

# The Problem of Evil

# The Judeo-Christian Conception of God (or the Tri-Omni conception)

- If God exists, then God is omniscient (i.e., all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful) and omnibenevolent (perfectly good).
- **Omniscience** = a being is omniscient just in case it knows (or can know) all there is to know.

- **Omnipotence** = a being is omnipotent just in case it's able to perform any action (or bring about any state of affairs) that is logically possible to perform (or bring about).
- **Omnibenevolence** = a being is omnibenevolent just in case it is morally perfect and desires only the good.

# Two Varieties of Evil

- **Moral evil:** the kind of evil that consists in or results from an intentional action (or the inaction) of a person (or persons).
  - Common examples: murder, genocide, rape, theft, cheating on your partner, at least some cases of lying, torturing babies for fun, plagiarizing your phil 1 papers, etc.

- **Natural evil:** the kind of evil that results from any event or state of affairs occurring through natural processes (not the result of any person's action or inaction).
  - Common examples: earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, some floods, diseases, viruses, etc.

# Are these consistent?

- 1. God is omniscient.
  - 2. God is omnipotent.
  - 3. God is omnibenevolent.
  - 4. Evil exists.
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- It appears that any three of these claims entails the negation of the fourth.

# The General Argument from Evil

- 1. If God exists, then God is omniscient.
- 2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
- 3. If God exists, then God is omnibenevolent.
- 4. If evil exists, then either God is not omniscient, not omnipotent, or not omnibenevolent.
- 5. Thus, if evil exists, then God doesn't exist.

- 6. Evil exists.
- 7. Thus, God does not exist.

# Theodicy

- A **theodicy** is an attempt to reconcile the existence of evil or suffering in the world with the existence of a perfect (i.e., Tri-Omni) God.
- A successful theodicy need not provide God's *actual* reason for permitting evil, but only a *possible* reason for doing so (such that *if* God had acted on this reason, permitting evil would be morally justified).

# One Theodicy

- Theodicy 1 (T1): Evil is often a necessary *means* to good.
  - There are occasions on which persons endure or permit some evil (e.g., pain or suffering) as a *means* to achieving some good
    - the patient who undergoes painful medical treatment to improve their health, the parent who punishes their child to improve their character, etc.
    - Perhaps God permits a degree of evil in the world since it serves as a means for God to achieve certain goods, such as empathy and compassion.

# An Objection to T1

- It is certainly true that certain evils (e.g., pain and suffering) sometimes serve as causally necessary means to certain goods.
  - Pain, for example, is often causally connected with that which is beneficial, such as the avoidance of greater evils, like injury or death. So it seems that the existence of some evil is causally necessary for the existence of some goods.
  - But this seems to only explain why agents who are restricted by causal laws (such as the laws of nature) should tolerate the existence of some evil for the sake of its associated good.

– By our tri-omni conception, God, if he exists, is *not* such an agent. Given that God is omnipotent, God is not restricted by any causal law, and indeed is able to override them. Thus, the existence of causal means-end relationships between certain evils and certain goods does not explain why God should allow for the existence of some evil in the world.

# The Free Will Theodicy

- Definition: A person  $x$  is *significantly free* with respect to an action  $A$  at a time  $t$  if and only if  $x$  is not causally determined to either perform  $A$  or refrain from performing  $A$  at  $t$ .
- Creatures who are *significantly free* cannot be causally determined to do only what is right.
- Thus, if God creates creatures who are significantly free, God cannot causally determine them to do only what is right.

- Thus, if God creates creatures who are significantly free, he must create creatures who are at least *capable* of moral evil.
- Thus, if God creates a world containing creatures who are significantly free, it will contain creatures who are capable of moral evil.
- If God creates a world containing creatures who are capable of moral evil, God can't guarantee that there will *not* be evil in that world.
- Thus, if God creates a world containing creatures who are significantly free, God can't guarantee that there will not be evil in that world.

- A world containing creatures who are significantly free is a better world, *all else being equal*, than a world containing no significantly free creatures.
- Thus, there is a good reason for God to create a world containing creatures who are significantly free.
- Thus, there is a good reason for God to create a world that God can't guarantee will not contain evil.

## Some Responses to the Free Will Theodicy

- **Natural evil:** Even if the free will theodicy does provide justification for God's permitting moral evil, it doesn't provide a good reason for God's permitting instances of natural evil.
  - So, the free will theodicy is at least *incomplete*.

- **The Severity of Certain Cases of Moral Evil:** even if the free will theodicy provides justification for God's creating creatures who are significantly free, it does not justify God's permitting certain *severe* cases of moral evil (e.g., genocide).
  - God can put up "road blocks" in nature to prevent the occurrence of such cases without thereby preventing creatures from having free choice.

# A Final Objection

- The logical possibility of a world containing significantly free agents in which there is no moral evil.
  - God's omnipotence is constrained only by logical possibility. (By the Tri-Omni conception)
  - So, if it is logically possible that there be a world in which there exist individuals who are significantly free with respect to at least some actions (and at least at some times) *and who never commit moral evil*, then the tri-omni God could have created such a world.
  - But the advocate of the Free Will theodicy maintains that the tri-omni God *could not* have created such a world.
    - It seems that the advocate of the FW theodicy must maintain that God could not have made the world such that it both contains significantly free agents and lacks any moral evil.
    - But such a world appears to be logically possible.