

The Problem of Evil and the Limits of Theistic Explanation

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Abstract

The problem of evil remains one of the most enduring and challenging objections to classical theism. It questions how belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect God can be reconciled with the pervasive reality of moral and natural evil. This paper critically examines the logical and evidential formulations of the problem of evil, engaging with key philosophical arguments developed by thinkers such as J. L. Mackie and William L. Rowe. It explores traditional theistic responses, including the free will defense articulated by Alvin Plantinga and soul-making theodicies inspired by John Hick, assessing their explanatory scope and limitations. The study argues that while these responses may mitigate certain versions of the logical problem, they struggle to provide a fully satisfactory account of apparently gratuitous suffering and large-scale natural disasters. Furthermore, the paper highlights the epistemic limits of human reasoning when attempting to justify divine purposes, raising concerns about whether appeals to mystery undermine meaningful theological explanation. Rather than offering a definitive resolution, the analysis suggests that the problem of evil exposes structural tensions within theistic frameworks and calls for a more modest understanding of what religious explanation can achieve. The paper concludes that the debate ultimately reflects deeper questions about moral intuition, epistemic humility, and the boundaries of rational theology.

Keywords: Problem of Evil; Logical Problem of Evil; Evidential Problem of Evil; Theodicy; Free Will Defense; Soul-Making

Introduction

The problem of evil has long stood at the center of philosophical debates about the rationality of theism. At its core lies a fundamental tension: if God is understood as omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, how can the existence of evil and suffering be explained? From ancient reflections to contemporary analytic philosophy, this question has tested the coherence of religious belief and shaped discussions in metaphysics, ethics, and theology. The issue is not merely theoretical; it draws urgency from lived realities such as war, disease, injustice, and natural disasters that seem difficult to reconcile with the idea of a benevolent divine order. In modern philosophy, the problem has been framed in both logical and evidential forms. The logical version, associated with J. L. Mackie, argues that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the traditional attributes of God. The evidential version, developed by William L. Rowe, contends that the sheer amount and apparent pointlessness of suffering make God's existence improbable. These formulations have compelled theistic philosophers to articulate more refined defenses and theodicies, seeking to demonstrate either the logical

consistency of God and evil or the plausibility of divine reasons beyond human comprehension. Responses such as the Free Will Defense advanced by Alvin Plantinga and the soul-making theodicy influenced by John Hick attempt to preserve divine goodness while acknowledging the reality of suffering. Yet such explanations raise further questions about the scope and limits of theistic reasoning. At what point does appeal to divine mystery cease to function as an explanation? Can human moral standards be meaningfully applied to God? And does the persistence of seemingly gratuitous suffering undermine the credibility of classical theism? the problem of evil as a challenge not only to specific doctrines but also to the broader capacity of theistic frameworks to provide coherent explanations of suffering. By evaluating both major formulations of the problem and key theistic responses, the study seeks to clarify the extent to which religious belief can accommodate the reality of evil without compromising its central claims.

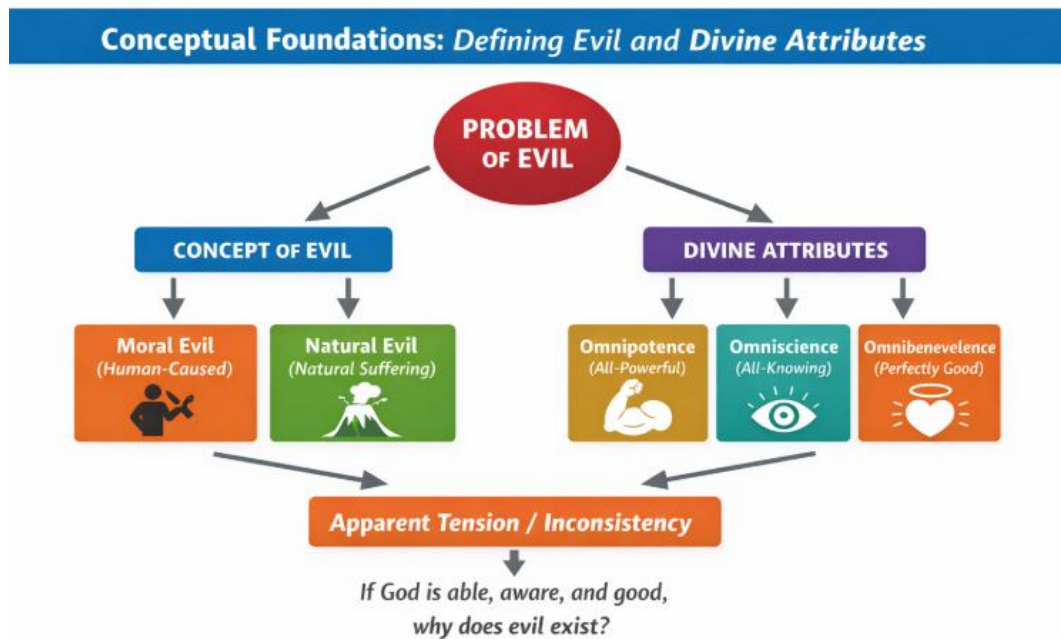
Conceptual Foundations: Defining Evil and Divine Attributes

Any serious discussion of the problem of evil must begin with conceptual clarity. The debate turns not only on the reality of suffering but also on how “evil” and divine attributes are understood within classical theism. Philosophically, evil is commonly divided into moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil refers to wrongdoing that results from human agency such as violence, injustice, or cruelty. Natural evil, by contrast, includes suffering caused by events like earthquakes, disease, or famine, where no direct human intention is involved. This distinction becomes crucial because different types of evil demand different forms of explanation within theistic frameworks. In the classical theistic tradition, especially as articulated by thinkers like Augustine of Hippo and later Thomas Aquinas, evil is often described not as a substantive force but as a *privation* of good. On this view, evil lacks independent ontological status; it is the absence or corruption of what ought to be present. While this account aims to preserve God as the ultimate source of all being and goodness, critics argue that it may understate the experiential intensity of suffering.

Equally central are the divine attributes traditionally affirmed in theism:

- Omnipotence – God possesses unlimited power.
- Omniscience – God has complete knowledge, including foreknowledge of all events.
- Omnibenevolence – God is perfectly good and morally flawless.

The tension arises because these attributes, taken together, appear to generate expectations about the world. If God is all-powerful, He could prevent evil. If all-knowing, He is aware of every instance of suffering. If perfectly good, He would presumably desire to eliminate evil. The presence of persistent and severe suffering therefore seems to conflict with at least one of these attributes, unless further explanation is provided. The conceptual foundation of the problem of evil, then, lies in this apparent incompatibility between divine perfection and worldly suffering. Any adequate theistic response must either reinterpret divine attributes, redefine evil, or demonstrate that their coexistence is logically coherent.



The Logical Problem of Evil

The logical problem of evil asserts that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. The most influential modern formulation is associated with J. L. Mackie, who argued that traditional theism contains an internal contradiction.

Mackie presented the issue as an inconsistent triad:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Evil exists.

According to this argument, if God is both able and willing to prevent evil, then evil should not exist. Since evil clearly does exist, at least one of the propositions must be false. The challenge for the theist is to show that these claims can consistently coexist without contradiction.

In response, the most prominent defense has been offered by Alvin Plantinga through what is known as the Free Will Defense. Plantinga argues that it is logically possible that God created free creatures, and that genuine freedom entails the possibility of moral evil. If free will is a greater good that cannot be achieved without the risk of wrongdoing, then God's allowance of moral evil does not contradict divine goodness or power. Thus, the coexistence of God and evil is logically possible. Many philosophers now agree that Plantinga's defense successfully rebuts the strict logical inconsistency claim. However, this does not eliminate all difficulties. The logical defense primarily addresses moral evil and leaves questions about natural evil and large-scale suffering less resolved. Moreover, critics argue that even if logical consistency is preserved, the explanatory adequacy of theism remains under pressure. The logical problem of evil therefore serves as the starting point in contemporary discussions. While it may no longer be seen as decisively refuting theism, it continues to shape the parameters within which the debate unfolds.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

While the logical problem claims a strict contradiction between God and evil, the evidential problem takes a more modest but arguably more powerful approach. It does not argue that God's existence is impossible. Instead, it contends that the quantity, intensity, and apparent pointlessness of suffering in the world make God's existence unlikely. The most influential formulation of this version comes from William L. Rowe. Rowe introduced the idea of *gratuitous suffering*—instances of pain that appear to serve no greater good or prevent any greater evil. His well-known example of a fawn suffering and dying in a forest fire suggests that some forms of suffering seem unnecessary and excessive. Even if God might have reasons beyond human understanding, the absence of any discernible justification counts as evidence against classical theism.

The evidential argument proceeds inductively. It reasons that because there are many cases of suffering that appear gratuitous, it is reasonable to conclude that not all suffering is divinely justified. The challenge for the theist, then, is not merely to show logical compatibility, but to provide a plausible account explaining why a perfectly good and powerful God would permit such apparently pointless evils. Some theists respond by adopting what is often called "skeptical theism," arguing that human cognitive limitations prevent us from grasping God's purposes. Others suggest that suffering may contribute to goods such as moral development, compassion, or long-term divine plans that exceed our perspective. Yet critics argue that excessive appeal to mystery risks weakening meaningful claims about divine goodness. If no conceivable suffering could count against theism, then the concept of a morally perfect God becomes difficult to evaluate. Thus, the evidential problem shifts the debate from strict logical coherence to probabilistic reasoning. It presses the question of whether the world, as we actually observe it, resembles what one would expect if governed by a perfectly good deity.

The Free Will Defense and Moral Responsibility

Among the most significant responses to the problem of evil is the Free Will Defense, most prominently articulated by Alvin Plantinga. This defense aims primarily at the logical problem but also has implications for the evidential challenge. The central claim is that moral freedom is a great good. A world containing creatures capable of genuine moral choice is more valuable than a world of automatons programmed only to do good. However, genuine freedom entails the possibility of wrongdoing. If God were to causally determine every action to ensure goodness, human freedom would be undermined. Therefore, the existence of moral evil can be understood as a consequence of human misuse of freedom rather than a defect in divine power or goodness. Plantinga further argues that it is logically possible that every feasible world containing significantly free creatures would involve some moral evil. If so, even an omnipotent God could not create a world with free beings who never choose wrongly. This argument seeks to demonstrate that God and moral evil are not logically incompatible. Yet important questions remain. The Free Will Defense primarily addresses moral evil, but it struggles to fully account for natural evil such as earthquakes, diseases, or genetic disorders. Some theists attempt to connect natural evil indirectly to human freedom or to broader cosmic purposes, but such explanations are often debated.



Additionally, critics question whether the value of free will justifies the scale and severity of suffering observed in history. If freedom is preserved, could God not limit its most destructive consequences? The defense preserves logical coherence, but it may not fully satisfy the evidential concerns regarding excessive or seemingly pointless harm. In this way, the Free Will Defense remains one of the most influential and carefully developed responses within contemporary philosophical theology. It protects the logical possibility of theism while leaving open deeper questions about the moral structure of reality and the limits of theistic explanation.

Soul-Making Theodicy and Human Development

Another influential response to the problem of evil shifts the focus from freedom alone to moral and spiritual growth. Often associated with John Hick and inspired in part by earlier ideas from Irenaeus, the soul-making theodicy proposes that the world is structured as an environment for character formation. According to this view, human beings are not created in a state of moral perfection but with the capacity to develop virtues such as courage, compassion, patience, and forgiveness. These virtues cannot emerge in a frictionless environment. A world without danger, pain, or moral challenge would not allow for meaningful moral growth. Suffering, therefore, is seen not as pointless but as instrumental in shaping mature moral agents. Hick argues that an “epistemic distance” between God and humanity is necessary for authentic freedom and development. If God’s presence were overwhelmingly obvious, moral growth might be coerced rather than chosen. The world’s ambiguity and the reality of hardship create conditions under which genuine trust, responsibility, and moral commitment can arise. The soul-making approach offers a broader framework than the Free Will Defense, as it attempts to account for both moral and natural evil. Natural processes such as tectonic shifts or biological evolution may generate suffering, but they also create a stable and law-governed environment

necessary for moral agency and long-term development. However, critics question whether the scale and intensity of suffering are proportionate to the goods achieved. While moderate adversity may contribute to growth, extreme suffering, especially in cases involving children or non-human animals, appears difficult to justify solely as soul-making. Moreover, some instances of suffering seem to crush rather than refine moral character. The challenge remains whether all evils can plausibly be interpreted as contributing to human development.

Natural Evil and the Challenge of Gratuitous Suffering

Natural evil presents one of the most persistent difficulties for theistic explanation. Unlike moral evil, which can be linked to human freedom, natural evil arises from impersonal processes such as earthquakes, hurricanes, diseases, and genetic disorders. These events often affect individuals indiscriminately, raising the question of why a benevolent and powerful God would design or permit such a system. The evidential force of natural evil is strengthened by the concept of gratuitous suffering. As emphasized by William L. Rowe, some instances of suffering appear to serve no greater good and prevent no greater harm. If even a single case of genuinely pointless suffering exists, it poses a serious challenge to the claim that all events are ultimately governed by a perfectly good deity. Theistic responses often appeal to the necessity of stable natural laws. A predictable, law-governed world allows for scientific understanding, responsible action, and meaningful moral choices. Yet the same natural regularities that sustain life also make natural disasters possible. A world without tectonic movement, for example, might lack the geological conditions required for life as we know it.

Even so, the difficulty persists. Could an omnipotent God not create a law-governed world with fewer destructive consequences? Could suffering be limited without undermining natural order? These questions highlight the tension between divine omnipotence and observable reality. Some philosophers adopt a stance of epistemic humility, arguing that human beings are not well-positioned to judge whether suffering is truly gratuitous. Others contend that such appeals risk weakening the moral coherence of theism. If any and all suffering can be justified by unknown divine purposes, the distinction between justified and unjustified evil becomes blurred. Natural evil thus sharpens the broader issue at stake: the limits of theistic explanation. While various theodicies attempt to integrate suffering into a larger moral or cosmic framework, the persistence of apparently pointless harm continues to press the question of whether classical theism can fully account for the world as it is experienced.

Skeptical Theism and Epistemic Humility

In response to the evidential problem of evil, some philosophers adopt a position known as skeptical theism. Rather than attempting to specify God's reasons for permitting suffering, skeptical theists argue that human beings are not in a position to judge whether such reasons exist. Our cognitive limitations, they contend, make it unreasonable to infer that suffering is gratuitous simply because we cannot perceive a justifying purpose. This approach has been defended by thinkers such as Stephen Wykstra and Michael Bergmann. They argue that the gap between human understanding and divine omniscience is so vast that our inability to identify a morally sufficient reason for suffering does not count as strong evidence that no such reason exists. Just as a child may not understand a parent's difficult decision, human beings may lack

access to the full moral framework within which divine governance operates. Skeptical theism emphasizes epistemic humility. It urges caution in drawing conclusions from limited perspective and challenges the assumption that moral evaluation at the human level can straightforwardly be applied to divine action. In doing so, it attempts to weaken the force of Rowe-style evidential arguments. However, critics raise concerns that excessive skepticism may undermine other aspects of religious belief. If humans are too cognitively limited to assess God's reasons for permitting suffering, are they also too limited to affirm God's goodness with confidence? The worry is that skeptical theism, while deflecting one objection, risks eroding the meaningfulness of moral claims about God altogether.

The Limits of Theistic Explanation

The broader issue emerging from these debates concerns the limits of theistic explanation itself. Theistic frameworks aim to provide an account of why the world exists and why it unfolds as it does under divine providence. Yet the persistence of intense and seemingly disproportionate suffering places pressure on explanatory adequacy. One challenge lies in distinguishing explanation from mere possibility. Demonstrating that God and evil are logically compatible does not automatically provide a satisfying account of why specific evils occur. A defense may preserve consistency, but a theodicy seeks to justify God's permission of suffering. The question is whether such justification can be both morally persuasive and philosophically coherent. Furthermore, appeals to mystery, while sometimes unavoidable, must be handled carefully. If every instance of suffering can be attributed to unknown divine purposes, the explanatory framework risks becoming unfalsifiable. An explanation that accommodates all conceivable states of affairs may lose its informative content. Theistic explanation must therefore balance humility about human limits with the need to maintain substantive claims about divine goodness and justice. The limits of explanation do not necessarily entail the falsity of theism. Rather, they suggest that religious belief may operate within boundaries shaped by faith commitments, moral intuitions, and interpretive traditions. The problem of evil exposes those boundaries, revealing both the resilience and the vulnerability of classical theistic reasoning.

Moral Intuition and the Coherence of Divine Goodness

At the heart of the debate lies a deeper concern about moral intuition. Human beings possess strong moral convictions regarding fairness, compassion, and the wrongness of unnecessary suffering. The problem of evil gains much of its force from the apparent conflict between these intuitions and the existence of extreme or indiscriminate harm. If God is described as perfectly good, divine goodness must bear some intelligible relation to human moral understanding. Otherwise, the term "good" risks becoming equivocal when applied to God. Critics argue that if actions that would be considered cruel or unjust in human contexts are justified when attributed to divine purposes, the coherence of moral language itself is threatened. On the other hand, defenders of theism maintain that divine goodness may transcend but not contradict human morality. They contend that moral intuition, while significant, is limited and fallible. The challenge is to articulate a conception of divine goodness that preserves continuity with human moral insight while allowing for a broader, more comprehensive perspective. The

tension between moral intuition and theological commitment ensures that the problem of evil remains philosophically potent. It is not merely a logical puzzle but a test of whether the concept of a morally perfect deity can remain coherent in light of lived experience. The ongoing debate reflects an enduring effort to reconcile faith, reason, and moral consciousness within the bounds of human understanding.

Conclusion

The problem of evil continues to stand as one of the most formidable philosophical challenges to classical theism. From the logical formulation advanced by J. L. Mackie to the evidential argument developed by William L. Rowe, the central concern remains the same: whether the existence of suffering can be coherently reconciled with belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. While contemporary theistic responses have significantly refined the debate, they have not eliminated its force. The Free Will Defense articulated by Alvin Plantinga successfully demonstrates that the existence of God and moral evil is not logically contradictory. Similarly, the soul-making approach associated with John Hick offers a broader developmental framework in which suffering plays a role in moral and spiritual growth. Yet coherence alone does not guarantee explanatory adequacy. The persistence of large-scale natural disasters, extreme suffering, and apparently gratuitous harm continues to press the evidential challenge. Appeals to skeptical theism and epistemic humility highlight genuine limits in human understanding, but they also risk weakening the meaningfulness of moral claims about divine goodness if extended too far. The debate therefore shifts from strict logical contradiction to questions of plausibility, moral resonance, and explanatory depth. Ultimately, the problem of evil reveals both the strength and the vulnerability of theistic explanation. It forces a reconsideration of how divine attributes are understood, how moral language applies to God, and how far human reasoning can penetrate ultimate reality. Rather than delivering a final resolution, the discussion underscores the need for philosophical modesty. The limits of theistic explanation do not automatically entail the falsity of theism, but they do mark the boundaries within which rational theology must operate. The enduring significance of the problem lies not only in its challenge to belief but in its capacity to illuminate deeper issues about freedom, responsibility, moral intuition, and the scope of human knowledge. In this sense, the debate remains less a closed argument than an ongoing inquiry into the relationship between suffering and the possibility of divine goodness.

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