

Theme 2 Challenges to religious belief

2A The problem of evil and suffering

- **The problem of evil is offered as a challenge to religious belief because it appears to contradict the character of God (according to monotheism).**
- It is usually considered a problem only for Christians, Muslims and Jews because of their claims for God's nature.

The types of evil

Any examples of evil that we find in the world can be divided into two general types:

Natural evil	Moral evil
Events resulting from the natural functioning of the world.	Events occurring due to human activity that cause suffering.
Involve no help or influence from humanity.	Deliberate or neglectful actions by humans.
Events that affect humanity or other living beings adversely, for example earthquakes, hurricanes, cancer, death.	Events that affect the humanity or other living beings adversely, for example war, murder, rape, child abuse, environmental destruction.
Events that appear to contain no intent behind them.	Deliberate destruction of habitat that affects humanity or other sentient beings.

- Primarily, evil causes suffering in ourselves or others.
- We call it evil due to its impact upon us, but while we have the potential to control moral evil, we do not have the ability to control natural evil.

The nature of God

The qualities that the God of classical theism is said to possess give rise to the problem of evil. There are many qualities listed by the three major theistic traditions, but the most important for our purposes are:

Quality	Description of quality
One	There is no other being equal to God in any way (even the devil). God is indivisible
Creator ex nihilo	There is nothing in existence that God has not created.
Omnipotent	All- powerful; He can do anything.
Omniscient	All-knowing; He knows everything, past, present, and future.
Omnibenevolent	All- loving; He loves all His creation without discrimination or condition.
Personal	God is not an indifferent, impersonal force, but a being with a personality.
Morally perfect	God only performs good acts. It is not in His nature to do anything evil.
Omnipresent	All- present; not distant or removed from us, He is everywhere at all times.

- **The problem of evil state that these divine characteristics** are incompatible with a word containing evil and suffering, since such a God could and would act to prevent it.
- Religious outlooks that accept the presence of many gods, of assorted character and authority, do not have this problem.
- For them, evil can be attributed to the tension between different gods or to the lack of power or compassion in a divine character.

The logical problem of evil

Classical (Epicurus): The problem of suffering

Who was Epicurus?

- Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was an ancient Greek philosopher and prolific writer who commented on a wide range of philosophical ideas.
- **He taught that death is the end of life and that the gods do not punish or reward us in any after life.**
- The logical problem of evil demonstrates that there is a logical impossibility of the co-existence of evil and the God of classical theism.
- Epicurus is perhaps one of the most ancient people to formally state the problem of evil and suffering.
- **His statement of it is often called the Epicurean Paradox or the Rille of Epicurus.**
- There is no surviving primary source containing the riddle, but scholars such as Lactantius and early Christian author, refers to it.
- Epicurus pointed out the paradox that we are presented with if God is both loving and powerful and yet evil remains.

“Either God wants to abolish evil and cannot; or He can but does not want to. If He wants to, but cannot, He is impotent. If He can, but does not want to, He is malevolent. If God can abolish evil, and really wants to abolish evil, why is there evil in the world today?”

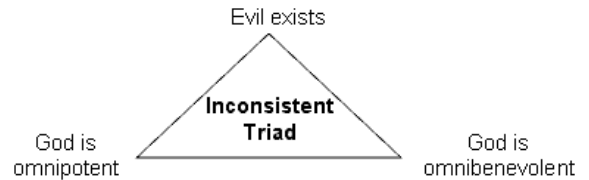
Notes

J.L. Mackie's modern development

The nature of the problem of evil (inconsistent triad)

Who was J.L. Mackie?

- John Leslie Mackie (1917-1981) was an Australian philosopher, known for his work on meta-ethics and the philosophy of religion.
- In 1955 J.L. Mackie published his 'Evil and omnipotence' essay, in which he **stated his re-working of the logical problem of evil**: the inconsistent triad. There are three things that the theist tries to hold in balance when they make the theistic claim to God's existence, and logically they cannot all be true.



At any time only two of these propositions can be held to be true.

1. God can be both loving and powerful if there is no evil, but this would be against all physical evidence to the contrary.
2. God can be loving and there is evil, meaning He is important and can do nothing for us.
3. God can be powerful and there is evil, meaning He is malevolent and enjoys our suffering.

The three propositions cannot all be true at once.

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Process theology:

The omnipotence paradox:

William Row- Evidential problem of evil and suffering

Note: The **logical problem of evil and suffering** NOT the same as the **evidential problem of evil and suffering**.

- To answer the logical problem of evil and suffering philosophers only need to give a logically coherent response.
- Many philosophers believe theodicies do succeed in showing how it is not logically incoherent to believe in an all-loving and all-powerful God and Evil and suffering exist (You will study some theodicies in 2B and 2C).
- Please note, being logically coherent does not mean something is true in reality/convincing.
- It is for this reason many modern atheist/agnostic philosophers highlight the evidential problem of evil and suffering.

Who was William Rowe?

William Rowe (1931-2015) was an American philosopher who characterised himself as a 'friendly atheist', accepting that theism could be justified even if God doesn't exist.

Intense human and animal suffering

- Rowe presents an evidential problem of evil which states that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God would want to and be able to **remove intense suffering where he could do so without causing greater harm or preventing greater good in the process**.
- Since God does not do anything to prevent this intense suffering, He cannot exist.

Essentially, there seems to be pointless suffering.

- **Suffering which is not testing people.**
- **Suffering that is prolonged for no apparent reason.**
- **Rowe is responding to how some philosophers justify why God allowed evil and suffering (2B and 2C).**

Rowe gives an example to support his argument. (See box)

In a distant forest, lightning strikes a dead tree, causing a forest fire. A fawn becomes trapped in the fire and is horribly burned. It lies suffering with its injuries for days before it dies with no one aware or able to do anything to help it.

- Rowe claimed that in this tragedy, the fawn's suffering does not benefit any being.
- No one freely caused this evil.
- No one could have performed a good act to help, and no one has learned anything from it as there were no witnesses.
- This unnecessary, avoidable event should have been prevented if God was both good and powerful.

Notes

Gregory S. Paul

Who is Gregory S. Paul

Gregory Scott Paul (1954- present) is an American author, illustrator and researcher who works in the fields of palaeontology, religion and society.

Premature deaths

Pauls evidential problem of evil estimates that:

- At least 100 billion humans have been born throughout history (starting roughly 50,000 years ago, when Homo sapiens first appeared).
- The historical death rate of children was over 50 percent.
- The deaths of these 50 billion children were mostly due to diseases.
- Additionally, 300 billion humans have never reached birth, dying prenatally- the prenatal death rate being about three quarters historically.
- Paul calls this horrifying number of child deaths the 'Holocaust of Children'. He considers it impossible for a theist to construct a rational account of God's nature when there is this magnitude of death of innocent, helpless beings. It is not credible for a God who is both loving and morally perfect to fail to prevent such horror.

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