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A New Response to the Evil-God Challenge

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Abstract

The evil-god challenge brings to scrutiny a belief taken for granted by many traditional theists: God's goodness. Evil-god challengers claim that evil-god parodies of theistic arguments are as reasonable as the originals, calling into question the assumption of God's goodness. I take a new approach to this challenge by considering how great good and great evil are best promoted in conjunction with evil-god's character and evidential arguments regarding lost or absent goods and evils. I conclude that the world has lost far too many great evils for the evil-god hypothesis to be a serious challenge to traditional theistic belief in God's perfect goodness.

Introduction

Is God unsurpassably good or a wholly evil tyrant? Ever since Madden and Hare's book *Evil and the Concept of God*, the concept of a wholly evil God has been a recurring theme intended to challenge traditional theism and its belief in God's goodness. Broadly speaking, the evil-god challenger's approach is to take theistic arguments and craft parodies based on the assumption that God is evil. Thus, the *evil–god hypothesis* (EGH) posits an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely evil creator, and the *good-god hypothesis* (GGH) posits an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good creator. Evil-god challengers claim that in terms of reasonableness, there is a *broad symmetry* between theodic arguments and their EGH parodies. In other words, for every theodic solution to the problem of evil, there is a parallel and equally reasonable parody to the problem of good. As stated by Stephen Law, the challenge is to 'explain why, if belief in an evil god is highly unreasonable, should we consider belief in a good God significantly more reasonable' ('The Evil-God Challenge', *Religious Studies*, 2010).

A New Approach

Here, I take a new approach to this challenge by considering divine activity as it applies to promoting great good and great evil. I start with a simple characterization of God's activity, which I label 'puristic'. This characterization captures many features common to traditional theistic belief regarding how God acts in the world. I then argue that an EGH parody of that characterization does not seem to describe the activity of a wholly evil being. The more believable alternative to evil puristic activity is labelled 'diabolical'. I next consider the reasonableness of diabolical activity in light of historical progress. Given the ease with which a diabolically acting evil-god should be able to promote and preserve great evil, the world has lost far too many immense evils to take EGH seriously. And, on balance, GGH lacks

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comparable failings. I also argue there is a paradox inherent in justifying evil-god against the loss of so many evils and consider a simple counterargument to address compensatory afterlife parodies.

Argument Details

Here, I appeal to ordinary notions of good and evil. Pain, cruelty, betrayal and suffering are examples of evil. Conversely, kindness, charity, forgiveness, love and generosity are examples of good. I assume not all evils are equally evil, nor are all goods equally good. I also require that people have enough freedom to make morally significant choices while at the same time recognizing the importance of social conditioning and pressures in shaping our choices.

As far as divine attributes are concerned, God and evil-god are omnipotent and omniscient. The relevant difference here is their activity type. I use the term 'activity' to refer to any divine act, action or undertaking, such as creating the universe, causing or curing cancer, or blessing or cursing individuals. If divine activity is not puristic, it is diabolical.

My characterization of puristic activity is based on a simple description of how God acts in the world: God wants us to love and do good but permits us to act freely. This freedom entails that when confronted with morally significant choices, God permits us to choose between good or evil and that our choices can affect not only the doer but others as well. God might occasionally intervene, but he does not coerce or compel us into being charitable, patient and forgiving. God will hold us accountable for our choices, but if we repent of our sinful deeds, God forgives us, and in the end, the righteous are saved.

The question we must answer is this. Does an EGH parody of the above characterization make sense? Evil-god wants us to love and do evil but permits us to act freely. This freedom entails that when confronted with morally significant choices, evil-god permits us to choose between evil or good and that our choices can affect not only the doer but others as well. Evil-god might occasionally intervene, but he does not coerce or compel us into being cruel, impatient and unforgiving. Evil-god will hold us accountable for our choices, but if we repent of our good deeds, evil-god forgives us, and in the end, the wicked are saved.

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The difficulty with the EGH version is that it does not seem to describe the activity of a wholly malevolent being – more like an evil Puritan. But more importantly, does the above characterization of evil puritanism describe the best way to promote great evil?

Puristic versus Diabolical Activity

Consider the following examples of puristic activity drawn from concepts familiar to many traditional theists, adapted appropriately for EGH.

> (P1) Evil-god saves the wicked.

This activity points to the ultimate reward for faithful evil-doers: salvation. Evil-god’s activity includes P1 just in case no other evil-promoting activities preclude P1 and are eviler. However, it seems that many do. Evil-god could damn everyone while causing each person to believe the others were saved. Or he could randomly select some good and some evil-doers for a pleasant afterlife, without consideration for their accountability, while sending all others to eternal torment, then enjoy the anger and confusion that follow.

Consider yet another puristically evil activity.

> (P2) Evil-god repays each according to their deeds.

Eventually, evil-god blesses and punishes every person according to how righteous or wicked they are. This will, quite possibly, encourage some evil and discourage some good. But again, it seems difficult to believe P2 cannot be surpassed. Good-doers and evil-doers could be blessed or cursed in ways that promote hate, despair, envy or cruelty.

And finally,

> (P3) Evil-god does not forgive those who forgive others.

Since under EGH, forgiving is a sin, P3 seems consistent with evil Puritanism. But how does evil-god handle those who do not forgive others? If he forgives them, he is doing something morally reprehensible. If he does not bother with forgiveness, his activity is consistent but not puristic.

In contrast, consider this characterization of diabolical activity. A diabolically acting evil-god might or might not respect our free choices or tolerate belief or disbelief. Evil-god might intervene in the world, but as a general rule, he is not concerned with avoiding coercion to achieve great evil. A minor act of goodness might be greatly punished or perhaps rewarded. An

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immense act of evil might be rewarded with a pittance or ignored. And, in the end, our ultimate reward or punishment does not reflect his judgement of our choices.

Evidential Argument against Evil-God

How, then, does the evidence stack against evil diabolism? Evil-god could have prevented the polio vaccine from being discovered by causing the medical trials to fail. He could have caused the Allies to lose the Second World War by arranging for the Nazis to learn the date and location of the D-Day invasion or by inspiring Nazi scientists to create a nuclear bomb. He could have preserved slavery in the United States by killing the Union's best generals. Likewise, he could have easily kept illiteracy rates high, prevented women's suffrage, and so on. Five hundred years ago, one thousand years ago, two thousand years ago, it was easily within a diabolically acting evil-god's power to promote and preserve the world's greatest evils.

One way evil-god challengers might grapple with the loss of so many great evils is to claim that some goods are needed to bring about future, greater evils – comparable to how some theists argue that evil is permitted to achieve greater good. This line of reasoning leaves far too many unanswered questions. How did polio, the male-only vote or industrialized slavery prevent greater evil or promote greater good?

But here is the rub. By providing believable answers to the above questions, evil-god challengers end up in what could be called a theodicy paradox. If evil-god challengers provide convincing arguments that polio, illiteracy, the triumph of Nazism, and so on prevented greater evil or promoted greater good, they have provided traditional theists with reasons why God would allow those things – to prevent greater evil or to promote greater good. All a traditional theist would have to add is that, eventually, those things outlived their usefulness and had to go. But, if there is no convincing argument that the loss of so many great evils prevented greater evil or promoted greater good, why would evil-god let them go? Given the immensity of those lost evils, I suspect traditional theists will have difficulty believing that something eviler exists.

Perhaps some of the above issues could be approached by appealing to free will. Suppose our good-appearing and evil-appearing acts are not free-will illusions or mere puppetry. In that case, they count as genuinely morally evil or morally good acts – instead of natural evil and good – and evil-god can hold us morally accountable for them.

As I argued earlier, holding individuals morally accountable is a puristic activity. Though free will is necessary for holding individuals morally responsible for their actions, a diabolically acting evil-god isn't particularly interested in judging our blameworthiness if it is not necessary for promoting great evil. As far as free will being necessary for evil-appearing acts to count as moral evil, history has repeatedly demonstrated that activities such as intimidation, propaganda, racial animus, controlling speech and suppressing dissent promote immense evil – some of the greatest evils the world has ever known. But more importantly, evil always has a victim.

Consider the tragic case of child soldiers. Abducted at a young age, given drugs, denied familial affection and exposed to cruelty and extreme violence, they eventually become remorseless killers. One can debate if they ever come to *freely* commit acts of violence. But no one could reasonably argue that what was done to them and the sufferings they inflict upon others don't qualify as moral evil.

Another argument available to the evil-god challengers is the character-destroying argument: the success and health of some make the unsuccessful and unhealthy suffer even more acutely (Law 2010). As a counterexample, consider global birth defects. About 6% of births worldwide are affected by serious defects (*March of Dimes Global Report on Birth Defects*, 2006). One could argue that the 94% who lack deformities make the 6% suffer more when they see the happiness and health they were denied. But given ordinary notions of good and evil, which is eviler? The 6% who suffer because 94% lack deformities, or, for example, the 40% who suffer because 60% lack deformities, or the

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60% who suffer because 40% lack deformities? It seems 6% is not the evilest possibility. Moreover, if we 'weigh' the percentages of those with and without serious birth defects, we get 15.6 against EGH.

'If evil-god challengers provide convincing arguments that polio, illiteracy, the triumph of Nazism, and so on prevented greater evil or promoted greater good, they have provided traditional theists with reasons why God would allow those things – to prevent greater evil or to promote greater good.'

Let us also consider infant mortality. Global childhood mortality dropped from around 40–50% prior to the eighteenth century to around 4% today ('Mortality in the Past', *OurWorldInData.org*, 2023). And even more recently, the under-5 mortality rate has declined by 62% from 1990 to 2022 (*UN IGME Report*, 2023). Again, if we weigh the percentages, the scales tip more than ten to one against EGH.

But the evil-god challengers also have the compensatory afterlife argument that the good we experience in this life is permitted because in the next life, evil-god will punish all, and this loss attenuates our disappointment and suffering in the next.

But consider this defeater. Surely, the joys of heaven eclipse any joys we experience in this life. So much so that earthly goods have little comparative value, therefore, to maximize evil, evil-god could send us all to a heavenly afterlife to enjoy ineffable bliss for several thousand millennia, then send everyone to hell, achieving the greatest possible attenuation to suffering. Alternatively, evil-god could put us in a recurring good-life/evil-life cycle tailored to transform us into evil-loving beings.

The difficulty is this. Arguments involving the afterlife cannot be weighed evidentially and only work if they are parodies of a traditional counterpart. Even though the heaven-to-hell theology seems eviler than mortality-to-hell, such a scenario does not parody a traditional theistic belief. Evil-god would not do mortality-to-hell if there is an eviler alternative. However, the alternative does not parody a traditional belief.

Evil-god challengers must develop their hypothesis to a level that provides believable responses to the following questions. In what ways did many of humanity's greatest evils impede greater evil or promote greater good and, therefore, had to go? How does human freedom prevent an omnipotent, wholly evil, unscrupulous being from promoting great evil? If evil-god is the omnipotent bastard, why would he procrastinate in making the world horrifically bad? Finally, they must resolve the theodicy paradox and demonstrate how compensatory afterlife parodies are immune to eviler-theology defeaters.

God's Activity

Does GGH possess similar failings? An evil-god challenger might well argue it was within God's knowledge, power and resources one hundred years ago to promote, impede or inspire key historical actors in ways that would make life much better than it is today. Two hundred years ago, it was easily within God's power to make life much better than it was one hundred years ago, and so on. Justifying current good deficiencies as necessary for greater future goods doesn't square with opportunities God had in the distant past

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to make the recent past significantly better than it was.

The difficulty with this parody is that it's difficult to believe the distant past was better, and from the Stone Age to the present age, human progress has been significant. The difference between GGH and EGH, as it applies to human progress, is that EGH challengers could claim that God didn't promote enough good. In contrast, evil-god would have easily torn the whole thing down. Again, if we weigh the relative differences, it seems the scales tip strongly against EGH as a viable hypothesis.

While it seems reasonable to believe that a diabolically acting evil-god could easily promote misery and hate, does it seem equally reasonable to believe that a puristically acting God could as easily promote love and happiness?

Take happy relationships, for example. A healthy, loving relationship requires both partners to foster such a relationship. Unfortunately, some couples are incompatible, and given human freedom, people sometimes make choices that harm their relationships. What about higher income? Promotions depend heavily on the hiring official's opinions, one's effort to find a better job or get promoted, individual abilities and work ethic, and prevailing economic conditions. What about having better-behaved children? Kids act their age and make choices based on limited experience and maturity.

While many people can easily imagine a better life, few expect a perfect relationship, job or family. Given the assumption of human freedom and considering that much of our happiness depends on the choices of others, it seems harder for a puristically acting God to promote a happier, uplifting life than it is for a diabolically acting evil-god to promote a miserable, degrading one.

Conclusions

If there is no way to eliminate EGH as a viable hypothesis, theodic arguments seem no better than the parodies which challenge them. I have shown asymmetry between EGH and GGH by appealing to divine activity and how promoting great good differs from promoting great evil. In light of historical progress, EGH seems unreasonable and GGH more plausible. I have demonstrated a theology paradox that arises from defending evil-god against the loss of so many great evils and provided a defeater for compensatory afterlife parodies.

For theists who accept that God acts puristically and that great evil is best promoted diabolically, the evidential divide between the two hypotheses seems too great to take EGH seriously as a challenge to asserting God's perfect goodness.

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Troy Alden Wynn holds a PhD in Physics from Utah State University. For the past fifteen years he has worked in the US defence industry. His personal research interests include the importance of opposition in obtaining joy and how God's justice and mercy are necessary opposites.

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