Evil and a Selection of its Theological Problems

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Edited by

Benjamin H. Arbour and John R. Gilhooly

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of evil is probably the most popularly recognized of the perennial issues in the philosophy of religion and theology. At root, the problem has been largely unchanged since its formulation in the Riddle of Epicurus. Despite this, according to Daniel Hill, between 1960 and 1998, more than 3,600 articles and books have been written focusing on how one ought to respond to the problem of evil.[1] So, why another volume on the problem of evil? Because it is the problem that just won't go away. Recent formulations of the inductive problem of evil require us to consider new responses to the charge that there is something irrational about believing in God. Furthermore, fresh approaches to the problem of evil offer suggestive ways to enter into a new line of inquiry, both in regards to theistic defenses against various articulations of the problem of evil as well as theodicy. Finally, developments in contemporary theology, especially analytic philosophical theology, likewise require new treatments of the problem of evil. In this volume, we have collected a series of brief but suggestive essays that incorporate responses to these developments by predominantly junior scholars.

Section 1 consists of essays that critique the analytic treatment of the problem of evil, but each essay offers different criticisms. In *The Atheologian's Trilemma*, Michael Willenborg claims that the formulation of the analytic problem contains an implicit conditional sentence that leaves open the possibility of God's existence. Given developments in modal logic and their application to the ontological argument, this situation makes the problem of evil untenable for the atheologian. In *Divine Hiddenness and The Problem of Evil*, Tyler Taber describes the relationship between the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of evil. By describing their structural similarities and differences, he provides a helpful taxonomy for navigating the two problems, including their special emphases. It cannot be, he holds, that they are versions of the same problem in light of some important but crucial dissimilarities between them. In *Anti-Leibnizianism and the Problem of Pointless Evils*, Raymond Stewart addresses a famous account of the inductive problem of evil, first

[1] Daniel J. Hill, "What's New in Philosophy of Religion?" *Philosophy Now* 21 (1998): 30-33, 32.

formulated by William Rowe. Stewart makes use of contemporary understandings of the metaphysics of modality to argue that two plausible commitments regarding the nature of possible worlds undermine the intuitive critique brought by the evidential problem of evil. In *How Much is Too Much? The Problem of Evil and Problems of Vagueness*, Pete Younger raises questions pertaining to the philosophical phenomenon of vagueness and its relation to the problem of evil. After discussing vagueness, Younger addresses one argument offered by John Martin Fischer and Neal Tognazzini against Peter van Inwagen's response to the problem of evil. The sum of this section suggests some weaknesses in the assumptions supporting some versions of the problem of evil or in the ability of the methodology to overcome or give account of the experience of evil.

Section 2 offers a treatment of narrative approaches to the problem of evil. These approaches attempt to show the way in which peculiar features of narrative or story-telling such as dramatic irony, verisimilitude, and distinctions between person-type propositions offer fresh ways to encapsulate our feelings about evil and our response to the theological problems raised by encounters with evil. The turn towards paying close attention to narrative in philosophy is a recent development in analytic circles, and the recovery of narrative theology is generating a rather long literature in contemporary biblical theology. Efforts on the part of analytic theologians to take the biblical witness seriously when seeking to appropriate the tools of philosophical analysis for understanding the metaphysical claims in Scripture are particularly exciting for those interested in analytic theology. In *Stump and Narrative*, John B. Howell, III provides a thorough review and assessment of a seminal work in this narrative approach by Eleonore Stump. In particular, he offers a reflection on the power of narrative to communicate in larger, more comprehensive ways than mere propositional argument. In her essay *Looking Along the Problem of Evil*, Holly Ordway reflects on this type of narrative power in an analysis of Shakespeare as a suggestive example of how literary studies or poetry often provide an underutilized resource for both apologetics as well as addressing philosophical problems. In particular, she describes the benefit that the faculty of *imagination* has for our description of and dealing with evil. In *Mystery and Evil*, John Gilhooly argues that shifts in the treatment of the problem of evil reveal that something deeper than propositional claims and credence levels is at work in our discussions. Hence, a failure to consider encounters with evil from an existential perspective leads to philosophizing about evil that fails to take mystery seriously in regards to both the mystery of evil as well as the mystery of

God. Analytic approaches to the problem of evil offer reductive accountings of evil that must be significantly enlarged if the problem of evil is to capture the worry to which it attempts to give codification. Given in particular the Christian narrative, the philosophical problem of evil is beside the point, yet the phenomenological problem remains one of the fiercest objections to trust in God. It is these existential concerns that make narrative approaches such a promising endeavor.

Section 3 discusses developments in contemporary analytic theology related the problem of evil. In addition to its putative benefits for discussion of human free will, open theism is often thought to help alleviate tensions raised by the problem of evil. In *Open Theism and the Problem of Evil*, Ben Arbour argues that the open view provides no benefit to the theologian that isn't already available on other standard conceptions of divine omniscience. Given the costs associated with open theism, Arbour suggests that there is no good reason to adopt openness theology if concerned only with how theists should respond to the problem of evil. In *Idealism and the Problem of Evil*, Gregory Trickett discusses the recent emphasis on idealism as a meta-ontological framework for describing creation, particularly from the perspective of Berkeleyan immaterialism. He addresses several *prima facie* objections that might come against idealism from the problem of evil, and he suggests how these concerns might be avoided. An important insight in his paper is that idealism faces no objection from moral evil that is not already faced by other accounts with a high view of God's sovereign control. Hence, there is no good reason for thinking that idealism, *mutatis mutandis*, cannot avail itself of available responses to the problem of evil offered elsewhere. A special area of emphasis for further research, however, is the problem of natural evils on idealism. In the final essay of the volume, Tyler McNabb and Erik Baldwin describe a defense of the *Felix Culpa* theodicy against the objection that there would have been better ways for God to achieve maximum happiness in the world.

SECTION 1:

CRITIQUES OF THE ANALYTIC PROBLEM OF EVIL

CHAPTER ONE

THE ATHEOLOGIAN'S TRILEMMA: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND THE MODAL ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

MICHAEL WILLENBORG

Throughout the history of philosophy, there has been no shortage of discussion either of arguments from evil or of modal ontological arguments.[1] What has so far been missing, however, is an exploration of the ways in which the two kinds of arguments might relate to each other. In what follows I take up this task. First, I lay down some very minimal conditions any argument from evil must meet in order to count as a successful piece of atheology. Next, I attempt to isolate the essential premise of such arguments, citing examples from contemporary instances along the way. I argue that there are two ways in which this premise could be construed, and on either construal the result spells trouble for arguments from evil. Construed one way, modal ontological arguments can then be deployed in the service of proving that theism is true; construed the other way, it turns out that the essential premise of arguments from evil cannot be substantiated. In either case, it turns out that arguments from evil cannot be shown to meet the minimal conditions required for successful atheology.

I suggest that the only way of escape involves embracing one or more horns of the following trilemma: one can maintain that God, if he exists, is a contingent being. This allows one to block a key premise in the modal ontological argument, which, as I discuss below, figures prominently in demonstrating that the premise common to all arguments from evil—construed in a particular way—entails that theism is true. One can also maintain that the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactual conditionals,

[1] To see this, one need only consult the respective entries on the argument from evil and ontological arguments in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <plato.stanford.edu>

for all its distinguished philosophical pedigree, is nevertheless mistaken. As I go on to explain, this allows one to block the attempt to show that—construed in another way—the premise common to all arguments from evil cannot be substantiated. Finally, one can deny the validity of the modal ontological argument by denying modal axioms of which it makes use. As my argument unfolds, I say a bit about the prospects for retrenching in response to the atheologian's acceptance of one or more horns of the trilemma.[2]

§1. Successful Arguments from Evil: Some Necessary Conditions

In general, the success conditions for philosophical arguments are far from clear.[3] With respect to arguments from evil in particular, however, it is easier to discern at least a couple of necessary conditions for success. Importantly, though, one's goal in offering such arguments should be kept in mind in this context. If one adduces an argument from evil merely in the service of attempting to lower another's credence in theism, for example, then the standards of success relative to that goal will be quite different than those relative to the goal of undermining one's claim to know that theism is true. For the purposes of my argument, I need not take any position regarding the goals at which arguments from evil should aim. I need only say that, in order to count as a successful piece of atheology, the premises of such an argument must either entail, or make likely that $P(T|E\&K) < r$, where r is some threshold required either for knowledge, or justified belief, or for one's having one's credence lowered.[4] Call this condition (A).

In addition to (A), another condition that an argument from evil must meet in order to count as a successful piece of atheology is that none of its premises entail theism. Call this condition (B). My claim is that no argument from evil can be shown to meet conditions (A) and (B); thus, no

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[2] By 'atheologian' I merely mean anyone who presents an argument from evil—or any other argument—as a successful piece of atheology. In this sense of the term, an atheologian could be an atheist, or an agnostic, or even a theist.

[3] For discussion on this, specifically as it relates to arguments from evil, see Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 37-55; for discussion as it relates to natural theology, though with application to broader issues, see John DePoe and Timothy McGrew, "Natural Theology and the Uses of Argument," *Philosophia Christi* 15:2 (2013): 299-309.

[4] $P(T|E\&K)$ should be read as: "The probability that theism given the evils in the world, combined with our background knowledge.

argument from evil can be shown to be successful. A word about "showing" is in order. While I have no general account of what it is to show that an argument meets some condition or other, I think it will be made clear in what is to come that any such argument will falter in at least one of two ways—either by failing with respect to (B), or by relying on a premise for which no cogent argument can be offered (which, I take it, suffices to prevent anyone from "showing" that the argument that utilizes the premise fulfills (A)). Thus, even in the absence of such a general account, I think it will become clear that, irrespective of whether any argument from evil actually succeeds, no such argument can be shown to succeed.

§2. The Essential Premise of Arguments from Evil

Though arguments from evil come in different shapes and sizes, I argue that all of them make use of a certain general conditional that stipulates what one ought to expect regarding evil in the world given the truth of theism, roughly as follows:[5]

> (EP): If God were to exist, then he wouldn't, or probably wouldn't, allow E to obtain, where E is some state of affairs involving a certain kind, amount, or distribution of evil.[6]

William Rowe's argument, for example, goes as follows:

(1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
(2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Hence:

(3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.[7]

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[5] As I discuss below, I don't think it matters for the purposes of my argument whether the conditional in question is material, strict, or counterfactual.

[6] If one is uncomfortable with talk of states of affairs, (6) may be recast in different ways: E could be a fact that God wouldn't allow to obtain, or a proposition that God wouldn't allow to be true, or a world segment that God would neither strongly nor weakly actualize, etc.

As it happens, both the premises of the above argument, (1) and (2), appear to be claims about what God could or would do given certain evils in the world, and thus what we ought to expect regarding those evils given the truth of theism. Even so, some disambiguating is necessary at this point. For example, there are a couple of different ways the second premise can be construed. One might gloss it as follows:

> (4) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being, and this being is such as to prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering that it can, unless by doing so it would thereby lose some greater good or permit some evil equally bad or worse.

Clearly (4) cannot be what Rowe had in mind, since (4) entails theism while the conclusion of Rowe's argument denies theism. In light of this, it is evident that (2) should be understood, not as a claim about what God is like, but rather as a claim about what God *would be* like if he existed. In other words, (2) should be construed as a counterfactual:

> (5) If God were to exist, he would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering that he could, unless by doing so he would thereby lose some greater good or permit some evil equally bad or worse.

Obviously enough, (5) fits the description of (EP), where E in this case is filled out in terms of intense suffering that God could prevent without thereby losing a greater good or allowing a comparably bad evil.

Consider also Paul Draper's argument from evil.[8] Though framed in probabilistic terms, it nevertheless employs a similar premise. The details of the argument need not concern us here, but, simplifying a bit, he says that the prior probability of the biological distribution of pain and pleasure that one finds in the world is much higher given some alternative to theism than it is given theism.[9] In order to maintain this, of course, he needs to make certain claims about what is (or what would be) true if God does (or were to) exist. Thus, even Draper's probabilistic argument requires (EP), where E is filled out in terms of the biological distribution of pain and pleasure characterizing the actual world.

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[7] William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16:4 (1979): 336.

[8] Paul Draper, "The Biological Distribution of Pleasure and Pain: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23, No. 3 (1989): 331-350.

[9] Ibid., 333.

The same holds for J. L. Schellenberg's new logical argument from evil.[10] As was true of Draper's argument, so too the details of Schellenberg's argument need not detain us. Suffice it to note that throughout he employs several premises of the sort I've described, such as the claim that, "[i]f every worldly good that permits or requires evil is greatly exceeded by a good of the same type, existing prior to creation in God, then any world with goods permitting or requiring evil is exceeded by a world modeling the corresponding pure goods in God."[11] Elsewhere he notes that, even when not explicitly stated as such, premises such as the one just mentioned are to be understood as conditionals, the antecedent of which is God's existence.[12] Thus it, too, requires (EP).

Lastly, I consider J. L. Mackie's older formulation of the logical argument from evil.[13] It might be thought that in this argument one finds a counterexample to the claim that the essential premise of arguments from evil is a conditional of the sort featured in the arguments already examined. It is set out as follows: after noting that God is supposed to be omnipotent and wholly good, Mackie says that he needs:

> …some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent.' These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.[14]

The key here is to note that, while Mackie has set forth his quasi-logical rules as distinct claims, doing so is logically equivalent to their conjunction, which is to say that it is logically equivalent to the claim that:

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[10] J. L. Schellenberg, "A New Logical Argument From Evil," in Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell: 2014). I discuss J. L. Mackie's "old" version of the logical argument from evil below.

[11] Ibid., 39.

[12] Ibid., 36, footnote # 5: "Certain of these propositions, just like the three commitments, would not rightly be regarded as necessary truths by *nontheists* without the addition, at the appropriate place, of the phrase "if God exists." But because it would be awkward to continually employ this phrase, and because theists will regard the relevant propositions as necessary truths without it, I have left it tacit."

[13] J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in Michael Martin and Rick Monnier, eds., *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Press, 2003): 61-73.

[14] Ibid., 62.

(6) If there is a good, omnipotent thing, then it eliminates evil completely.[15]

The above examples aside, there is a perfectly general reason to think arguments from evil require (EP). If a particular argument from evil includes no claim as to what the truth of theism should lead us to expect regarding evil in the world, then it is quite difficult to see how any particular fact about the evil in the world could serve to make theism any less likely than it would otherwise be. If theism doesn't suggest, at the very least, that the world probably wouldn't have the kind or amount of evil that it does in fact have, then why would the world's evils spell trouble for theism in any way at all? Moving forward, then, I assume that all arguments from evil feature—in some way or other—a premise equivalent to (EP).

§3. The Relevance of the Modal Ontological Argument

I've argued above that (EP) captures the essential premise of arguments from evil. The relevance of (EP) to my argument lies in the two ways in which it might be construed. Though usually reserved for counterfactual conditionals, let a 'counterpossible' be any conditional the antecedent of which is impossible. A question to consider, then, is whether (EP) is a counterpossible. At this point, one might, perhaps very reasonably, simply claim agnosticism. But even supposing that one is completely in the dark on the matter, it is uncontroversial that the answer is either yes or no. I now argue that if the answer is no, then it follows that theism is true.

If (EP) isn't a counterpossible, then it follows that its antecedent is possibly true, from which it follows that it is possible that God exists. If it is possible that God exists, then one can use the modal ontological argument to show that God actually exists. [16] According to most contemporary theists, God exists necessarily if at all.[17] Thus, to say that it is possible that God exists is to say that there is a possible world in which God exists necessarily. One need only add the claim that an object's modal

[15] This should be construed as a conditional, rather than as Mackie himself construes it, because otherwise it entails the truth of theism. Cf. the earlier discussion of (2) as it related to Rowe's argument.

[16] This is a slight oversimplification, since there are, in fact, many different modal ontological arguments. For a paradigm instance of such an argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974): 104-112.

[17] But not all. More on this below.

status is the same in all possible worlds to reach the conclusion that, since God exists necessarily in at least one possible world, he therefore exists necessarily in all of them, including the actual world.[18] Thus, if (EP) isn't a counterpossible, it follows that theism is true. Thus—if indeed (EP) isn't a counterpossible—then any argument from evil that makes use of (EP) will violate (B) and will on that account be unsuccessful.

In response, there are three ways atheologians might attempt to avoid this consequence. The first way is by denying that God exists necessarily if at all, as indeed even some theists have done.[19] If God exists contingently, then no proof of his existence proceeding from his mere possibility will be forthcoming. Here it seems to me that the proper reply for the theist is simply to cede the point. Indeed, if God exists contingently, then even if (EP) isn't a counterpossible, arguments from evil may nevertheless have some force. But why should that concern someone who thinks God exists necessarily? If arguments from evil can be wielded against a theism that countenances a contingent God, then so much the worse for that brand of theism. Or, so I suggest, should be the attitude of those who think God exists necessarily. If atheologians want to train their fire on God construed as a contingent being, I'm at a loss to explain why traditional theists shouldn't step aside and let them.

The second way atheologians might attempt to avoid the above consequence is by challenging the modal ontological argument's assumption that an object's modal status is the same in all possible worlds. Why think that merely because some object exists necessarily in one possible world, it must therefore exist necessarily in all such worlds?[20] Again, it seems to me that for purposes of my argument, one can set such issues aside. As it turns out, there is an argument in the vicinity that doesn't rely on any contentious modal axioms. Instead, it requires enriching one's concept of God just a bit. Note what Alvin Plantinga says about God's necessary existence:

> Most of us who believe in God think of Him as a being than whom it's not possible that there be a greater. But we don't think of Him as a being who, had things been different, would have been powerless or uninformed or of

[18] Ibid., 105.

[19] For example, Richard Swinburne, "What Kind of Necessary Being Could God Be?" *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4:2 (2012): 1-8.

[20] For criticisms along these lines, see Hugh Chandler, "Some Ontological Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy* 10:1 (1993): 18-32; and William Forgie, "The Modal Ontological Argument and the Necessary *a posteriori*," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29:3 (1991): 129-41.

> dubious moral character. God doesn't just happen to be a greatest possible being; He couldn't have been otherwise.[21]

Suppose Plantinga is correct: God doesn't just happen to be the greatest possible being. On this view, it is necessarily the case that God is maximally great. What's interesting is that necessary existence is itself supposed to be partly constitutive of maximal greatness.[22] Thus, it follows that it is necessarily the case that God exists necessarily. Put in terms of possible worlds, God exists as a necessary being in every possible world. Thus, one no longer needs the premise that an object's modal status is the same in all possible worlds in order to legitimately infer God's existence from the claim that his existence is possible. Instead, one needs only the claim that God's modal status is the same in all possible worlds, a claim which, on Plantinga's view anyway, follows from his being necessarily maximally great. For theists who are comfortable thinking of God along these lines, the atheologian will have to do more than argue against certain modal axioms in order to avoid the consequence that (EP) entails theism.

§4. Counterpossibles and Vacuous Truth

The third way the atheologian might seek to avoid the consequence that (EP) entails theism is by maintaining that (EP) is a counterpossible. In considering whether this is so, it will be helpful to ask more generally just what sort of conditional (EP) is supposed to be. You'll recall that earlier I framed (EP) as a counterfactual conditional. But what if it ought to be framed either as a material conditional or as a strict conditional instead? It turns out that on either of these latter options, the claim that (EP) is a counterpossible entails that (EP) is vacuously true—where a conditional is vacuously true if and only if, given the truth of the antecedent, any proposition can be substituted for the consequent while preserving the truth of the conditional resulting therefrom.

If (EP) is a material conditional, then (EP) is true so long as its antecedent is false; if (EP) is a counterpossible, then its antecedent is necessarily false. Thus, on the assumption that (EP) is a counterpossible, every conditional that shares its antecedent is true. Thus, if (EP) is both a counterpossible and a material conditional, it is vacuously true. A similar result obtains if (EP) is both a counterpossible and a strict conditional. Under these assumptions, (EP) is true just in case the possible worlds in which its antecedent is true are the same worlds in which its consequent is

[21] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 107.
[22] Ibid., 108.

true. Given that its antecedent is impossible, it follows that there aren't any worlds in which its antecedent is true, from which it follows that its antecedent and its consequent are true in exactly the same number of worlds—zero. Thus, if (EP) is both a counterpossible and a strict conditional, it follows that it is vacuously true.

What's the significance of this, especially in light of the fact that I originally set forth (EP) as neither a material nor a strict conditional, but as a counterfactual? Given the standard, Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactual conditionals, it also follows that a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent is vacuously true, from which it follows—given the semantics—that if (EP) is a counterpossible, then it is vacuously true as originally set forth.[23]

In light of the discussion on the modal ontological argument, one might think that the atheologian had better consider (EP) a counterpossible, lest it entail theism. Be that as it may, the atheologian certainly can't offer that as an argument for the truth of (EP), since that would beg the question against the theist. How, then, might the atheologian argue for (EP)?

Presumably, arguments for (EP) have to appeal either to intuitions or to definitions—either of God, particular evils, or both. This is Mackie's professed route, as encapsulated in (5) above. But as the subsequent discussion of Mackie's argument showed, (5) can't be delivered merely by definition. The quasi-logical rules used in its service aren't definitions; they are claims about the relations between goodness, evil, and omnipotence that require appeal to our intuitions. This, I say, holds with regard to (EP) as well. Mere definitions are insufficient to the task. To argue for (EP), one must traffic in intuitions.

The problem for the atheologian at this point is that, if (EP) is a counterpossible, then it's also true that:

(7) If God were to exist, then he would allow E to obtain.

Why is this a problem? Presumably, anyone who has an intuition in favor of (EP) also has an intuition of equal force that the conjunction of (EP) and (7) is false. But, given the standard semantics, the conjunction of (EP) and (7) isn't false. Thus, in this context, intuition seems to be an unreliable guide. When one takes into account that literally any conditional with an impossible antecedent is true, it seems to me that what ought to be said here is just that we don't have any intuitions at all with respect to counterpossibles—that any intuitions we may have with respect

[23] See David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1973).

to conditionals are limited to those whose antecedents are possibly true. But if that's right, then the atheologian won't be able to offer a cogent argument for (EP), given that appeals to both definitions and intuitions are insufficient in this regard.

Another line of thinking that may motivate the same conclusion regarding the impotence of intuitions vis-à-vis counterpossibles involves reflecting on the notion of an accidentally true belief. Following Trenton Merricks, I say that "a belief is accidentally true for one, to a first approximation, if its being true has no relevant connection to the reasons for, or processes involved in, one's holding the belief."[24] On the assumption that no accidentally true belief is warranted, it follows that no belief in the truth of a counterpossible is warranted, if that belief is based on an intuition that the counterpossible in question is true. This is because—given the relevant semantics—the truth of the conditional at issue is solely a function of its antecedent, in a way that bears no relevant connection to one's intuition that the conditional is true. If all that's right, then belief in (EP) based on intuitions cannot be warranted.

Thus, the atheologian appears to be in the following situation: either (EP) is a counterpossible or it isn't. If it isn't, then theism is true by modal ontological argument, and all arguments from evil fail with respect to (B). If (EP) is a counterpossible, then belief in it is unwarranted, and no argument from evil can be shown to fulfill (A). Either way, it seems that no argument from evil can be shown to be successful.

At this stage one might think that the best option for the atheologian is to give up the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics. Unfortunately, it isn't obvious that doing so will allow arguments from evil to proceed unharmed. For example, the atheologian must maintain that God and humans are incompossible; otherwise, theism is possibly true, and thereby actually true. But if God and humans are incompossible, it follows that it is necessarily true that humans cannot coexist alongside God. It is thus part of the essence of humanity to be at odds with God in this way. Thus understood, the coexistence of God and humans entails a contradiction. Thus, irrespective of the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics, a conditional of the form:

(8) If God and humans were to exist, then God would allow E to obtain.

is vacuously true—since any proposition follows from a contradictory antecedent. Suppose, then, that the atheologian drops the Lewis-Stalnaker

[24] Trenton Merricks, "Warrant Entails Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55:4 (1995): 843.

semantics; she then maintains that (EP) is non-vacuously true. "Well and good," the theist may reply. "It's true that if God were to exist, he wouldn't allow E to obtain. But if theism is false, then the following conditional is also true: if God and humans were to exist, he would allow E to obtain. And honestly, the only kind of theism I'm interested in defending is one according to which God is the creator of humans. On that sort of theism, you must view (EP) as vacuously true, with or without the standard semantics. And if (EP) is vacuously true, then it can't be substantiated. So you've made no advance by dropping the semantics. You're still in exactly the same position."

§5. Conclusion

To sum up, all arguments from evil must commit to (EP). If (EP) isn't a counterpossible, then theism is true by the modal ontological argument, and arguments from evil fail with respect to (B). If (EP) is a counterpossible, then (EP) must be argued for on the basis of intuitions. But if it's a counterpossible, then the intuitions that motivate it aren't justificatory. Thus, either arguments from evil are unsuccessful, or no argument from evil can be shown to fulfill condition (A). Thus, no argument from evil can be shown to be successful. In response, the atheologian may seek escape either by denying that God should be thought of as a necessary being, or by questioning the validity of the modal ontological argument, or by denying the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactual conditionals. Throughout I have attempted to assess whether the supposed escape hatches actually deliver the refuge they promise. In each case, their prospects are questionable, at best. It seems to me that a similar sort of argument might be deployed with equal effect against other pieces of atheology, such as the argument from divine hiddenness. But this is a project the development of which I must leave to others.

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CHAPTER TWO

DIVINE HIDDENNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

TYLER TABER

The problem of evil (hereafter POE), put roughly, is said to exemplify a conflict between the claim that God exists, on the one hand, and the fact that evil exists, on the other. The problem of divine hiddenness (hereafter PDH), put roughly, is said to exemplify a conflict between the claim that God exists, on the one hand, and that God's existence is not clear, on the other. Many philosophers and theologians—perhaps most—suggest that the two problems enjoy a tight relationship. I analyze in this paper the relationship between POE and PDH. First, I spell out *similarity* between POE and PDH; second, I spell out *dissimilarity* between the two. I will not provide reasons to *reject* the presented similarity but do, however, provide reasons to *accept* what I perceive to be dissimilarity between POE and PDH.

§1. Similarity between the Problems of Evil and Divine Hiddenness

In what follows, I list several reasons for thinking there to be similarity between POE and PDH.[1] First, it seems that POE and PDH can be understood in a similar way such that both pose a threat, or a problem, for *theism*. For one could argue that evil and the 'hiddenness of God' are just what one would expect to find on, say, naturalism but that, given theism,

[1] Though I disagree with some of his conclusions, variations of my reasons can be found in J.L. Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Phillip L. Quinn, eds. (Malden: Blackwell, 2010), 512-13, as well as in his "The Hiddenness Problem and the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010): 45-60.

these phenomena are just what they are: challenges or *problems*. As John Greco writes of both problems, "How is God's existence compatible with the thing at issue?"[2] Second, in conjunction with the first provided reason, both POE and PDH can be understood as bad states of affairs; the former is self-evident, whereas the latter, a theist (argues J.L. Schellenberg) "may keenly feel the value of what (she takes to be) an existing relationship with God and may therefore be inclined to view anything contributing to its absence, such as nonbelief [putatively caused by divine hiddenness], as *a bad thing*."[3]

Third, PDH can be thought of as *part* of POE, or POE a *part* of PDH. Consider first the former: how PDH might be thought of as part of POE. In his 1993 argument (from *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*), Schellenberg claims that "the problem of reasonable nonbelief, as I develop it, must be viewed as a special instance of the empirical problem of evil."[4] Chad Meister, for example, explains that divine hiddenness is "one aspect of the problem of evil,"[5] whereas William Wainwright describes divine hiddenness as a "form of the problem of evil," "aggravated by evil's pervasiveness."[6] Richard Swinburne argues that the hiddenness of God "is a variant on the normal argument from evil against the existence of God,"[7] noting elsewhere that "some human ignorance of God may be a

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[2] John Greco, "No-fault Atheism," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 111. See 110-16 for Greco's further analysis of POE and PDH. For my review of this volume, see Taber, "Review of Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds., "*Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*," forthcoming.

[3] Schellenberg, "Divine Hiddenness," 513; emphasis added.

[4] J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 9; this is the newly prefaced version to the original 1993 argument (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). See his comments on pg. 6: "It is interesting to note at this juncture that the problem posed for theology by the argument I develop may also be construed as a special instance of the problem of evil." "Hence I seem to be in a position to claim that the problem of reasonable nonbelief is a problem of evil" (7).

[5] Meister, "Evil and the Hiddenness of God," in *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 138.

[6] William Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Paul K. Moser and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.

[7] Richard Swinburne. *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 267.

moral evil."[8] Jeremy Evans asks his readers to "recall that divine hiddenness is a *subspecies* of the problem of evil."[9] Thomas Morris writes:

> The problem of the hiddenness of God can be viewed as *a limited version of* the problem of evil: What could possibly justify a good God's allowing us to be afflicted with so great an evil as the deprivation of any clear awareness of his presence, a deprivation bemoaned by both the psalmist and the saint?[10]

Similarly, Paul Moser explains that "God often seems hidden from some people at such times . . . and this fact of hiddenness emerges as a cognitive variation of the problem of evil."[11] T.J. Mawson writes that "this argument [divine hiddenness] may be correctly thought of as a version of the Problem of Evil."[12] Further, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Moser, in a descriptive essay, propose that PDH may be a *subset* of the traditional problem of suffering and evil,[13] just as Jonathan Kvanvig explains that, whatever divine hiddenness is, it is merely a special component *of* POE, in which case adding divine hiddenness *to* the traditional problem of evil does not tip the scales in favor of atheism.[14] Commenting on Eleonore Stump's work on suffering and evil, Evan Fales says, "Divine hiddenness

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[8] Swinburne. *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203.

[9] Jeremy Evans. *The Problem of Evil: The Challenge to Essential Christian Beliefs* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 67; emphasis added.

[10] Thomas V. Morris. *Making Sense of it All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 89; emphasis added. See also Morris, "The Hidden God," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 5-21.

[11] Paul Moser. *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 261. In email correspondence, Moser notes that we need not say that *all* cases of hiddenness are subsumable to the problem of evil, maintaining that God could have good purposes for being hidden from some persons at some times, which may *not* arise from a situation of evil and/or suffering.

[12] T.J. Mawson. "Praying to Stop Being an Atheist," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 67 (2010): 175.

[13] "Introduction: The Hiddenness of God," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6-8.

[14] Jonathan Kvanvig. "Divine Hiddenness: What is the Problem?," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159-60.

is problematic because it seems to represent one *type* of gratuitous evil."[15] So, in short, many contemporary thinkers take PDH to be a part of the greater POE.

Consider now the latter: POE as part of PDH. For instance, "The entire problem of evil," explains Robert McKim, "may be thought of *as a part of* the problem of the hiddenness of God, since the presence of evil in the world is a fact that makes for the hiddenness of God."[16] Morris, noted above, explains on the one hand that PDH can be taken to be a part of POE, arguing further that, "On the other hand . . . the problem of evil can be seen *as a subcategory* of the problem of the hiddenness of God."[17] William Rowe seems to propose that POE inevitably *leads* to PDH; for God as a loving parent, if he exists, would want to be present alongside his suffering children, particularly if those same children could not understand the reasons he might have for allowing such suffering.[18] Finally, James Keller writes that:

> the two problems are so closely related that either *can be construed as a part of the other*. Because some human suffering arises from a failure to have faith in God—or so theists usually allege—and from lack of knowledge of God's will, the hiddenness of God is part of the problem of evil; that is, if God is as many theists have claimed, we might find it inexplicable that God remains hidden, since that hiddenness causes suffering. . . . In this way, the evil in the world contributes to the hiddenness of God.[19]

Fourth, from a Christian theistic perspective, it can be said that there is similarity between PDH and the so-called *soteriological* POE. The soteriological POE roughly is the problem that there is a God who has provided salvation for humanity but that there are some persons who never hear the Gospel and so are lost. And, assuming that some persons are

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[15] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Evan Fales, "Journeying in Perplexity," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 89; emphasis added.

[16] Robert McKim, "The Hiddenness of God," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 141; emphasis added.

[17] Morris. *Making Sense of it All*, 89; emphasis added.

[18] William Rowe. "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 276, 285n.35.

[19] James Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 14; emphasis added.

saved and that some are lost, is not this fact a part of the grander problem of God's hiddenness? For if God were more obvious, as one might postulate, then more persons could respond to his revelation and be saved.[20]

Fifth, from a Christian theistic perspective, Scripture is full of places that *prima facie* appear to tie the two phenomena closely together. "Why do you hide your face?," the psalmist writes: "Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (44:24). "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (10:1). And just a few passages later: "How long, O Lord? . . . How long will you hide your face from me?" (13:1). The author of Job confesses, "Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy?" (14:24; cf. Is 45:15).

Sixth, POE and PDH, in their generic form, can both lead to *arguments*, either logical (deductive) or evidential (inductive), against God's existence.[21] The argument from evil has a distinguished history. In this case, like the very first line of similarity offered above, POE and PDH, when they take argument form, both can be said to count as *evidence* against, and not just generic problems for, theism.

Seventh, defenses and theodicies can be applied to either or to both POE and PDH.[22] A defense is a *possible* "story" explaining the consistency of God's existence and evil (or divine hiddenness), whereas a theodicy is an *actual* "story" explaining the consistency of God's existence and evil (or divine hiddenness).[23] Eighth, skeptical theism can be applied to either or to both POE and PDH; skeptical theism is a response to the evidential POE, particularly with respect to gratuitous suffering, whereby the skeptical theist expresses skepticism about one's ability to determine if

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[20] While the soteriological POE is widely discussed, I do not know of any instances in the literature where PDH is *specifically* linked to the soteriological POE (or vice versa). For discussion of the soteriological POE, see, for example: David P. Hunt, "Middle Knowledge and the Soteriological Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 1 (1991): 3-26; David Basinger, "Divine Omniscience and the Soteriological Problem of Evil: Is the Type of Knowledge God Possesses Relevant?," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 1-18.

[21] For this specific point, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Hiddenness of God," accessed May 7, 2014, http://faculty.wwu.edu/howardd/HiddennessofGod.pdf.

[22] See further Peter van Inwagen, "What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30-31.

[23] Van Inwagen, "What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?," 30-32. "Story" is van Inwagen's term.

encountered evils truly are gratuitous.[24] Recently, skeptical theism has been used for PDH.[25]

Ninth, POE and PDH can both have *existential* repercussions. POE, as expressed above, can take both logical and evidential forms; but it is also customary to speak of the *existential* POE. Perhaps the same can be said with respect to PDH. One may find oneself, for instance, internally afflicted and troubled having experienced evil or suffering, just as one may feel abandoned or forsaken, having prayed to God for help, only to receive silence, no answer. POE and PDH, however they are to be understood, both seem to share these themes. Yujin Nagasawa, in a recent essay, develops what he calls the "'the problem of divine absence,' which is a combination of the most intense form of the problem of divine hiddenness and the most intense form of the problem of evil."[26]

In close, I have surveyed several reasons for thinking there is much similarity between the two problems; noted also were putative theological (i.e., soteriological) and scriptural similarities. I do not provide reasons to reject the similarity, but will now attempt to give reasons to accept *dissimilarity* between POE and PDH.

§2. Dissimilarity between Evil and Divine Hiddenness

My claim in this section is that, while clearly there *is* similarity between these two phenomena, there are also motivations for seeing some dissimilarity; I explore philosophical as well as theological and biblical reasons to support my claim. First, it appears that, for POE, there is something *present*, such as the existence of evil (or pain or suffering). For PDH, however, there is something *absent*, such as the reality of God, a shortage of religious experience, and so forth. Perhaps the reverse is true: for POE, it can be said that there is something *absent*, particularly for those who hold that evil is the privation of good, whereas for PDH, there is

[24] See Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 374-402.

[25] Justin McBrayer and Philip Swenson, "Scepticism about the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 129-50; see also Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Greco, "No-fault Atheism," 115-16 for further examination of skeptical theism applied to PDH.

[26] Yujin Nagasawa. "Silence, Evil, and Shusaku Endo," in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 246.

something *present*, such as nonbelief (which presumably would not arise if God were more obvious).

Second, PDH can be construed as a purely epistemological problem, perhaps in a way that POE cannot. According to van Inwagen, POE is roughly the problem of "bad things,"[27] of how to find meaning in a world where everything is touched by evil. But van Inwagen asks us to imagine a secular utopia, a world with "alabaster cities, undimmed by human tears," where there is no pain or "premature death," no "violence, accident, or disease." Presumably, there would be no jealousy, adultery, or murder; can such a place, a possible world, be imagined? "Could someone in this world," he notes, "perhaps one of its atheists, raise the problem of divine hiddenness?"[28] It appears so, and I think that this point helps to show a dissimilarity between POE and PDH; van Inwagen writes that "in a world that lacks any real suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God is a purely *epistemological* problem, or a cluster of epistemological problems [i.e., in which case POE is not]."[29] Consider also Howard-Snyder's remarks; he notes that

> inculpable nonbelief [as putatively caused by divine hiddenness] is supposed to be evidence against the existence of God *independent* of evil and suffering. To see how this can be, imagine a society in a world much like our own but in which there is no evil or suffering. While no argument from evil could arise in such a society, some of its citizens might maintain that there is a God while others maintain that there is not since there are inculpable nonbelievers.[30]

In these comments, Howard-Snyder, like van Inwagen, has similar motivations for thinking there is dissimilarity between POE and PDH. Notably, Schellenberg, since his 1993 argument, has come to change his

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[27] Peter van Inwagen. *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4; this brief exposition of van Inwagen is helped by his "What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?," 24-32 (where the former expounds upon the latter), as well as his "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," in *The Evidential Problem of Evil*, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151-74.

[28] Van Inwagen. "What is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?," 24-26.

[29] Van Inwagen. *The Problem of Evil*, 142. He writes, "The problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness are, therefore, not identical" (137).

[30] Daniel Howard-Snyder. "Hiddenness of God" (online article); emphasis added; see also Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green, "Hiddenness of God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/divine-hiddenness/>.