

ABSTRACT OF *GOD, THE BEST, AND EVIL*

Overview of the book

God, the Best and Evil has three closely interrelated main aims:

- to explore some implications of divine omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness for God's providential policies, and in particular to investigate whether God is in some sense a maximizer
- to assess the strength of objections to the existence of God, based on the apparent fact that God could have created a better world than this one
- to assess the strength of objections to the existence of God, based on evil.

Here is a summary of some major conclusions reached in the book:

To *create* a (possible) world is to strongly or weakly actualize it. A world is *prime* if God can create it, and he cannot create a world better than it. I argue that: (1) If there is at least one prime world, then if God does create some world he will create one of them. (2) If there are no prime worlds, then it does not follow that God does not exist. Instead, what follows is that if God creates a world he will create one that is good enough, despite the fact that he could create a world which is better. (3) These conclusion does not give rise to a good objection to theism, based on the apparent fact that the actual world is improvable, and is not good enough (4) Even if there is a best world, or several equal-best worlds, God cannot create any of them. (5) A good partial theodicy for evil can be provided, appealing to goods bound up with human freewill, moral responsibility, and the roles of individuals' own personal traits in shaping their own and other people's lives. The partial theodicy is neutral between Theological Compatibilism and libertarianism (6) There are no recent strong objections to the existence of God, based on evil.

Chapter 1. Introduction: problems, concepts and background theories

Chapter 1 outlines the project, defending its moral propriety, and explaining some key concepts – such as *omnipotence*, *creation*, and *counterfactual of creaturely freedom* -- which are used later on. It introduces readers to three important contemporary theories of divine providence: Theological Determinism, Molinism and Open Theism. Since there is disagreement about how best to understand various terms, and about the presuppositions and implications of various theories, some sections of the chapter turn out to go well beyond stage setting, and to contain complex philosophical argument. For example, the chapter explores how God could compare his options concerning deterministic worlds with his options concerning indeterministic worlds.

Chapter 2. God and worlds than which there are none better

The a priori investigation of God's providential policies depends on one's understanding of what options God has, and what options he has depends on the structure of the array of worlds. Chapter 2 continues the investigation. It starts with a discussion of whether any possible world has infinite value, and of whether for every world there is at least one better world, and concludes that currently available considerations do not settle either question. The chapter then argues that even if there are worlds than which there are none better, we cannot infer that if God exists then the actual world is one of them. This conclusion is reached independently of any assumption concerning which of Theological Compatibilism, Molinism and Open Theism is to be preferred.

Chapter 3. Divine choice from infinite hierarchies of creatable worlds

I do not believe that we know whether there are prime worlds. But William L. Rowe holds that there are none, and he (along with various other recent authors) argues that this entails that God does not exist. The chapter argues that the alleged entailment does not hold. God's choice situation when there are no prime worlds is likened to that of a finite agent making a self-interested, rational choice between infinitely many better and better options, and argues that both God and the finite agents should satisfice – that is, select an outcome which is good enough.

Chapter 4. World-creation when there are prime worlds

There is a presumption that in bringing about the better overall outcome, one acts in the better way. But the presumption can be defeated by special circumstances. This chapter argues that if there are prime worlds and God is choosing which world to create, then it is implausible that any relevant defeater obtains, and so God will create a prime world. Putting this result together with one of the results of Chapter 2 yields the further conclusion that even if there is a world than which there is none better, God cannot create it.

Chapter 5. Empirical objections to theism, not based on evil

This chapter states and refutes the following objection to theism, distinct from the problem of evil. Chapter 4 argued that if there are prime worlds and God creates a world then God creates a prime world. But even leaving evil aside, it is obvious that the actual world is not prime. Chapter 3 argued that if there are no prime worlds and God creates a world then God satisfices by creating a world that is good enough, relative to this choice situation. But even leaving evil aside, it is obvious that the actual world is not good enough relative to this choice situation. Therefore neither Theological Determinism nor Molinism is true. Open Theism encounters a similar difficulty, generated by the plausible idea that if God exists then he cannot 'replace' the actual world by a better one.

Chapter 6. Logical arguments from evil, against the existence of God

This chapter discusses attempts to refute theism by appeal to premises which entail that God does not exist. J.L. Mackie's paper 'Evil and Omnipotence' (1955) and H.J. McCloskey's book *God and Evil* offer such arguments. Other attempts rely on premises identifying non-defeasible moral duties applying to all rational agents, including God if he exists. In each case, the chapter argues that one premise is either false or doubtful, unless the argument is reinterpreted as an evidential one rather than a logical one.

Chapter 7. Theodicy for two general truths about evil

This chapter identifies some truths in virtue of which God is justified in ensuring or allowing that human beings undergo a lot of suffering, weakness, paralysis, blindness, mental retardation, phobias, delusions, and so on, and frequently choose and act in morally wrong ways. The central idea is that if God were morally required to ensure that there is little or no evil, then rational creatures would have at most low degrees of freedom and moral responsibility for each other's well-being, and the absence of evil would be independent of individuals' distinctive personal traits. The chapter is neutral between compatibilism and libertarianism.

Chapter 8. Evidential arguments from evil against the existence of God

This chapter attacks four recent, representative evidential arguments, ones offered

respectively by Michael Tooley, William L. Rowe and J.L. Schellenberg, together with an argument from horrific evils, arising from Chapter 6. I argue that these four challenges to theism involve either false premises or difficulties with inductive logic, or else can be largely dealt with using resources supplied by Chapter 7.