 'But why is a world such as this, in which we possess free will, worse than a world in which we possess no freedom and are simply compelled to cause endless misery to each other? Surely the latter would be far more evil. So why didn't evil god create it?' But this is to forget that a world in which we are compelled to maximize suffering is a world in which no morally evil actions are performed. And moral evil is a particularly profound and important form of evil (as even theists typically acknowledge). Just as, from the point of view of a good god, a world lacking morally good actions is gravely deficient, so similarly, from the point of view of an evil god, a world lacking morally evil actions is also gravely deficient.

In response, it may be said: 'But still, a world in which there is a free will is far preferable to us than a world in which we are compelled to cause each other endless misery. The second hellish sort of existence would be far worse. And thus preferable from an evil god's point of view. So why didn't evil god create it?'

There is some plausibility to this response. Notice, however, that much the same kind of worry can be, and has been, raised about the standard free-will theodicy. Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, for example, asks whether our freedom isn't bought at an unacceptably high price if it results in the torture of innocent children. Surely, Ivan and others suggest, given the choice between creating a heavenly world in which we are made noble and virtuous and enjoy a profoundly joyful existence, and a world in which, as a result of our having been given have

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free will, humanity as a consequence endures endless war, murder, rape, torture, the Holocaust, and so on, a good god would choose the former (certainly many of us would much *prefer* to occupy the former heavenly world; indeed, many theists hope and pray they will eventually do so).

So, while there may be a difficulty here for the free-will solution to the problem of good, that does not reveal it to be any less plausible than the standard free-will solution to the problem of evil, given that this kind of worry is common to both.

Here are two more solutions.

The character-destroying solution Hick was mistaken: this is a vale, not of soul making, but of soul-destruction. Evil god wants us to suffer, do evil and despair. Why, then, does an evil god create natural beauty? To provide some contrast. To make what is ugly seem even more so. If everything were uniformly, maximally ugly, we wouldn't be tormented by the ugliness half as much as if it was peppered with some beauty.

The need for contrast also explains why evil god bestows lavish lifestyles and success upon a few. Their happiness is designed to make the suffering of the rest of us even more acute. Who can rest content knowing that they have so much more, that they are undeserving, and that no matter how hard we might strive, we will never achieve what they have (and remember, too, that even those lucky few are not *really* happy).

Why does evil god allow us to have beautiful children to love and that love us unconditionally in return? Because we will worry endlessly about them. Only a parent knows the depths of anguish and suffering that having children brings.

Why does an evil god give us beautiful, healthy young bodies? Because we know that out health and vitality will be short-lived, that we will either die young or else slowly wither. By giving us something wonderful for a moment, and then gradually pulling it away, an evil god can make us suffer even more than if we had never had it in the first place.

First-order goods allow second-order evils Some evils are second-order evils requiring first-order goods. Take jealousy. I cannot feel jealous unless I perceive others to have something worth being jealous of. Evil god had to allow a few of us to have goods (or perceived goods) so that jealousy might exist.

Let us call such attempts to explain the problem of good *reverse theodicies*. If these reverse theodicies leave you unconvinced, remember that, like a defender of the good-god hypothesis, we can also play the 'mystery' card. Being infinitely intelligent and knowledgeable, evil god's supremely ingenious and diabolical plan is likely to be largely beyond our ken. In which case, the fact that we can't understand why there is so much good in the world if he exists is not good evidence of his nonexistence.

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The symmetry thesis

The three reverse theodices introduced above to deal with the evidential problem of good obviously mirror the three theodicies we looked at earlier. In fact, other theodices can be mirrored in this way too (see below). This suggests an interesting way to challenge theism.

How persuasive are our three reverse theodicies? Intuitively, not at all. Rather than being taken seriously, they usually provoke amusement among theists and non-theists alike. But this raises the question: if the reverse theodicies are feeble and ineffective, why should we consider the standard theodicies any more effective?

We may also raise a larger question. In terms of reasonableness, isn't there a broad *symmetry* between the good-god hypothesis and the evil-god hypothesis? Take arguments supporting the two hypotheses. I pointed out earlier that many of the popular arguments in support of the good-god hypothesis turn out to provide much the same sort of support (i.e. not very much) for the evil-god hypothesis. Moreover, when it comes to dealing with the evidence against the respective hypotheses provided by the enormous quantities of both good and evil that we find in the world, we can construct similar kinds of explanation. In particular, the three theodicies offered to deal with the evidential problem of God are mirrored by the reverse theodicies outlined above.

I shall call the suggestion that, in terms of reasonableness, there is indeed such a rough symmetry between the good-god and evil-god hypotheses, *the symmetry thesis*.

The scales analogy

Suppose the reasonableness of the good-god and evil-god hypotheses is in each case indicated by a pointer on a set of weighing scales. Depending on how each of our two scales is loaded – considerations adding to reasonableness being placed on the left of each scale; considerations subtracting from reasonableness being added to the right – the pointer on each scale moves from highly reasonable through a range of positions (fairly reasonable, not unreasonable. etc.) to highly unreasonable.

Certainly, we find that many of the popular arguments loaded by some theists onto the left side of the good-god scale can just as effectively (or ineffectively) be loaded onto the left side of the evil-god scale. We also find the weighty problem of evil on the right side of the good-god scale is mirrored by the hefty problem of good on the right side of the evil-god scale. And we find that three theodicies we have seen used by theists to try to remove or lessen the weight of the problem of evil on the good-god scale (perhaps we might think of them as large helium balloons that can be attached to the problem to lighten the load) are mirrored by reverse theodicies that might be used to reduce the weight of the problem of good.

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The symmetry thesis says that, when we load the scales correctly with all the available evidence and other considerations pertinent to the reasonableness of a belief (incidentally, I make no commitment to evidentialism here),[3] *the two scales settle in roughly similar positions*.

Now most of us, theists included, consider the evil-god hypothesis highly unreasonable. We suppose that there is little of any substance to place on the left-hand side of the scale, and that, when the boulder that is the problem of good is added, the scale lurches violently to the right, notwithstanding the effects of any reverse-theodicy helium balloons we might then try to attach. Yet adherents of the good-god hypothesis typically suppose the good-god scale far more evenly balanced. To believe in a good god, they think, is not like believing in fairies, Santa or, indeed, an evil god. When this scale is properly loaded and the pointer observed, they say, we find it points to 'not unreasonable' or even 'quite reasonable'.

In short, those who embrace the good-god hypothesis typically reject the symmetry thesis. The challenge I am presenting to those who believe in the god of classical monotheism, then, is to explain why, if belief in an evil god is highly unreasonable, should we consider belief in a good god significantly more reasonable?

We might call this *the evil-god challenge*.

The problem of good in the literature

I am not the first to note how the problem of good might be used to generate a problem for theists.

The earliest discussion appears to be in the 1968 volume *Evil and the Concept of God* by Edward Madden and Peter Hare,[4] in which the authors devote three pages to the problem of good. After briefly sketching some reverse theodicies, Madden and Hare conclude:

> The point should be clear by now that the problems of evil and good are completely isomorphic; what can be said about one can be said about the other in reverse. For any solution to one problem there is a parallel solution to the other, and for every counter-argument in the one there is a parallel counter argument in the other.[5]

In his 1976 paper 'Cacodaemony',[6] Stephen Cahn (quite independently) draws the same conclusion, claiming that: 'classic arguments in defence of the view that every evil in the world makes possible a world containing even greater goods can be exactly paralleled by arguments in defence of the view that every good in the world makes possible a world containing even greater evils'.[7] In 'God, the demon, and the status of theodicies',[8] published in 1990, Edward Stein concurs with Hare, Madden, and Cahn that '[a] demonist can constrict a demonology which is isomorphic for any theodicy'.[9]

Christopher New (also unaware of the earlier literature), in his 1993 paper, 'Antitheism',[10] develops some mirror arguments for, and reverse theodicies in

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defence of, belief in an evil god. Finally, in 'God, demon, good, evil',[11] published in 1997, Charles Daniels attempts to deal with the arguments of Hare, Madden, Cahn, and Stein by suggesting that there is a crucial asymmetry between the good and evil-god hypotheses – Daniels argues that an evil god is actually an impossibility. I respond to Daniels's objection at the end of this paper.

There are a number of important differences between my evil-god challenge and the earlier challenges raised by Madden and Hare, Cahn, Stein, and New.

First, as will become clear, I reject Hare, Madden, Cahn, and Stein's central claim: that the problems of good and evil and their respective solutions are 'exactly parallel'(Madden and Hare). The solutions are not *exactly* parallel. I will indicate some asymmetries between the two problems and sets of theodicies (and also asymmetries in the arguments that might be mounted for these respective gods). However, I will explain why these local asymmetries need not, and probably do not, threaten the symmetry thesis.

Second, I find fault with New's attempt to deal with certain seemingly non-reversible arguments for a good god, and provide a better response to those arguments.

Third, I intend my evil-god hypothesis to provide a more nuanced and tougher challenge to theism than those raised by earlier contributors to this discussion, not just by acknowledging and responding to the problem of local asymmetries, but also by anticipating and dealing with a broader range of potential theistic responses.

Responses to the evil-god challenge

Some may think the evil-god challenge easily met. For example, haven't we omitted several important arguments for the existence of God which are arguments specifically for a good god, and which are not mirrored by any corresponding arguments for an evil god? Don't these arguments show that belief in a good god is, after all, rather more reasonable than belief in an evil god?

Miracles and religious experience

Take for example, the argument from miracles. Miracle cures and other supposedly supernatural phenomena are regularly observed. Some are officially investigated and confirmed by religious authorities such as The Catholic Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Don't such events provide at least some evidence for the existence of, not just a god, but a good god prepared to perform great works of good in response to our prayers?

Or consider the argument from religious experience. Religious experiences are almost always judged to be experiences of something immensely positive. Again, don't they provide us with at least some evidence that, not only is there some

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sort of intelligence behind the universe, but this intelligence is a force for good, not evil?

Even if such arguments are far from conclusive when considered individually, we might suppose that they contribute towards making a cumulative case for the existence of, not just *a* god, but the supremely benevolent god of classical monotheism. But if this is true, then the balance of the good-god scale now shifts. We have something rather more weighty to place on the left side of the good-god scale, something to which there corresponds nothing that might be placed on the left side of the evil-god scale. Do we now have grounds for rejecting the symmetry thesis?

New on arguments from miracles and religious experience

In 'Antitheism',[12] New attempts to deal with this seeming asymmetry by constructing mirror arguments for an evil god. He asks us to imagine a world in which the inhabitants have experiences as of an evil god (New calls them 'anti-religious experiences') and who note harmful or evil events that cannot be explained scientifically (New calls them 'anti-miracles'). We have now imagined evidence for an evil god that precisely mirrors the evidence for a good god. The problem with New's strategy, however, is that imaginary evidence isn't really evidence. I can't provide evidence against a scientific theory simply by imagining some.[13] If evidence is to count, it must actually exist.

Many theists insist that we have real evidence for a good god – the evidence provided by miracles and religious experience. The problem for the symmetry thesis, the theist may insist, is that there simply isn't anything like this sort of evidence for anti-religious experiences and anti-miracles. New's attempt to mirror the arguments from miracles and religious experiences fails. However, as I now explain, there is a better way of responding to the arguments from miracles and religious experience.

A better response

Do the arguments from miracles and religious experience provide better evidence for a good god then they do an evil god?

Suppose that the evil-god hypothesis is true. This malignant being may not want us to know of his existence. In fact, it may help him maximize evil if he deceives us about his true character. An evil and omnipotent being will have no difficulty duping human beings into believing he is good. Taking on a 'good' guise, he might appear in one corner of the world, revealing himself in religious experiences and performing miracles in response to prayers, and perhaps also giving instructions regarding what his followers should believe. He might then do the same in another part of the globe, with the exception that the instructions he leaves regarding what should be believed contradict what he has said elsewhere.

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Our evil being could then stand back and watch the inevitable conflict develop between communities to whom he has now misleadingly revealed himself, each utterly convinced by their own stock of miracles and religious experiences that the one true all-good god is on their side. Here we have a recipe for ceaseless conflict, violence and suffering.

When we observe how religious experiences and miracles are actually distributed, this is more or less the pattern we find. So, even if they are genuinely supernatural, do these miraculous phenomena provide better evidence for a good god than an evil god? While a good god might create miracles and religious experiences, it is difficult to see why he would produce them in this way, given the predictably horrific consequences. Perhaps miracles and religious experiences do indicate the activity of a supernatural agency, but it is arguable that their actual arrangement fits the evil-god hypothesis rather better than it does the good-god hypothesis. We should not, at this stage, rule out the possibility that, if there is an asymmetry between the two hypotheses, it is because the evil-god hypothesis is actually rather *more* reasonable than the good-god hypothesis.[14]

In reply to the above defence of the evil-god hypothesis, it may be asked: 'But why would an evil god bother to deceive us about his true character, given that full knowledge of this merciless and all-powerful torturer would actually be far more terrible?'

The answer, of course, is that an evil god will want to allow for the performance of morally evil acts within his creation. As already noted, a world lacking moral agents able to perform actions of a profoundly wicked character is a world that is seriously deficient from his point of view. So not only does evil god create a world in which we are free moral agents, he also engineers the kind of circumstances in which we are, then, likely freely to choose to do evil. Religiously motivated conflicts clearly have been, and continue to be, a major source of moral evil in the world. By means of this deception, an evil god is able to create an environment within which moral evil is likely to flourish.

One may still raise this objection: 'But surely *nothing* could be worse than hell as traditionally conceived? Why doesn't an evil god just send us straight to hell?' However, as already noted, a mirror puzzle faces those who believe in a good god. Given that a heavenly environment would be profoundly more joyful than this, why doesn't a good god send us straight to heaven? Why are so many of us allowed to go through such appalling suffering here?

Given that both god hypotheses face this kind of objection, it constitutes, as it stands, no threat to the symmetry thesis. Moreover, we can, in both cases, attempt to deal with the objection by appealing to an afterlife. We are sent to this world first, where we have the opportunity to act in profoundly morally good and evil ways (this being important to both the good and evil gods). We then pass on to an afterlife: an eternity in heaven or (on the evil-god hypothesis) hell, where joy or (on the evil-god hypothesis) pain and suffering are

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maximized and any earlier evils or (on the evil-god hypothesis) goods in the first stage of our existence are compensated. I will look at examples of such afterlife theodicies shortly.

Historical evidence

Incidentally, the above response can be extended to deal with arguments for a good god based on historical evidence, such as the evidence provided by scripture (not all of which is rooted in religious experiences and miracles). Some will suggest there is much textual and other historical evidence that might be marshalled to support belief in a good deity, but no corresponding evidence to support belief in an evil deity – and this constitutes a significant asymmetry between our two god hypotheses.

In response, we may again ask – does this historical evidence really fit the good-god hypothesis better than the evil? Not if our evil god wishes to create the illusion that he is good, in order to foster the deception outlined above. It may well be in his interest to fabricate misleading evidence about his own character.

When we consider the spread of evidence supplied by the miracles, religious experiences, and also the historical evidence associated with the various different faiths, it is at least arguable that the pattern we find fits the evil-god hypothesis better than the good. For, to repeat, why on earth would a good god produce these phenomena in such a way as to guarantee endless religious strife? Surely their actual, disastrous arrangement is rather more likely to be the handiwork of a malignant being?

A moral argument

Another strategy the theist might adopt, in order to establish a significant asymmetry between the good- and evil-god hypotheses, would be to maintain that there are moral arguments for the existence of a good god that cannot be mirrored by parallel arguments for an evil god. For example, they may argue that our moral sense could only have a supernatural origin, and that only a *good* god would have an interest in providing it. So the fact that we have a sense of right and wrong is powerful evidence favouring the good-god hypothesis over the evil-god hypothesis.

This particular argument fails, however. While it might be true that only a supernatural being is capable of furnishing us with a moral sense, the fact is that an evil god might well also have an interest in providing such a sense. For by providing us with both free will and knowledge of good and evil, an evil god can allow for the very great evil of our freely performing evil actions in the full knowledge that they are, indeed, evil.

Why, then, is the fact that we do possess knowledge of good and evil evidence favouring the good-god hypothesis over the evil?

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A second moral argument

A different kind of moral argument for the existence of a specifically good god focuses not on knowledge of objective moral value, but on its existence. Some will insist that moral facts are both non-natural and objective, and that a good god is therefore required to underpin them (or at least provides the best explanation of them).

It is at least contentious whether a cogent argument along these lines can be constructed. Notoriously, such arguments face the Euthyphro dilemma. Suppose we say that God, as divine law-maker, decrees that certain things, such as stealing and murder, are wrong. Does God decree this because He recognizes that stealing and murder are, independently, wrong, or are they wrong only because He decrees them to be so? The first answer makes God redundant so far as setting up a standard of right and wrong is concerned – murder would have been wrong anyway, whether or not God exists, or, indeed, whether or not God Himself happens to be good or evil. But then the objective, non-natural wrongness of murder would obtain anyway, even if there were an evil god. On the first answer, there can exist *both* a non-natural, objective standard of right and wrong, *and* an evil god.

The second answer, notoriously, appears to make the moral wrongness of murder arbitrary and relative. Notice that this is a problem whichever of our two god hypotheses we favour. In short, on the first answer, there is no problem for the evil-god hypothesis; on the second, there is, prima facie, equally a problem for both hypotheses. The Euthyphro dilemma thus constitutes a major obstacle to the construction of a moral argument for the existence of a specifically good, rather than evil, god.

Of course, it remains possible that a cogent moral argument along the above lines might yet be constructed. I suspect that, for those who reject the symmetry thesis, this is the most promising line of attack. However, to date, it remains, even among theists, controversial whether any such argument exists.

More reverse theodicies

Let's now return to standard theodicies and their mirror versions. Perhaps we have underestimated the range and efficacy of the standard theodicies on offer. Are there some that are not reversible? Certainly there are many we have not yet discussed. However, in many, if not all, cases, reverse theodicies quickly suggest themselves. To illustrate, I will sketch out three more examples: (1) a reverse laws-of-nature theodicy, (2) a reverse afterlife theodicy, and (3) a reverse semantic theodicy.

Laws-of-nature theodicy Effective purposeful action requires that the world behave in a regular way (for example, I am able deliberately to light this fire by striking my match only because there are laws that determine that, under such

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circumstances, fire will result). That there are laws of nature is a prerequisite of our having the ability both to act on our natural environment and interact with each other within it. These abilities allows for great goods. They give us the opportunity to act in a morally virtuous way, for example.

However, such a law-governed world inevitably produces some evils. For instance, the kind of laws and initial conditions that produce stable land masses on which we can survive and evolve also produce tectonic shifts that result in earthquakes and tidal waves. Still, the evil of earthquakes and tidal waves is more than outweighed by the goods those laws allow. We might *think* we can envisage possible worlds that, as a result of being governed by different laws and/or initial conditions, contain a far greater ratio of good to evil (that contain stable land masses but no earthquakes, for example), but, due to consequences we have failed to foresee (perhaps the absence of earthquakes is at the cost of some even worse kind of global catastrophe), such worlds will, in reality, always be worse than the actual world.

A reverse laws-of-nature theodicy can be constructed like so.

Reverse laws-of-nature theodicy Effective and purposeful action requires that the world behave in a regular way. That there are laws of nature is a prerequisite of our having the ability both to act on our natural environment and interact with each other within it. These abilities allow for great evils. For example, they give us the opportunity to act in morally depraved ways – by killing and torturing each other. By giving us these abilities, evil god also allows us to experience certain important psychological forms of suffering such as frustration – we cannot try, and become frustrated through repeated failure, unless we are first given the opportunity to act.

True, such a law-governed world inevitably produces some goods. For example, by giving us the ability to act within a physical environment, evil god gave us the ability to avoid that which causes us pain and seek out that which gives us pleasure. Still, such goods are more than outweighed by the evils these laws allow. We might *think* we can envisage possible worlds that, as a result of being governed by different laws and/or initial conditions, contain a far greater ratio of evil to good (that contain far more physical pain and far less pleasure, for example), but, due to consequences we have failed to foresee (perhaps the greater suffering will result in us being far more charitable, sympathetic and generally good towards others), such worlds will, in reality, always be better than the actual world.

To this, some may object: 'Very well, an evil god will produce laws of nature so we can possess the power to do evil – but surely he will also sometimes suspend those laws in order to cause us confusion and frustration and to produce evils to which the laws of nature would otherwise prove an obstacle.'

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Notice, however, that both theodicies face this type of objection. A similar concern can be raised about the standard laws of nature theodicy. Yes, a good god will produce a regular universe so that we are able to do good, but surely he would be prepared to suspend those laws and intervene in order, say, to thwart some particularly morally despicable act (e.g. stop Hitler's rise to power) or to prevent some particularly terrible natural disaster, or to help us achieve some very great good (perhaps arranging for a stroke of good fortune in a science lab that then leads to a cure for cancer). A good god would not just stand back and allow thousands of children to be buried alive in an earthquake, even if the earthquake does happen to be the result of natural laws that are otherwise largely beneficial.

After-life theodicies are also popular. Take the following version presented by T. J. Mawson in his *Belief in God*.[15]

Compensatory afterlife theodicy The pain and suffering we experience in this world is more than compensated for in the afterlife – where we will experience limitless good. The explanation for why a good god would not simply send us straight to heaven is that it is only within a law-governed world within which we have free will (something which, according to some theists, such as Mawson,[16] we lack in heaven) that we can enjoy important goods, including the very great good of doing good of our volition. As a consequence of inhabiting this world for a short while, we suffer, but this suffering is more than compensated for by an eternity of communion with God in heaven.

Mawson's afterlife theodicy can also be mirrored like so.

Reverse compensatory after-life theodicy The joy and happiness we experience in this world is more than compensated for in the afterlife – where we experience limitless evil. The explanation for why an evil god would not simply send us straight to this endlessly cruel world is that it is only within a law-governed world within which we have free will that we can experience important evils, including the very great evil of doing evil of our volition. As a consequence of inhabiting this world for a short while, we experience some goods, but this is more than compensated for by what follows: an eternity of suffering in the company of a supremely malignant being.

Semantic theodicy It is also possible to reverse the standard semantic responses to the problem of evil. Consider this example. When we describe God as being 'good', the term means something different to what it means when applied to mere humans. This difference in meaning at least partly explains why a good god would do things that we would not call 'good' if done by us.

We can reverse this theodicy like so.

Reverse semantic theodicy When we describe god as being 'evil', the term means something different to what it means when applied to mere humans. This

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difference in meaning at least partly explains why an evil god would do things that we would not call 'evil' if done by us.

With a little ingenuity, reverse theodicies can be constructed for many other standard theodicies too. However, as I now explain, we should probably concede that – contrary to the claims made by Madden, Hare, Cahn, and Stein – *in some cases, no 'exactly parallel' theodicy can be constructed*.

Asymmetries

Take for example, theodicies founded in a particular Christian story about the Fall and redemption. When we examine Augustine's explanation of natural and moral evils – that both are rooted in the original sin of Adam and Eve – no parallel narrative suggests itself. An attempt to construct a reverse story about a reverse Adam and Eve, who, through disobedience to their evil creator, bring about a reverse 'Fall' runs into insuperable obstacles.

For example, while a good god might have some reason to allow the natural evils brought about by original sin to continue (for these evil consequences, being brought on ourselves, are deserved, and there remains, in addition, God's offer of redemption) why would an evil god allow the continued existence of the natural goods brought about by the disobedience of a reverse Adam and Eve? It may be that, with some ingenuity, a rather different sort of narrative involving an evil god might be constructed to account for natural goods, but it is hard to see how it could mirror the Christian story of the Fall in sufficient detail to qualify as a reverse theodicy. *Pace* Madden, Hare, Cahn, and Stein, it seems that not every theodicy even has a parallel, let alone an exact one.

Even where a parallel theodicy can be constructed, there may still be asymmetries. For example, if we suppose free will is itself an *intrinsic* good, then the reverse free-will theodicy involves an evil god imbuing us with the good of free will. While an evil god may still be able to maximize evil by giving us free will, he will nevertheless have to pay a price (introducing that intrinsic good) – a price for which there is no parallel in the standard free-will theodicy. Arguably, this makes the standard free-will theodicy much more effective than the reverse version. The theist may insist that because free will is not just an intrinsic good, but a very great good, so very great additional quantities of evil are required to outweigh it – so great, in fact, as to render the reverse free-will theodicy significantly less plausible than the standard theodicy.

So it appears that there are *some* asymmetries between the two sets of theodicies. However, the effect of these asymmetries appears to be comparatively minor, having little effect on the overall balance of reasonableness. For example, given the mythic status of Adam, Eve, and the Fall, Augustine's theodicy fails.

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But then the absence of a parallel theodicy does not affect the balance of reasonableness very much (and in any case, we might be able to construct a different sort of narrative to accompany the evil-god hypothesis that accounts for natural goods in another way).

What of the asymmetry between the free-will and reverse free-will theodicies? Stein attempts to defend the thesis that for each theodicy there is an 'exact parallel' by arguing that free will is not, in fact, an intrinsic good. However, suppose we grant, for the sake of argument, that free will is an intrinsic good. That requires we abandon the Madden-Hare-Cahn-Stein thesis that for each theodicy there is a reverse theodicy that is its 'exact parallel'. But does it require that we abandon my symmetry thesis – the thesis that when we load the good-god and evil-god scales correctly, with all the available evidence and other considerations pertinent to the reasonableness of a belief, that the two scales settle in roughly similar positions?

I don't believe so, for at least three reasons.

First, this asymmetry between the two theodicies may very well be neutralized by another. In order for us to have a full range of free choices between good and evil, God, whether good or evil, must introduce pain, suffering and death not just as possibilities but as realities. Not only must He make us vulnerable to pain, suffering and death (to give us the option of torturing or murdering others), He must actually inflict pain and death so that we have the free choice to help alleviate or prevent it. Now if it is prima facie plausible that free will is an intrinsic good, it is no less plausible that pain, suffering, and death are intrinsic evils. In which case both free-will theodicies require the introduction of intrinsic goods *and* intrinsic evils. While the intrinsic goods give the evil-god hypothesis some additional explaining to do, the intrinsic evils give the good-god hypothesis some additional explaining to do. In which case, it appears that the two asymmetries balance out.

Second, even if it were true that the free-will theodicy is *significantly* more effective then the reverse theodicy, that might not greatly affect the balance of reasonableness between the good-and evil-god hypotheses. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the standard free-will theodicy is entirely effective in accounting for moral evils, and that the reverse theodicy wholly ineffective in accounting for moral goods (this being a far more dramatic asymmetry than even the one proposed). Thus, we leave the full weight of moral good on the evil-god scale, but entirely remove the weight of moral evil from the good-god scale. Does this change in the balance of the two scales result in the two pointers indicating very different levels of reasonableness?

Arguably not. For, *ceteris paribus*, there still remains an enormous amount of evil on the good-god scale (such as the extraordinary quantities of suffering unleashed on sentient creatures over hundreds of millions of years before moral

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agents even made an appearance on Earth). It may be argued (I think with some plausibility) that when those evils explained by the free-will theodicy are removed, there remains more than enough weight of evil to keep the needle pointed firmly at 'highly unreasonable'. The needle does not now point at 'not unreasonable' or 'quite reasonable' – it remains stuck down the 'highly unreasonable' end of the scale. The scale has shifted a little, perhaps, but not by very much. *If* that is so (and I do think it at least arguable), then the symmetry thesis remains true.

Third, let's remember that even if the standard free-will theodicy is rather more effective than the reverse theodicy, this asymmetry might in any case be counterbalanced or outweighed by other asymmetries favouring the evil-god hypothesis over the good-god hypothesis. In fact, we have already discovered one example: prima facie, the evidence concerning miracles and religious experience appears to support the evil-god hypothesis rather more than it does the good-god hypothesis.

To conclude, then, it seems that – *pace* Madden, Hare, Cahn, and Stein – the two sets of theodicies do *not* precisely parallel each other. There are asymmetries. However, we have found little reason to suppose these asymmetries have much effect on the overall level of reasonableness of our respective god hypotheses. We have not yet found good reason to suppose that our two sets of scales do not, as the symmetry thesis states, settle in roughly similar positions.

Other moves

To finish, I now anticipate five responses that the evil-god challenge may provoke, and briefly sketch out some of the difficulties they face.

Significantly more good than evil We might try to meet the challenge by showing that there is significantly more good than evil in the world. This will be hard to establish, however, not least because good and evil are difficult to quantify and measure. Some theists consider it just obvious that the world contains more good than evil, but then many (including some theists) are struck by the exact opposite thought. Appeals to subjective estimations can carry little weight.

Ontological arguments Might ontological arguments provide a priori grounds for supposing that not only is there a god, but that he is good? The most obvious difficulty here is that it is debatable, to say the least, whether any cogent ontological argument can be constructed. The cogency of those arguments that have been offered remains unrecognized not just by non-theists, but also by many theists – perhaps the majority of philosopher-theists. They, certainly, will not be reaching for the ontological argument in order to demonstrate why the symmetry thesis fails.

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New notes that some ontological arguments are, in any case, reversible.[17] Take this example (my own – based on New and Anselm):

> I can conceive of an evil god – a being than whom no worse can be conceived. But it is worse for such being to exist in reality than in the imagination. Therefore, the being of which I conceive must exist in reality.

Impossibility arguments Could we meet the evil-god challenge by showing that an evil god is actually an impossibility, for the very notion of an evil god contains a contradiction? Here are two examples of such an argument.

In 'God, demon, good, evil',[18] Daniels suggests the resources to deal with the evil-god challenge can be found in Plato's *Gorgias*. Daniels believes that Plato has shown that an evil god is an impossibility. His 'platonic refutation' of the evil-god hypothesis is as follows. First, Daniels claims that we always do what we judge to be good. Even when I smoke, despite judging smoking to be bad, I do it because I judge that it would be good to smoke this cigarette here and now. It follows, says Daniels, that no-one does bad knowingly. But then it follows that if a being is omniscient, he will not do bad. There cannot exist an omniscient yet evil being. The notion of an omniscient yet evil being involves a contradiction.

I believe Daniels's argument trades on an ambiguity in his use of the word 'good'. True, whenever I do something deliberately, I judge, in a sense, that what I do is 'good'. But 'good' here need mean no more than, 'that which I aim to achieve'. We have not yet been given any reason to suppose I cannot judge to be 'good', in *this* sense, what I also deem to be evil, because I desire evil. Yes, an evil god will judge doing evil to be 'good', but only in the trivial sense that evil is what he desires. *Pace* Daniels, there is no contradiction involved in an omniscient being judging evil to be, in this sense, 'good'.

A rather different argument would be: 'But by bringing about evil, your evil god thereby aims to satisfy his own desire for evil; and the satisfaction of a desire is an intrinsic good. Thus the idea of a maximally evil god aiming to produce an intrinsic good involves a contradiction.'

This argument also fails. Even if we grant the dubious assumption that the satisfying of any desire – even an evil one – is an intrinsic good, the most we have revealed, here, is another local asymmetry – that, in aiming to maximize evil, evil god would have also to aim to achieve at least one intrinsic good (namely, the satisfaction of his desire to maximize evil). What we have established, perhaps, is that there are certain logical limits on God's evilness (just as there are also logical limits on His power: He can't make a stone so heavy that it cannot be lifted). Evil god can still be maximally evil – as evil as it is logically possible to be. We have not yet established a contradiction in the notion of a maximally evil being.

There is, in any case, a more general point to be made about arguments attempting to show that an evil god is an impossibility and that the evil-god

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challenge is thus met. The point is this: even supposing an evil god is, for some reason X, an impossibility, we can still ask the hypothetical question: setting aside the fact that so-and-so establishes that an evil god is an impossibility, how reasonable would it otherwise be to suppose that such an evil being exists? If the answer is 'highly unreasonable', i.e. because of the problem of good, then the evil-god challenge can still be run. We can still ask theists to explain why, if they would otherwise reject the evil-god hypothesis as highly unreasonable, do they not take the same view regarding the good-god hypothesis?

Arguments from simplicity What if the good-god hypothesis is significantly *simpler* than the evil-god hypothesis?

For example, we might suggest that a good god can be defined in a simple way, e.g. as possessing every positive attribute. As goodness is a positive attribute, it follows that this god is good. The concept of an evil god, by contrast, is more complex, for he possesses both positive attributes (omniscience and omnipotence) and negative attributes (evil). Principles of parsimony require, then, that we favour the good-god over the evil-god hypothesis.

I acknowledge that there may indeed be asymmetries between the good- and evil-god hypotheses in terms of simplicity and economy. However, note that the fact that one theory is much more economical than another lends it little additional credibility if what evidence (and other considerations pertaining to reasonableness) there is overwhelmingly favours the view that both theories are false.

Take, for example, these two hypotheses: (i) Swindon is populated with 1,000 elves, and (ii) Swindon is populated with 1,000 elves, each of which has a fairy sitting on its head. The first hypothesis is more economical, as it posits half as many entities as the first. But is the first hypothesis significantly more reasonable than the second? No. For not only is there little reason to suppose that either hypothesis is true, there is overwhelming evidence that both are false.

Similarly, if the reasonableness of both the good and the evil-god hypotheses is very low, pointing out that one hypothesis is rather more economical than the other does little to raise the probability of one hypothesis with respect to the other. The suggestion that the two hypotheses are more or less equally unreasonable remains unthreatened.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on the evil-god challenge: the challenge of explaining why the good-god hypothesis should be considered significantly more reasonable than the evil-god hypothesis. We have examined several of the most popular arguments for the existence of a good god and found that they appear to provide little if any more support for the good-god hypothesis than they do for the evil-god hypothesis. We have also seen that many of the theodicies

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offered by theists to deal with the problem of evil are mirrored by reverse theodicies that can then be applied to the problem of good. Prima facie, our two sets of scales seem to balance out in much the same way.

Now I do not claim that the symmetry thesis is true, and that the evil-god challenge cannot be met. But it seems to me that it is a challenge that deserves to be taken seriously. The problem facing defenders of classical monotheism is this: until they can provide good grounds for supposing the symmetry thesis is false, they lack good grounds for supposing that the good-god hypothesis is any more reasonable than the evil-god hypothesis – the latter hypothesis being something that surely even they will admit is very unreasonable indeed.

While I acknowledge the possibility that the evil-god challenge might yet be met, I cannot myself see how. Perhaps there are grounds for supposing that the universe was created by an intelligent being. But, at this point in time, the suggestion that this being is omnipotent, omniscient, and maximally good seems to me hardly more reasonable than the suggestion that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and maximally evil.

Notes

1. See John Hick (ed.) *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 515.
2. See e.g. Stephen Wykstra 'The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of ''appearance''', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **16** (1984), 73–93, in which Wykstra writes '[I]f we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable – given what we know of our cognitive limits – that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken.'
3. I allow that considerations pertinent to reasonableness may include the fact that a belief is, in the terminology of reformed epistemology, 'properly basic'.
4. Edward Madden and Peter Hare *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield IL: C. Thomas, 1968).
5. *Ibid*., 34.
6. Stephen Cahn 'Cacodaemony', *Analysis*, **37** (1976), 69–73.
7. *Ibid*., 72.
8. Edward Stein 'God, the demon, and the status of theodicies', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **27** (1990), 163–167.
9. *Ibid*., 163.
10. Christopher New 'Antitheism', *Ratio*, **6** (1993), 36–43.
11. Charles Daniels 'God, demon, good, evil', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, **31** (1997), 177–181.
12. *Ibid*.
13. With the exception, of course, of a few scientific thought-experiments – such as Galileo's experiment involving chained falling balls, designed to show that two balls of different weights must fall at the same speed.
14. Between acceptance and publication of this paper I discovered an excellent early discussion of the evil-god hypothesis: Peter Millican 'The devil's advocate', *Cogito*, **3** (1989), 193–207. Millican makes much the same move as I make here, and also offers a similar treatment of the first moral argument below.
15. T. J. Mawson *Belief in God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 12.
16. *Ibid*., ch. 12.
17. See New 'Antitheism', 37.
18. Daniels 'God, demon, good, evil'.

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