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Evilism and the a priori

JOE MILBURN

Department of Philosophy, University of Navarra, Campus Universitario, 31009 Pamplona, Spain
e-mail: jmilburn@unav.es

Abstract: **In this article, I respond to Stephen Law's *evil god challenge (EGC)* to traditional theism. I argue that while there are credible a priori grounds for believing that the first cause is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, there are no credible a priori grounds for believing that the first cause is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil. Because of this, theists have a reason for explaining away the a posteriori evidence against theism. The hypothetical evilist, on the other hand, does not. Thus, while the problem of the good makes it absurd to believe in evilism, the problem of evil does not make it absurd to believe in theism.**

In this article I respond, to Stephen Law's *evil god challenge (EGC)* to traditional theism. We can understand the EGC as follows. Call the hypothesis that there is an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil creator of the universe *evilism*. If evilism were true, the universe would be created by a maximally powerful, maximally knowledgeable, and maximally evil being. We can contrast evilism with *traditional theism*. According to traditional theism there is an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good creator of the universe. If traditional theism is true, the universe is created by a maximally powerful, maximally knowledgeable, and maximally good being.

The EGC capitalizes on the absurdity of evilism. Every one, it seems, takes evilism to be an absurd doctrine. Why? Law argues that the reason evilism is absurd is because it faces the problem of the good. If the creator of the universe were all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil, why is there so much good in the world? All the goodness of the created world speaks against its being created by a being that is maximally powerful, maximally knowledgeable, and maximally evil. To believe in evilism in the face of so much counter-evidence would be absurd. Law argues, however, that if the problem of the good makes evilism an absurd doctrine, *mutatis mutandis*, the problem of evil should make it absurd to believe in traditional theism. If the creator of the universe were all-knowing,

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all-powerful, and all-good, why is there so much evil in the world? All the evil in the created world speaks against traditional theism. The challenge for the traditional theist is to explain why evilism is absurd but traditional theism isn't. What makes this challenge particularly difficult is that the theist's standard ways of dealing with the problem of evil have a parallel that can be used by the evilist to deal with the problem of the good (see Collins (2018)).

Responses to the EGC have varied. Some, like Law, take the EGC to give us reason to reject traditional theism. The most common response in print, however, is to deny that it is the problem of the good that makes evilism absurd. Hendricks (2018), for instance, argues that evilism can withstand the problem of the good, and likewise, the problem of evil can be met by traditional theism. (Hendricks does not take a stand on whether it is absurd to believe in evilism.) Scrutton (2016), on the other hand, argues that what makes it unreasonable to believe evilism is not the problem of the good, but the fact that it would be unreasonable to live as though evilism is true. Finally, Weaver (2015) and Ward (2015) argue that what makes evilism absurd is that it is an incoherent position (at least on modest assumptions about goodness or moral reasons).

While I am sympathetic to the view that evilism is ultimately incoherent, in this article, I consider a different response to the EGC. Unlike most of Law's critics, I think Law is correct in thinking that the problem of the good makes *evilism* an absurd doctrine. However, unlike Law, I think that traditional theists are correct in thinking that the problem of evil does not make traditional theism absurd. This is because the traditional theist possesses reasons for explaining away the problem of evil, whereas the hypothetical evilist does not. My argument is this: given that God exists as first cause of all things, there are credible a priori grounds for believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Because of this, while the actual distribution of goods and evils provides prima facie reason for denying traditional theism, it does not, in itself, make belief in theism irrational. The credible, a priori grounds for believing in traditional theism gives us reason to see if the a posteriori evidence against theism can be explained away. If it can, then belief in theism is not absurd.

Things are not so with evilism. Given that God exists as first cause of all things, there are no credible a priori grounds for believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil. Thus, the only grounds for accepting evilism would be a posteriori, i.e. the actual distribution of goods and evil we observe in this world. But as Law notes, the actual distribution of goods and evils in this world does not give us reason for believing evilism; rather, it gives us reason to reject evilism. Since we have no credible a priori grounds for believing evilism, we have no reason to explain away the a posteriori evidence against it. Given this, it is absurd to believe in evilism, even if we might be able to explain away the a posteriori evidence against it.

This is my response to the EGC in a nutshell. If it is right, the EGC can be met. Theists can explain why the problem of the good makes it absurd to

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believe in evilism, while the problem of evil does not make it absurd to believe in traditional theism. In what follows, I spell out some of the details of this argument.

There are credible a priori grounds for believing that God, as the first cause, is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good

My first claim is that there are *credible, a priori* grounds for believing that God, as the first cause, is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Some comments are called for. As I am using the term, some fact is an a priori ground for believing that God has an attribute, just in case this fact can explain why God is rightly said to have this attribute. This use of the term 'a priori' implies that the grounds for belief provide an explanation for the fact that is to be believed. It does not imply that the grounds for belief are not mediated by experience. In the normal case, a priori grounds will provide a causal explanation of the fact that is to be believed. However, I am assuming that God's attributes are not the effects of any further causal principle, and so I take it that a priori grounds for predicating an attribute of God explain not why God has this attribute, but why we can rightly say that He does.

Consider, for instance, the putative fact that anything that is composed of parts requires some further principle or cause to make its parts into a whole. This fact is an a priori ground for believing that God is simple (not-composed), since it can explain why God (as first cause) is rightly said to be simple. Given this fact regarding composition, if God were composed of parts, God would require some further cause to make His parts into a whole. But in this case, God would not be the first cause. So the putative fact about composition gives us a priori grounds for believing that God, as first cause, is simple and not-composed.

We can contrast a priori grounds with a posteriori grounds. A (putative) fact is an a posteriori ground for believing that God has some attribute, just in case God's having this attribute would explain why the fact obtains. For instance, the putative fact that we see design throughout the natural world is an a posteriori ground for believing that God is intelligent, since God's being intelligent could explain why we see this design.

The prima facie case that there are credible a priori grounds for believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good is provided by the history of philosophy. Consider for example, the Thomistic case for attributing maximal goodness to God. First, Thomas proves the *existence* of a first, unchanging, and necessary cause of all change and of all being (*Summa Theologiae* [henceforth 'ST'] 1 Q2 A2, in Aquinas (1888); see also Davies (1992), 26). Second, Thomas shows that as the first unchanging cause of all change and all being, God is pure actuality (ST 1 Q3 A1). Thomas then points to some a priori grounds for thinking that God, as first cause, is perfect. To be imperfect, says Thomas, is to be only potentially what one should be actually, so that something is more perfect the more it is actual. But God, as first cause, is pure actuality. It follows that God is

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most perfect. There is no way that God could and should be but is not; there is no way in which God could be better (ST 1 Q4 A1; Davies (1992), 81–82). And since God alone is pure actuality (ST Q11, A3), it follows that no being could be more perfect than God. Furthermore, it follows from God's being perfect that God is all-good, since something is good insofar as it is desirable, and something is desirable insofar as it is perfect (actual) (ST 1 Q5 A1). But since God is completely perfect, He is all-good; and as nothing could be more perfect than God, likewise nothing could be better than God.

Note that the Thomistic argument that I have sketched for God's being maximally good in no way depends upon a posteriori grounds. In particular it does not depend upon putative facts about the distribution of goods and evils that we can observe in this world that would be explained by God's goodness. Rather, it depends upon a Thomistic conception of causality, perfection, and goodness; given the Thomistic conception of causality, perfection, and goodness, we can explain why God, as the first cause of all change and being, is rightly said to be maximally good.

Thomistic arguments for God's being all-powerful and all-knowing also rest on a priori grounds. Aquinas argues for God's omnipotence as follows:

> P1. (a priori ground) The active power of an agent increases insofar as the agent is in act.
>
> P2. But God as first cause of all change and being is pure, unlimited actuality.
>
> C. Thus God's active power is unlimited (ST 1 Q25, A2).

Furthermore,

> P1. (a priori ground) What restricts the range of an agent's power is the limitations of its form, limitations in the kind of thing it is.
>
> P2. But God, as first cause of all being and change, is absolute form or absolute being, being without limitations.
>
> C. Therefore, God's power has an unrestricted range. (ST 1 Q3, A3)

Likewise, Aquinas argues that God is all-knowing, not only because knowing is a perfection, and God is most perfect, but also because (a priori ground) the more immaterial a being is the less restricted this being is with regard to knowledge. But God is pure actuality, and so nothing could be less material than God (since matter implies potentiality). So nothing could be less restricted with regard to knowing than God. Therefore, God is maximally knowledgeable (ST 1 Q 13 A1; Davies (1992), 128–130).

These arguments, like the Thomistic argument for the goodness of God, do not depend upon a posteriori grounds. God's supposed omnipotence and omniscience are not called upon to explain any particular fact. Rather, putative facts about power and knowledge are called upon to explain why God can rightly be said to be all-powerful and all-knowing.

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In pointing in this cursory way to Thomistic arguments for the attributes of God, I am not pretending to give a scholarly exegesis of them; much less am I defending them from objections. Rather, I am simply noting that there are a priori grounds for believing that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. Furthermore, it seems that these grounds are credible even if they are controversial. While many philosophers have and do reject them, they have convinced or sustained the convictions of thoughtful people, and they continue to do so. Thomistic natural theology continues into the twenty-first century as a living school of thought.

Furthermore, it is not just Thomistic natural theologians who have provided a priori arguments for the divine attributes. Consider Leibniz's argument that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. We can understand Leibniz's argument along the following lines: the actual world is contingent, one of an infinite number of possible worlds. There must be an explanation for why this world exists instead of any other possible world. As the world is made up of contingents, to find such an explanation we must appeal to the choice of a necessary being. Given that this necessary being can choose which world to actualize and this choice is ultimately explanatory, the necessary being must be omnisicient, since it knows and can compare every possibility; it must be omnipotent, because it can bring every possibility into being; finally, it must be all-good, since the will by its nature is directed towards the good, and there is nothing that could interfere with the exercise of the necessary being's will (Leibniz (1985), 127).

Again, I bring up Leibniz's argument in this cursory way not to give an exegesis of the argument or to defend it, but just to show that there are credible a priori grounds for believing that God as first cause is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Like Aquinas's arguments, Leibniz's arguments for the divine attributes depend upon a priori grounds. Again, God's knowledge, power, and goodness are not called upon to explain any particular fact. Rather, facts about the nature of rational choice and what attributes one would need to make a rational choice among all possible worlds are called upon to explain why God can rightly be said to be all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful. Furthermore, while Leibniz's arguments are controversial, and are rejected by many, they have sustained the convictions of thoughtful individuals (see Forrest (2012) for an argument not unlike Leibniz's).

If one believes that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent on a priori grounds, the problem of evil does not make this belief absurd

My second claim is that if one believes that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent on a priori grounds, the problem of evil does not make this belief absurd. Why is this?

The problem of evil is best understood as giving us a posteriori, defeasible reasons for rejecting traditional theism. On the one hand, when we consider the actual distribution of goods and evils in the world, traditional theism does not

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seem to give us a good explanation of this fact. If we simply consider the distribution of goods and evils we are aware of, it seems just as likely that there is no explanation for them as it is that traditional theism explains them. Furthermore, non-traditional 'theistic' hypotheses (e.g. some form of Manichaeism) seem to do a better job of explaining the distribution of goods and evils than traditional theism. In brief, the distribution of goods and evils in this world is not what we would first expect, supposing the world is created by an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good creator.

The problem of evil is a problem for theists, but it does not make belief in traditional theism absurd. Given that the theist possesses credible a priori grounds for believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, the fact that the distribution of goods and evils is not how we first expect has a *disjunctive* upshot. *Either* the a priori reasons for believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, are not as good as one thought and God is not all these things, *or*, one's expectations of what the world would be like, given that it was created by an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good God, are flawed. Given the problem of evil, one *could* come to reject the a priori reasoning that grounds one's belief in the traditional theism. But one might also revise one's expectations of how the world would be if an all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful being created it. This is exactly what traditional theodicies encourage us to do. Thus, the problem of evil, while it poses a real difficulty for theism, does not by itself make traditional theism absurd.

There are no credible a priori grounds for believing that the first cause is all- knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil

Things are different with evilism. My third claim is that there are no credible a priori grounds for believing that the first cause is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-evil. My argument for this claim is a kind of inductive argument. According to this argument, if no one has ever claimed to believe in evilism on any a priori grounds, nor can we think of any a priori grounds that might convince thoughtful people, we can safely conclude that neither we nor anyone else possesses such grounds. Now, no philosopher, as far as I know, has ever professed evilism. Neither has any theologian. In fact, no one seems to have seriously defended evilism in print. So no one has ever claimed to believe in evilism on any a priori grounds.

Likewise, when we consider evilism on its own, it is hard to see what arguments with even an air of plausibility could be offered in favour of it. Collins (2018) suggests the following arguments. Suppose that instead of accepting, as Aquinas does, the convertibility of being with goodness, one accepts the convertibility of being with evil. With this doctrine in hand, one could give an argument that God was maximally evil on the grounds that God was pure actuality. The argument would go as follows. To be imperfect is to be only actually what one should be

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potentially, so that something is more imperfect the more it is actual. It follows that God, as pure actuality, is most imperfect. Every way that God should be he is not; there is no way in which God could be worse. And since God alone is pure actuality, it follows that no being could be more imperfect than God. Furthermore, it follows from God's being most imperfect that God is all-evil, since something is bad insofar as it is undesirable, and something is undesirable insofar as it is imperfect (actual). But since God is completely imperfect, He is all-evil; and as nothing could be more imperfect than God, likewise nothing could be worse than God.

Of course, no one has ever actually defended this argument and for good reason – while the doctrine that being and goodness are convertible is controversial, the doctrine that being and evil are convertible is not – it is a complete non-starter, rejected by everyone. Likewise, someone could give a parallel argument to the one given by Leibniz. The argument would go something like this. The actual world is contingent, one of an infinite number of possible worlds. There must be an explanation for why this world exists instead of any other possible world. As the world is made up of contingents, to find such an explanation we must appeal to the choice of a necessary being. Given that this necessary being can choose which world to actualize and this choice is ultimately explanatory, the necessary being must be omniscient, since it knows and can contrast every possibility; it must be omnipotent, because it can bring every possibility into being; finally, it must be all-evil, since the will by its nature is directed towards evil, and there is nothing that could interfere with the exercise of the necessary being's will. Again, this argument is a non-starter. While the claim that choice is always made under the 'guise of the good' is a controversial doctrine, the claim that choice is always made under the 'guise of the evil' is not. Everyone rejects it out of hand.

The point here is that while the a priori arguments for God's perfect goodness are controversial, they are credible. The parallel arguments given by the evilist aren't like this. Strictly speaking, the evilist arguments are *incredible*. No one believes the distinct evilist premises or finds them plausible.[1]

Given that no one has ever claimed to believe evilism on a priori grounds nor can we think of any plausible a priori arguments for believing that the first cause is maximally powerful, knowing, and evil, it is safe to hold that we and everyone else lacks credible a priori grounds for believing in evilism. No thoughtful person does accept evilism on a priori grounds, nor could they.

Thus, the problem of the good makes it absurd to believe in evilism

My fourth claim is that, given all this, the problem of the good makes it absurd to believe in evilism. Our a posteriori evidence, given the problem of the good, gives us no reason for believing evilism. In fact, it gives us reason for disbelieving evilism. But the (hypothetical) evilist also lacks priori grounds for believing evilism. So the situation for evilism is this: we lack both credible a priori grounds

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and credible a posteriori grounds for believing evilism; we do, however, have reasons for disbelieving evilism. It follows that it is absurd to believe that evilism is true.

In saying this, I do not wish to deny what Law has argued for so forcefully: that reverse theodicies can be told in defence of evilism, and that these reverse theodicies are parallel to those told by traditional theists. Nor do I wish to deny that the problem of the good makes evilism absurd in spite of these theodicies. Evilism is absurd, not because the reverse theodicies that can be told on its behalf aren't as good as the theodicies told on behalf of traditional theism. Evilism is absurd because we have *no reason* to explain away the a posteriori evidence against it. This is true for all sorts of absurd ideas about the first cause.

To see this, compare evilism with *verdantism*. According to verdantism, the universe is created by a maximally wise, maximally powerful being who prefers green to all other colours to a maximal degree. Verdantism faces the problem of other colours. If God is all-powerful, and all-knowing, and maximally prefers green to any other colour, why shouldn't the world be all green (or almost all green)? Our a posteriori evidence speaks against verdantism. Nevertheless, there is surely some story that could be told that could explain away this a posteriori evidence. Perhaps while the first cause maximally prefers green to all other colours, it has overriding reasons not to make a world in which everything (or almost everything) is some shade of green, even if we can't know what these reasons are. Or maybe we have reason for thinking that the nature of colour wouldn't allow for a universe that was all or mostly all green. No matter how well we could explain away the a posteriori evidence against verdantism, however, it is still absurd to believe it. Why? Because we have no reason to believe verdantism apart from the a posteriori evidence in favour of it, and so no reason to explain this a posteriori evidence away.

Evilism is like verdantism. We have no reason to believe it apart from our a posteriori evidence, and this evidence gives us reason for disbelieving it. Perhaps we could come up with some story that would allow us to undermine this evidence against it. But even then, it is absurd to believe it. Evilism is absurd, not because we could not defend it, but because we lack any reason to defend it.

Things are different with traditional theism. Prima facie, there are credible a priori grounds for holding traditional theism given that there is a first cause; these a priori grounds can give one reason to explain away the a posteriori evidence against traditional theism. Thus, the problem of evil does not make it absurd to believe in traditional theism, whereas the problem of the good does make it absurd to believe in evilism. The EGC has been met.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Law is right and that his critics are wrong: the problem of the good *makes* it absurd to believe evilism. But I have also argued

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that Law is wrong, and his critics are right: the problem of evil *doesn't* make it absurd to believe in theism. At the heart of my argument is the claim that there are credible a priori grounds for believing that the first cause is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Because of this, given that there is a first cause, the theist has good reason to believe theism independently of the a posteriori evidence he has in favour of it. This makes it rational to look for ways to explain away the a posteriori evidence against traditional theism.

I suspect that Law denies that there are any good a priori grounds for attributing the omni-properties to the first cause. That is why he thinks that the positions of traditional theism and evilism are parallel. However, the claim that there are no good a priori grounds for believing traditional theism is not something Law argues for, and it is not something traditional theists should grant him.[2]

I end by making two comments. First, Law might be excused for thinking natural theologians *have* conceded that there are no good a priori grounds for believing traditional theism. Natural theologians working in the analytic tradition have tended to focus on questions about the existence of God and less on questions concerning the divine attributes. So for instance, neither the *Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Re Manning (2013)) nor the *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Craig & Moreland (2009)) have chapters dedicated to a priori grounds for attributing power, knowledge, or goodness to the first cause. This is a mistake. There is a long history of natural theologians from both the Scholastic and Rationalistic traditions arguing from God's being the first cause to God's having the traditional omni-properties. This approach deserves further consideration and development by contemporary theistic philosophers of religion.

Second, my article has focused on a priori grounds for attributing the omni-properties to God as first cause. What is important about these a priori grounds with regard to the EGC is that they justify one's explaining away the a posteriori evidence provided by the existence of evil. But there might be other ways that the belief that God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing could be justified independently of one's a posteriori evidence. For instance, if belief in traditional theism is a basic belief, then one may be justified in believing traditional theism without considering the a posteriori evidence for or against it. This justification for believing in traditional theism could then justify one in seeking a theodicy to explain away the defeasible a posteriori evidence against traditional theism. If this is correct, a parallel argument could be given to the one I have given above. On this line of argument, the problem of evil does not make it absurd to believe traditional theism, because we are justified in believing traditional theism without considering the actual distribution of goods and evils, since belief in theism is a basic belief. This justifies us in seeking a theodicy to deal with the problem of evil. Evilism, however, is not a basic belief, so we are not justified in believing it without possessing further grounds for so doing. Since we are not justified in believing in evilism before we consider the distribution of goods and evils in the world, we are not justified in seeking out a reverse theodicy to deal

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with the problem of the good. If this is correct, some traditional theists adverse to a priori proofs of God's attributes might be able to meet the EGC as well. Either way, the EGC can be met.[3]

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Notes

1. For this reason, we shouldn't consider the evilist arguments I rehearse above to be successful parodies of the theistic arguments. Consider Gaunillo's parody of Anselm. Gaunillo's parody is a powerful response to Anselm, only because it rests on premises that are just as plausible, on the face of things, as Anselm's own premises. If one buys into Anselm's argument it seems that one should also buy into Gaunillo's argument. Of course, Gaunillo's argument leads to an incredible conclusion, so the upshot is that one shouldn't buy into either Gaunillo's or Anselm's arguments. The arguments for evilism I have canvassed above aren't like this. While the conclusion of the evilist's arguments is absurd, the premises of the evilist's argument are not just as plausible as the premises of the corresponding theistic argument, and people who would buy into the theistic arguments certainly should not buy into the evilist arguments. Thus, even on the supposition that that the theistic arguments of Aquinas and Leibniz are fatally flawed, reflecting on the parallel evilist arguments will not help us to see this. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.
2. It should be noted that Law does consider ontological arguments for attributing the omni-properties to God (Law (2010), 370–371). However, he does not consider the sorts of a priori arguments that I have canvassed above.
3. Special thanks to the members of the research group on 'The Problem of Evil From Leibniz to Analytic Philosophy of Religion' at the University of Navarra, especially Agustín Echavarría, and to two anonymous reviewers at *Religious Studies* for helpful comments on this article.

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