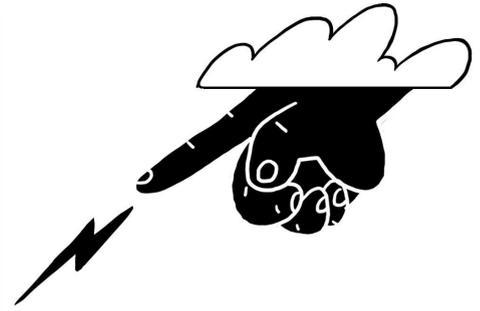


The evil god challenge

The philosopher Stephen Law uses the idea of an 'evil god' as a thought experiment to challenge the reasonableness of theodicy. Theodicy attempts to show that, despite all the suffering in the world, an omnipotent and benevolent god could still exist. Law points out that the same arguments could be equally well used to show that, despite all the good in the world, an evil god could exist. The thought experiment is not intended as a serious argument for an evil god, but as an attempt to demonstrate the problems with theodicy.



Imagine the possibility that the universe was created by an omnipotent, evil god: a god of unlimited power and malice. Is such a god plausible? Many would say not. They would highlight all the evidence of goodness in the world: the beauty and the joy to be found in nature, our body's ability to defend us against disease and heal us from injury, and our ability to be kind and caring to one another. Many would say this evidence would make the notion of an evil god extremely unlikely.

But can we defend such a malevolent deity? Perhaps he gave us **free will** so that we might become evil ourselves rather than commanding us to do so. The goodness that sometimes results would be a small price to pay for the potential for genuine evil. Perhaps **we need certain goods to allow certain evils**. We could not, for example, display vice or jealousy, without there being some people who were healthy, wealthy, and happy. Perhaps **this world is built to destroy our characters**: we are given good health and pleasure in our youth, only so that the pain is more acute when such gifts are taken away in later life. Perhaps this is **the worst of all possible worlds** or perhaps the good in this life is there to make the evils of the afterlife appear so much greater. We cannot understand the evil god's mysterious plan.

Despite these defences, most people would conclude that the existence of an evil deity was highly unlikely. But why should the quantity of good in the world count as evidence against the existence of an evil god, but the quantity of suffering not be evidence against the existence of a benevolent god?

Some might highlight miracles and religious experiences. Those who believe in them may say these are always positive and are therefore evidence of a benevolent god. But is this because our definition of 'miracles' is that they are positive, happy events? What is to say that a divine being is not intervening to cause negative, harmful events? It is also possible to argue that an evil god would not want people to know he or she was evil. Perhaps such an evil god would reveal himself through miracles or religious experiences to different groups but then make them believe contradictory things in order to cause conflict.

The evil god, therefore, although seemingly absurd, can be defended in all the ways a benevolent god can be. Can religious believers therefore say why the idea of a benevolent god is more reasonable than the idea of an evil god?