

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

Lecture 31

The Logical Version of the Problem of Evil

Last time we began to look at the logical version of the problem of evil. You will recall this version of the problem claims that the co-existence of God and the suffering in the world is logically impossible. Given the suffering and evil in the world, it is logically impossible that God exists.

The statements

1. An all-powerful, all-loving God exists.

and

2. Evil and suffering exist

are not explicitly contradictory to each other. So the atheist must be assuming some hidden premises if he thinks this is an *implicit* contradiction – premises which would bring out the contradiction and make it explicit.

We identified two such premises. The first one was:

3. If God is all-powerful (as Christians claim) then he can create any world that he wants, including a world with no evil and no suffering.
4. If God is all-good then he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering.

Since God is all-powerful and all-good, it would follow therefore that suffering does not exist. Since suffering does exist, one can conclude that therefore God does not exist.

We began to look at those hidden assumptions and ask ourselves: are they necessarily true? We saw first of all that that assumption that “if God is all-powerful he can create any world that he wants” is not necessarily true because if it is even possible that human beings have freedom of the will then there may be worlds that in and of themselves are logically possible but they are not feasible for God to create because people would not freely do what God wants them to do. It is logically impossible to make someone freely do something. If there is a freedom of the will (or if that possibility exists) it follows that it is not necessarily true that God can just create any old world that he wants to create. On that basis alone the atheist’s argument collapses and is fallacious.

Let’s go on to the second assumption: “If God is all-loving and all-good then he would prefer a world without suffering.” Is that necessarily true? Well, I don’t think so. It doesn’t seem like it. Because God could have other overriding reasons for allowing the suffering in the world. We all know of cases in which we permit or even inflict suffering

because of some greater good that might be achieved. I am reminded of a comment made by C. S. Lewis to the effect of “What do people mean when they say ‘I am not afraid of God because I know that he is good.’ Have they never even been to the dentist?”

Remember, that was written when dentists worked without Novocaine! Those of us who remember those days know that even though the dentist is good, nevertheless, that can inflict considerable suffering. So it is simply not true that a world without suffering is automatically better than a world with suffering.

The atheist might say an all-powerful God isn’t limited in the way that, say, your dentist is. The all-powerful God could bring about this greater good directly without the suffering. But, again, clearly given the freedom of the will, that may not be possible.

Some goods, for example moral virtues, can only be achieved given freedom of the will. It is only through the free cooperation of people that moral growth and moral virtue is possible. So it could well be the case that a world with suffering is, on balance, a better overall world than a world that would involve no suffering. This is, I think, at least possible, and that is all that needs to be the case in order to defeat the atheist’s claim that this assumption is necessarily true.¹

START DISCUSSION

Student: You've been really clear about just the mere possibility of a rejoinder – this is enough to defeat the argument. What if somebody says, *I've got a mere possibility against your teleological argument. The mere possibility of there being a multiverse is enough for me to ignore all the design implications I see around me.* When somebody attempts to use that . . .

Dr. Craig: That wouldn't be relevant to the teleological argument because one isn't making claims of necessity – that of logical necessity this is the case. It would be relevant to the ontological argument. There, if he could show that it is possible that God does not exist, then you are quite right that it would have these ramifications. But it is so important to keep in mind here that the atheist is making a very, very strong claim in the logical version – that it is logically impossible for God and the suffering in the world to co-exist. That is why, as I say, if it is even possible that people have free will it would show that the key assumptions are not necessarily true.

Student: I follow your argument entirely except for one thing I need clarity on. I understand that if God created a world with human beings that have free will that on their own accord can choose him or not choose him – there would have to be evil. Correct?

Dr. Craig: Not that there would *have* to be.

Student: But the possibility that evil could exist.

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Dr. Craig: Right. The possibility of evil, and it might be the case that in any world of free creatures that has as much good as this world does there would also be this much suffering and evil. We just don't know. The atheist is just conjecturing here.

Student: Then you factor in Satan and the impact of sin and that we are fallen, it only magnifies it – the possibility of sin and evil being present.

Dr. Craig: That's right. I don't mention Satan because it doesn't really add anything. The idea here is there is creaturely freedom, and this could be human creatures, or Klingons, or it could be demons and Satan.

Student: What I am not quite following is the material suffering. That's not the proper word. Suffering through natural causes – not through evil acts – whether it be, as you mentioned last week, with the child who was buried in the rubble. There was no cause of a human will that created that situation. I think to me that is where we will have the most difficulty in trying to explain or rationalize . . .

Dr. Craig: I think you are right, and that is just the point. One isn't trying here to offer an explanation. You are not trying to give an explanation of why there is evil and suffering in the world. What you are merely doing is undercutting the atheist's claims that an omnipotent God *could* create a world without evil and suffering and that an all-loving God *would* create a world (or prefer a world) without evil and suffering. And we are simply saying those two assumptions aren't necessarily true. But you are not offering any explanation here of natural evil or other sorts of evils in the world.

Student: But we in your class are very curious people so . . . *[laughter]*

Dr. Craig: I think the answer will become more relevant when we get to the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil. There we will need to address these issues, I think, more directly.

Student: Is there anything you think in the fact that the world is suffering through domination by Satan, and that it is crying out in pain as well as the human race and therefore even the world is captured, if you will, by . . .

Dr. Craig: I mentioned that last week. Alvin Plantinga says it is logically possible that the natural evil in the world is the result of Satan and his minions – that we live in this fallen universe where they cause all sorts of disasters and things. That might seem enormously improbable, but as long as it is logically possible it shows that the atheist has failed to prove these crucial assumptions that would show God's existence with evil's existence to be impossible.²

Student: What if someone claims that an all-good God should have refrained from creating rather than creating creatures who have free will who he knew would suffer?

Dr. Craig: I think that that is not essentially different because a world in which there is no physical universe – that only God exists – is still a possible world. That is a possible world. So the claim here, on the atheist's part, is that if God is all-loving he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering. And a world in which God alone exists would be such a possible world – a world without suffering. I think the response remains the same. We can have morally sufficient reasons for allowing suffering to occur, and therefore a world with fallen creatures who come to know God through Christ's salvation may be a better world than a world without suffering – that is a world in which God creates nothing and just exists by himself. So it is really the same point again. The atheist has to show that it is logically impossible that there could be goods in mind that God has which prompts him to create a world of creatures that lapse into suffering and evil.

Student: I think we give up too much ground because I am not sure that they can prove that this world is not perfect as it is now. Because we don't have total knowledge. We don't know that God is not perfectly fair and makes up for the child and the suffering in the rubble in a different area. So the world could be perfect and have always been perfect because a greater plan that we cannot see now.

Dr. Craig: The logical version of the problem of evil is trying to expose an inconsistency within the Christian worldview. It is trying to say, *You, Christians, are committed to the truth of God's being all-powerful and all-loving and to the reality of evil. You yourselves recognize that this is not a perfect world; that this is a world which is fallen, in which there is evil.* And so the atheist will claim that the Christian worldview is internally contradictory. I don't think that it would be a theologically acceptable response to say this world is perfect. That would be to say sin is illusory. That is really a Hindu view of the world that says the distinction between good and evil is part of Maya or the world of illusion. I think that as Christians we are committed to the truth of that premise that evil and suffering really do exist.

Student: Evil exists. It is not that. Suffering is an unfairness. What I am saying is God may have orchestrated things that we cannot see yet – for each individual it balances out.

Dr. Craig: I think that is the same point that I am making. Like the dentist, there can be overriding goods that God has in mind that would outbalance the suffering. I think that is right. But I would stay away from the word "perfect."

Student: I have reasons to lead that way but. The reason I am trying to say is because of lack of complete knowledge that it only appears . . .

Dr. Craig: We'll talk some more about that when we get to the evidential version.

Student: I am going to use a simple parable to illustrate what we view as evil. That is, if a baby sleeps in a crib and as he grows if we continue to let him stay in the crib it is going to be more and more difficult and incur suffering. That kind of suffering is almost like God built in this growth mechanism and if we don't grow with it (the sin of omission) we will fall into suffering. In that sense suffering is necessary to promote this growth.

Dr. Craig: I think that is the point I was trying to make with respect to moral virtues. If God just left us as infantile persons protected from every suffering and from every discipline, we would never be able to grow into mature moral agents who can make wise decisions and do acts of goodness and sacrifice and become the kind of moral persons we are supposed to be.³ We would be like, as you say, these infantile spoiled children still in the crib. In one sense, I think you are right. That is worse. That is more suffering than the person who, through hard knocks and discipline and the vicissitudes of life, learns to be a mature, giving, courageous, patient person that has these moral virtues that he develops. I think that is a good point.

Student: Going back to the first hidden premise, it seems to me that the atheist could say that, as Christians, we absolutely do believe in a God that can create a world without pain and suffering because we believe he is going to do exactly that in eternity.

Dr. Craig: Remember, this is so crucial – by a “world” here we don't mean a universe, we mean a possible world. And a possible world is a maximal description of reality that includes past, present, and future. So the actual world in which we live is one in which there is real evil and real suffering, even if the initial segment of it began very well, it hasn't continued like that. Even if the final segment of it will be restored (as we believe), nevertheless in between there is this segment of genuine, horrible evil and suffering. We must not try to minimize that. When we talk about a world (a possible world) we mean everything – past, present, and future.

Student: It seems almost as though the atheist's logical argument on this is almost too simplistic. They are not taking into account all the nature laws of physics. Even the mortality of man – free radicals that break down the body and all that different type of stuff that can happen to a person that can cause him to suffer that might not have anything to do with any other person doing it. Gravity – if you decide to jump off a building – you are probably going to get hurt. Tidal waves, and things like that.

Dr. Craig: I think, if I can speak for the atheist, he would say but that is assuming that the law of gravity is logically necessary. Maybe God could have created a world operating according to different laws of nature in which these unfortunate incidents would not

occur. But then I think your response to that ought to be quite properly, "How do you know? That is just conjecture." The atheist really has no way of proving that in a world operating according to different laws of nature there would be less evil and suffering than in this world.

Student: I think when you combine the two – the different laws that people have to obey (you can hardly get around them, whatever it is, even a moral conscience or nature laws), and then you have the freedom of the will which you brought up. You only have freedom of the will to a certain extent. I can't just fly out of this room. If you have freedom of the will along with boundaries, you hit the boundaries and there is suffering, whatever it is.

Dr. Craig: Think of this scenario. God could have created a world of pure spirits in which there is no physical bodies or physical universe at all. So you would never be injured. You'd never feel pain. There would just be pure spirits. Would that be a world without evil and suffering? Not at all. That kind of world might be horrible. It might be terrible. That could be like an angelic world that falls into sin and produces demonic beings. So it is not at all clear that in a world, say, of pure spirits that this would be a world that would be without evil and suffering so long as there is freedom of the will.

Student: That was a segue to what I was thinking. Anytime you have freedom you are going to have evil. God created free beings.

Dr. Craig: Be careful. You didn't say this, but you don't want to say that freedom entails evil. There could be logically possible worlds where people always freely do the right thing. I think freedom of the will entails the possibility of evil, but it doesn't entail evil itself.

Student: No, it doesn't, but if God created people with free will, ultimately evil is going to be expressed because Satan was created without sin but yet sin began in heaven.⁴

Dr. Craig: Yeah, but you don't want to say that Satan's fall was logically necessary.

Student: Not necessary but some evil will come is inevitable.

Dr. Craig: Well, I don't think that is true, at least not in a logical sense. I think what one can say is that possible worlds in which no evil occurs (and there are free beings, free creatures) are logically possible but they may not be feasible for God to create because if there were free creatures they would go wrong and do things that God didn't want them to do. Remember our discussion of middle knowledge. That is what this relates to. By his middle knowledge, God knows all of the worlds that are feasible for him to create. So we don't need to deny that there are logically possible worlds in which people always freely do the right thing. Otherwise sin would be necessary. But what one can say is that these worlds may not be feasible for God. That was the point that I was trying to make where I

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said just because God is all-powerful doesn't mean that he can actualize any old possible world that he wants. There are worlds which may be infeasible for God in view of human freedom.

Student: The corollary then would be, in our world, is if God wants to destroy evil then he should destroy me, and nobody wants that for themselves unless you are going to take the Kool Aid like Jim Jones. That is the logical extension to that – we just all off each other.

Dr. Craig: Yes, we can be grateful, each of us, that God is willing to allow evil or we wouldn't be allowed to exist.

END DISCUSSION

The point here is that in making these two assumptions – that if God is all-powerful he can create any world that he wants, and that if God is all-good he would prefer a world without suffering over a world with suffering – the atheist is assuming a burden of proof that is simply unsustainable. He would have to show that freedom of the will is impossible and that it is impossible that a world with suffering is better than a world with no suffering. No atheist has been able to carry that heavy burden of proof.

Having said that, we can actually push the argument a notch further. I think that we can make it plausible that God and the suffering and evil in the world are logically consistent with each other. All we have to do is come up with a third statement that is consistent with God's existence and entails that suffering exists. Here is such a statement:

5. God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but with less suffering, and moreover God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world.

Is that statement (5) true? I don't know. God knows! But as long as it is even possible it shows that there is no inconsistency between God and the evil and suffering in the world. Because if God exists and God could not have created a world with as much good as the actual world but less suffering and he has good reasons for permitting the suffering that does exist then it follows that suffering does exist. Thus there is no inconsistency. So not merely has the atheist failed to prove any inconsistency between God and the suffering in the world, but I think we can make it very plausible that God and the suffering in the world are logically consistent, namely, the possibility of (5) shows that they are logically consistent.

START DISCUSSION

Student: When we are talking to someone, we can just leave it as it is that he just has good reasons but we don't necessarily know what they are. However, we can take it a step further and suggest those reasons. If they say, *OK, what reasons could he possibly have?*

Even though his mind is higher than ours, isn't a primary reason that we could give is saying God didn't put us on the Earth as his pets that are just here for our pleasure. Happiness is not God's objective for us – it is actually a knowledge of God and salvation?⁵

Dr. Craig: You are anticipating the evidential problem of evil that we are going to talk about next where those kind of points will become relevant. But with regard to this logical version, I would reiterate what I said earlier. We are not trying to offer any explanation of why God permits the suffering and evil in the world. That is not our burden of proof. This is the atheist's argument. He is the one making this very strong claim that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering in the world exist. It is simply enough to say isn't (5) possible? As long as it is, it shows there is no inconsistency. And you haven't provided any explanation at all for why there is evil and suffering in the world.

Student: For this, it is not even necessary, but the other can be an extension of it.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, right. Sure. Obviously, I think as someone said, we are curious and we'd like to know – what might those reasons be? God has good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. What might they be? That is a legitimate inquiry, and we'll talk about that in a minute.

Student: Do we need good and free will in that statement? Because I can see God creating a world where we have free will and no suffering if we are all isolated. But as soon as we have to have community and interaction, then he has got to establish a law that brings suffering.

Dr. Craig: The idea behind (5) is that we can imagine worlds that, say, have less suffering than the actual world. Right? He could have created a world where there is a lot less suffering. But then the good of the world might also be diminished at the same time. Or we can imagine worlds in which God will create much better goods – there is more goods – but the attendant suffering would also be much greater. What we want to say is it's possible that God couldn't have created a world that attains this much goodness in it but doesn't also have this much evil and suffering in it.

Student: I see what you are saying. I am trying to say the measure of good – how do you measure good. Without free will, you could just have everyone doing God's will (we're all robots) and there is no suffering. But if you have free will, everybody goes their way but God is so sovereign and so powerful he could keep us from interacting with each other. But we would never have community and fellowship. So when he has to give the law, you must obey a common ground – his will. He puts a moral . . .

Dr. Craig: Yeah, I think it would be plausible to say that a world in which, say, there is only one person on each planet would be a world that doesn't achieve the kind of goods that this world does because of the things you mentioned.

Student: So good would be a measure in that case of something more like social interaction.

Dr. Craig: That would be part of the goods that this world has achieved, hasn't it? Love between persons and things of that sort. There are lots of things.

Student: On a more basic level, multi-cellular life.

Dr. Craig: Yeah.

We tried to show that the atheist has failed to bear his burden of proof to show that they are inconsistent, and now we've pushed the argument a step further and say that we can prove that they are consistent as long as (5) is possible.

Student: My understanding or conception of what heaven will be like is a world in which all the inhabitants of heaven will have free will and yet will not fall into sin. Also, somehow the laws of physics will be such that we won't be suffering by natural evil either. The question is if God can bring that about then and will bring it about then, then why can he not bring it about now?

Dr. Craig: What you need to remember is that heaven is not itself a possible world. It is just a segment of a possible world. There is also all of the people in hell at the same time. There is also that precursor to heaven that is this veil of tears through which we go. So heaven is the outcome or the result of all that has gone before. It may well be the case that God could not create a world like heaven just *de novo* because people wouldn't have had the opportunity to choose for and against Christ and so forth. I don't think that that is a counter example to what we are saying here.

Student: We are not there yet, and I know we are getting there, but when you debate you notice people jump right past logical. Is that largely because it has been abandoned philosophically? I am thinking of the late J. L. Mackie and his disciples. It seems as if they jump right to it.⁶ Neil deGrasse Tyson all the way to the late Chris Hitchens go right for natural evil, non-volitional, non-free will evil and simply bypass this to the evidential. Do you find that to be the case?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I do find the slide from the logical version into the evidential or probabilistic version, but I don't think it is because the logical version has been answered and they are aware of it. I think it is through the failure to draw clear distinctions between these versions. So very often people will make this very strong claim of the logical

version that it is impossible for God and the suffering in the world to exist, but then they argue evidentially. It is just, I think, a failure to draw the clear distinctions. It will really help us to deal with the respective problems if we can keep these distinctions clear.

END DISCUSSION

Let me wrap up this version of the problem of evil – the logical version – by saying that after centuries of discussion, the books are pretty much closed now on the logical version of the problem of evil. Scarcely any atheist today will defend this argument. It is widely admitted by both theist and non-theistic philosophers alike that the logical version of the problem of evil is bankrupt. The reason is because the burden of proof that it lays on the atheist's shoulders is so heavy that it cannot be sustained. He would have to prove that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering and evil in the world co-exist, and no one has been able to do that.

START DISCUSSION

Student: What we can conclude here is what you were saying – you didn't bring up what he said but – Chris Hitchens is famous for saying that God can't be all good because of dot-dot-dot and God can't be all-powerful because of dot-dot-dot. You are saying that it is a logical claim because he is saying it is one way or the other, there is no middle ground. But then it is argued on an evidential level. So they kind of switch the whole play of the argument. So our job in that circumstance is to keep it logical and say, OK, prove logically that what you just said that God can't be all-good and allow evil and God can't be all-powerful and allow evil.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, and I think if we do that it might be a sort of startling realization to the unbeliever that, *Gee, I guess I can't really prove this. I really can't prove these are impossible or inconsistent as I thought.* That might help to open him up a little more. So, right, I think it is really important in discussing with an unbeliever who is pushing this problem of evil is to ask him, *Are you saying that it is logically impossible that God and the suffering in the world co-exist? Or are you merely saying that the suffering in the world makes it improbable that God exists? Which one of those do you believe?* If he says “impossible” then hold his feet to the fire and say, *OK, you are making a strong radical claim. One that is rejected by most atheist and theist philosophers alike. Let's see you support that claim.*

Student: Are there any other versions of the logical problem of evil? Sometimes I talk to atheists I hear them reference things like, *The way J. L. Mackie defended it isn't the only version of the logical argument.* Or are they all pretty much the same thing?

Dr. Craig: I think they basically come down to the same considerations. There is an argument from gratuitous evil in the world. That is to say, *All right, God and suffering*

and evil are consistent. That is logically possible. But it is not logically possible that God would co-exist with the unnecessary, pointless evil in the world. Given the unnecessary pointless evil in the world, it is impossible that God exists. But you see, then, the Christian isn't committed to the truth that there is pointless and unnecessary evil. As I said earlier, the Christian is committed to God's being all-powerful and all-good and to the reality of evil. He is committed to those. So if the atheist can show an inconsistency between those there is an internal contradiction in our worldview. But we are not committed as Christians to the view that there is *gratuitous* evil in the world, that there is pointless and unnecessary evil. Therefore the atheist would have to give some good argument for that, and that then launches you right into the evidential version of the problem.⁷

Student: I thought God and evil have to co-exist because God's purpose is to draw us to him. Just like light and darkness, if a plant needs a light he will be drawn to the light. We are drawn to God only when we experience darkness.

Dr. Craig: Be careful. You wouldn't want to say that our existence is logically necessary, right? That you and I have to exist. You wouldn't want to say that – that God had to create you and me.

Student: Well, but God did.

Dr. Craig: Right! [laughter] He did, but he didn't have to. So if our existence – if the existence of human beings – isn't logically necessary then it is not logically necessary that human suffering and evil exist. Because there needn't have been any human beings. What you are talking about is at most a kind of conditional necessity that if God created human beings then there would need to be evil and suffering. But that is not an absolute necessity. There is no necessity that he had to create human beings to begin with. I would even dispute that conditional necessity. As I said earlier, I don't think that as Christians we want to say that the existence of free will entails that evil exists. I think that is, in fact, the case that because there is free will there is evil, but there is nothing logically impossible about a world in which God gives creatures free will and they always do the right thing. They wouldn't be puppets or robots, they would just always freely make the right choice. That is what led someone like a J. L. Mackie to think then an all-powerful God ought to have created that world. It is a logically possible world, he could have created that world. What he didn't see is the distinction between a possible world and a feasible world. Such a world may be logically possible in and of itself but it may not be feasible for God because if he tried to create those people they would in fact go wrong and result in evil in the world.

Student: When Jesus died he offered salvation. It is possible that we all – like the new heavens and new Earth – it is possible but not necessary. But he laid that seed so that possibility can be realized. God created evil so that good (eventually) will be agreed upon and realized.

Dr. Craig: I certainly do want to agree with you that God uses evil and suffering as a means of bringing people into his Kingdom, to know him. But the way you stated it initially, I don't think we want to say that evil is in any way necessary. This is a contingent result of creaturely freedom, of creatures misusing their free will to bring about evil. But it is not something that is logically necessary, I would say.

END DISCUSSION

The bankruptcy of the logical version of the problem of evil doesn't mean we are out of the woods. Because we still have the evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil. This is still very much a live issue that is debated today. You will remember the atheistic claim here is that given the suffering and the evil in the world, it is improbable that God exists. It is highly improbable that God could have good reasons for permitting the suffering in the world. So even though this is possible, nevertheless it is highly improbable. Much of the suffering in the world looks to be pointless and unnecessary, surely God could have created a world with this much good but with a little less suffering in it. So the suffering in the world provides evidence that God does not exist.

This is a much more powerful version of the problem of evil. Because the conclusion is more modest, the burden of proof it lays on the atheist is much lighter.⁸ Here the atheist doesn't need to prove that it is impossible that God and evil co-exist, but just that it is improbable given the evil and suffering in the world that God exists. And because this conclusion sets the bar lower, the burden of proof that the atheist bears is much lighter. We will need to examine next time how we can respond to this evidential or probabilistic version of the problem of evil.⁹

⁸ 40:00

⁹ Total Running Time: 41:56 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)