

Introduction to Philosophy

Reason and Religious Faith: Evil and the Paradox of Omnipotence

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence".

Background

As seen already, some theists (such as Richard Swinburne) argue that the existence of evil and suffering is the price humans must pay for their free will. According to this argument, it is logically impossible for God to have created perfectly free and perfectly good creatures. In contrast, J. L. Mackie uses the problem of evil to reject belief in God by claiming this problem demonstrates that such belief is irrational. In particular, Mackie argues that the attributes traditionally ascribes to God by Western monotheistic religions—specifically omnipotence and perfect benevolence—are inconsistent with the existence of evil. Mackie defends the position that there is no logical contradiction in the conception of a God who creates people who always freely choose to do what is morally correct.

Questions

1. According to Mackie, there are three propositions (call these P₁, P₂, and P₃) that are "essential parts of most theological positions". What are these three propositions? In addition, Mackie gives two "additional principles" (call these A₁ and A₂) that are commonly assumed. What are these two principles?
2. Why does accepting these five positions (P₁, P₂, P₃, A₁, and A₂) apparently lead to a contradiction? What is the general form of an "adequate" solution to this problem? What is the general form of the several "inadequate" solutions to this problem?
3. Mackie addresses four proposed solutions to the problem of evil, finding each to be wanting. Why does the first of these involve a rejection of A₁ and A₂ and why is that problematic? How does the second involve a rejection of A₂ and why is that problematic? How does Mackie explain the third solution and why is it problematic?
4. The fourth proposed solution claims that "evil is due to human free will". How does Mackie explain this solution? What is Mackie's argument that there is no logical impossibility in God creating beings who choose freely to do what is right and why does there seem to two senses of "freedom" involved here? What is the Paradox of Omnipotence and why is this problematic for the fourth proposed solution?
5. Given that they reach different conclusions, Mackie and Richard Swinburne cannot both be right. Where exactly in their respective arguments do they disagree? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?