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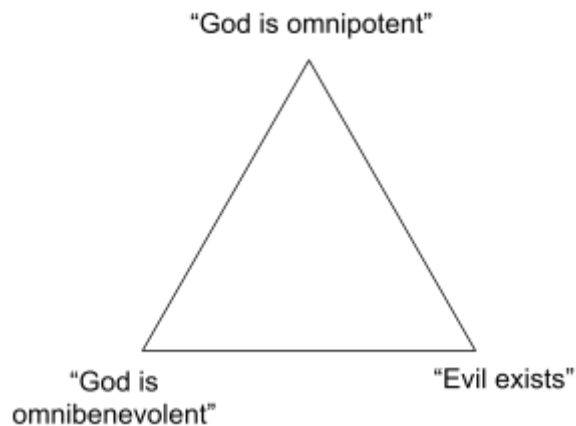
Seminar 188

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Good God: Could Evil and God Coexist?

“Is it possible for God to coexist with evil?” Answering this question requires a discussion of two different cases: case 1, in which God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, and case 2, in which God lacks either omnipotence, omnibenevolence, or both. It is not possible for an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to coexist with evil, but it is possible for evil to coexist with a God that lacks either omnipotence, omnibenevolence, or both. This is due to the inconsistent triad proposed by J. L. Mackie and the modal theory of combinatorialism.

J. L. Mackie popularized the ‘problem of evil’ in his essay “Evil and Omnipotence.” One can visualize this problem as being an inconsistent triad which has three statements at each corner:



Mackie argues that the three statements cannot be true at the same time — he calls this contradiction the problem of evil. Therefore, according to Mackie, it is not possible for an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to coexist with evil. In terms of the two cases, Mackie believes

that it is not possible for God to coexist with evil in case 1 (in which God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent). Mackie then says that the question is not answered in case 2 (in which God lacks either omnipotence or omnibenevolence) by pointing out that if you say that God lacks omnibenevolence, God lacks omnipotence, or that good is not defined as being opposed to evil, then “the problem of evil will not arise for you” (201). Saying that God lacks either omnipotence or omnibenevolence, then, does not change the problem in case 1 but rather changes the discussion to one of case 2.

Now that we have established the problem we can discuss its importance. Most obviously, it forces those who define good and God as the triad does to question their religious beliefs. More generally, it forces people to analyze their moral beliefs; how a person defines good and evil determines their actions in many ways and can lead to self-improvement. This question can thus cause someone to analyze what they have perhaps only subconsciously considered before.

Since one corner of the triad must be false, according to Mackie, there are implied ‘adequate solutions’ that argue which corner is false in the actual world (Mackie 201). These solutions are simply scenarios such as those aforementioned scenarios described by Mackie on page 201 (e.g. God lacking omnibenevolence, God lacking omnipotence, or good not opposing evil). It may be helpful to look at examples in popular media to clarify what such scenarios look like. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, for example, God is depicted as being somewhat malevolent. In the movie, God instructs King Arthur and his knights of the round table to find the Holy Grail, which results in the knights eating minstrels, harassing old ladies, and killing several people. God’s power is unquestionably great, but his actions do not eliminate more evil than they create; in fact, the knights never succeed in their quest (Gilliam). Such a scenario is an

adequate solution to the triad as described by Mackie due to God's lack of omnibenevolence (201). Another example of an adequate solution can be found in *Bruce Almighty*, in which God is depicted as being restricted. In the movie, God tells Bruce that he has all of God's powers, but Bruce is unable to alter anyone's free will with his powers. This restriction implies that, in the *Bruce Almighty* universe, God does not have the power to influence free will himself; this scenario is a solution in which God is not omnipotent (Shadyac).

Because these solutions do not affect the logic of case 1, it remains impossible for an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to coexist with evil. Mackie asserts that the following is logically consistent:

1. God is all-powerful without limitation.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Being good implies choosing to eliminate evil when the possibility arises.
4. If God were both omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then he would necessarily destroy evil.

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5. It is therefore not possible that God and evil coexist.
 6. If evil exists, then it is not possible that God exists.
 7. If God exists, then it is not possible that evil exists.

So, saying that God lacks omnipotence or omnibenevolence does not change the fact that if God were omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then he could not coexist with evil (Mackie 202). The same logic applies to saying whether or not evil exists, and Mackie calls such an assertion a 'fallacious solution.' If God had the desire to do something that he would consider morally good and if he had the ability to do so (i.e. if he were all-powerful without limitation), it is clear that he would do so since there would be nothing restricting him from acting on his desire. So, if such an omnipotent God wanted to eliminate evil (i.e. if he were wholly good where good seeks to eliminate evil whenever possible), God would do so and so evil would not exist. This reasoning

is the same as the logically consistent argument proposed by Mackie, thus showing that it is not possible for an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to coexist with evil; in case 1, then, the answer to the question, “is it possible for God to coexist with evil?” is “no.”

In contrast, it is possible for a non-omnipotent and/or non-omnibenevolent God to coexist with evil due to the modal theory of combinatorialism. We cannot use the triad to rule out the possibility of God’s coexistence with evil in case 2 because Mackie’s logically consistent assertion defines God as being omnipotent and omnibenevolent; case 2, however, defines God as lacking either omnipotence, omnibenevolence, or both. The fact that the logic describes a scenario in case 1 does not mean we cannot use it to help prove case 2, though. The modal theory of combinatorialism says that nothing logically impossible could exist as a state of affairs because consistency must be maintained within possible worlds (Borghini). Combinatorialism would consequently say that a scenario in case 1 does not exist because it is logically impossible. Contrastingly, a scenario in case 2 is not explicitly ruled out by the consistency of combinatorialism. Combinatorialism further supports the possibility of case 2 through its properties of ‘individuals’ and ‘universals.’ In combinatorialism, a universal is a trait or property (e.g. redness or omnipotence); an individual is an entity (e.g. Angela Merkel or Sherlock Gnomes from *Gnomeo and Juliet 2: Sherlock Gnomes* (Stevenson)) defined by all of the universals they exhibit (Borghini 123). Combinatorialism is the theory that all possible worlds are simply hypothetical worlds made up of the same universals and individuals as the actual world; the universals and individuals of the actual world are simply recombined (i.e. rearranged) in a possible world (Borghini 124). So, if combinatorialism assessed the world portrayed in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, then it would say that God is an individual that does not exhibit omnibenevolence but does exhibit omnipotence since omnipotence and omnibenevolence

are universals. In the same world, the universal of malevolence and any individual from the actual world could be recombined into a malevolent being. It is therefore possible for a God who lacks omnipotence or omnibenevolence to coexist with evil.

One popular objection to the problem of evil is the soul-making theodicy which was popularized by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*. A theodicy is a proposed scenario that supposedly provides a plausible solution to the problem of evil. Hick proposes a scenario in which God and humanity are analogous to a father and his child; God does not wish to simply eliminate all evil. Instead, he wishes that humanity overcomes all obstacles to eliminate evil. In such a scenario, as Hick describes, God has to be almost entirely hidden; he must be knowable but “only by a mode of knowledge that involves a free personal response on man's part” (281). This ‘epistemic distance’ is necessary because God must not intervene in order to give humanity the freedom to improve on their own (Hick 281). Hick’s example of a world with an epistemic distance is the actual world under the Christian belief: I, as a hypothetical Christian, may not actively experience God with my senses, but I would know his existence through the Bible, so there would be an epistemic distance between God and humanity. Thus, according to Hick, evil in the world is plausibly an obstacle that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God does not eliminate because he wants humanity to improve on its own (282).

The main problem with the soul-making theodicy is that God must lack either omnipotence or omnibenevolence in order for soul-making to occur. If God is omnipotent and evil exists, then it is God’s choice that leaves an epistemic distance between him and humanity, so he is not wholly good. If God is omnibenevolent and evil exists, then it is God’s inability that leaves an epistemic distance between him and humanity, and God is not omnipotent. In both

scenarios, one side of the triad must be false in order for soul-making to occur, so the theodicy is not a solution.

Is it possible, then, for God to coexist with evil? In case 1, in which God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, it is not possible for God to coexist with evil because of the logic proposed by Mackie and the support from combinatorialism. In case 2, in which God is either non-omnipotent, non-omnibenevolent, or both, it is possible for God to coexist with evil because the modal theory of combinatorialism allows for a recombination of individuals and universals in which such a state of affairs exists.

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