# An Exploration of the Evil-god Challenge

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# Abstract

The Evil-god challenge attempts to undermine classical monotheism by contending that because belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omni-malevolent God (the Evil-god hypothesis) is similarly reasonable to belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God (the Good-god hypothesis), the onus is on the classical monotheist to justify their belief in the latter hypothesis over the former hypothesis. This thesis explores the Evil-god challenge by detailing the history and recent developments of the challenge; distinguishing between different types of Evil-god challenge; responding to several prominent objections to the challenge; and applying the challenge to philosophical arguments for the existence of God. I also evaluate the efficacy of parallel arguments as a whole, with a view to determining the parameters of the Evil-god challenge by laying out exactly which theistic positions are irrevocably undermined by it. I conclude that the Evil-god challenge effectively damages several arguments for the existence of God and, in cases where it does not straightforwardly do so, it nevertheless reduces the Good-god theist's belief to one or more intuitions.

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# Introduction

Many types of arguments have been used to provide strength to the hypothesis that a maximally benevolent divine being exists. Many types of arguments have also been used to provide strength to the hypothesis that such a being does not exist. This thesis concentrates on an unusual and compelling argument of the latter type: The Evil-god challenge.

There has been a resurgence of literature and interest in the Evil-god challenge since Stephen Law's 2010 paper that challenges theists to justify their belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being (the Good-god hypothesis) over a belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being (the Evil-god hypothesis). If the latter hypothesis is just as likely as the former but deemed a ridiculous belief to hold, then surely it is equally absurd to accept the Good-god hypothesis—at least that's what Law's Evil-god challenge maintains. Law's symmetry thesis proposes that there is at least a rough symmetry between the Good-god hypothesis and the Evil-god hypothesis. Law suggests that we imagine the feasibility of each belief as indicated by a pointer on a set of scales, which can indicate a range of positions from very unreasonable to very reasonable. If the likelihood indicators for both Good-god and Evil-god arrive at similar places on the scale, then we should consider the two about equal in plausibility. Law argues that both the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis ultimately arrive at the same destination: "unreasonable". In order to explore the depths of this challenge in more detail, not only do I apply it to traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of God, but I also conduct an examination of the type of argumentation itself.

Part I of this thesis, “The Evil-God Challenge and an Analysis of its Methodology”, is split into three chapters. The first chapter provides a survey of the literature on the topic, including the origins of the Evil-god challenge, as well as more recent works. The second chapter examines what “Evil-god” means, in particular what we mean when we brand this being “evil”. The third chapter provides an analysis of parallel arguments and attempts to define what makes specific parallel arguments like Evil-god challenges effective or ineffective, laying the methodological groundwork for the rest of the thesis.

Part II of this thesis, “Arguments Against the Evil-god Challenge”, classifies and surveys the main objections that have been posed to the Evil-god challenge and examines potential responses to these objections.

Part III of this thesis, “Philosophical Arguments for the Evil-god Hypothesis”, uses the Evil-god hypothesis to construct arguments that parallel traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. For each parallel I construct, I provide an evaluation using the analytical conclusions reached in Part I.

As I explain in Part IV of this thesis, “Findings and Conclusions”, the overall aim of this thesis is not to prove that the Evil-god challenge is a serious threat to all who believe in a good god. Rather, I intend to explore the specific arguments that can be paralleled, as well as to think about how effective parallel arguments are and can be. I conclude that the Evil-god challenge is an effective means to undermine the cumulative case for Good-god’s existence and that in cases where the classical monotheist is unconvinced by the Evil-god parallel, the challenge still provides insight into which exact essential premises on which their belief in Good-god is

founded. These premises, as will become clear, can always be reduced to intuitions that are held by the Good-god theist and not the Evil-god hypothesiser.

Ultimately, I aim to show that the Evil-god challenge is potentially damaging for classical monotheists who attempt to overcome the problem of evil while still maintaining the concept of an omni-benevolent god. It also poses strong challenges to traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. Whether or not this entails that Good-god hypothesisers are holding a preposterous position altogether is arguable, but it is clear that if responses to it can be met, the Evil-god challenge offers great insight into the question of whether classical monotheists have good reason to believe in a good god.

I hope that my conclusions will encourage people—through the process of accepting that their own beliefs may be based on intuition rather than rational argument—to be more open to acknowledging that others hold different intuition-based beliefs.

# Part I. The Evil-God Challenge and an Analysis of its Methodology

# Chapter 1. Origins, History, and Development of the Evil-god Challenge

## 1.1 Introduction

The Evil-god challenge has enjoyed a flurry of attention after its resurrection in Stephen Law's 2010 paper of the same name. Intended to undermine classical monotheism, the Evil-god challenge rests on the claim that the existence of all-powerful, all-knowing, all-evil god (Evil-god) is roughly as likely as the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good god (Good-god). The onus is then placed on those who believe in Good-god to explain why their belief should be considered significantly more reasonable than belief in Evil-god. In this chapter, I provide a comprehensive exposition of the Evil-god challenge by exploring its history and recent developments with the intention of providing motivation and context for the content of this thesis. I examine the key elements of the traditional challenge and offer my own classification system for different types of Evil-god challenge.

## 1.2 The Evil-god Challenge

One of the main tenets of classical monotheism is that there exists a single omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnibenevolent (all-good) god. This claim will henceforth be referred to as the “Good-god hypothesis” (GGH). The parallel “Evil-god hypothesis” (EGH) claims that there exists a single omnipotent,

omniscient, omnimalevolent (all-evil) being. For purposes of clarity, from here on the proper noun “Good-god” refers to an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god such as the god of classical monotheism; “Evil-god” denotes an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being; and the lower case “god” refers to an omnipotent, omniscient being that has no specified moral character.

The GGH and the EGH are both monotheistic positions; and each agrees that their single god is all-powerful and all-knowing. Where the hypotheses differ, however, is their view of said god's moral status. The Evil-god challenge, a term coined by Law (2010), uses the EGH as a basis to request justification from Good-god hypothesisers—justification for their belief that the GGH is more reasonable than the EGH. For the Evil-god challenge to be successful, it must demonstrate that, holistically, arguments for and against the existence of Evil-god are similar in strength to arguments for and against the existence of Good-god. If it is the case that the EGH and the GGH are similarly plausible, the question is raised as to why one would believe in the existence of Good-god over the existence of Evil-god. This is the Evil-god challenge; and in this chapter, I explore its historical origins and recent developments.

## 1.3 The History of the Challenge

Law revamped the Evil-god challenge in 2010, but postulating the existence of an evil god to undermine classical monotheism is not a completely novel approach. In the past half century, many philosophers have constructed, as Christopher New puts it, “arguments just like our present theistic arguments, but stood on their heads; in

other words, *reflections* of our present theistic arguments" (1993, p. 36) to weaken the GGH. If these arguments have the same explanatory power as their traditional counterparts, then the GGH is undermined. To call this approach the Evil-god challenge (singular) is slightly misleading. It is more accurate to label it a family of challenges because different philosophers have constructed Evil-god challenges that vary in method and application. Regarding application, philosophers have used the challenge to undermine both theodicies and philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. Regarding method, there are several different formulations of the challenge. The first, which I will call the weak Evil-god challenge, (considered by Haight and Haight 1970; New 1993; Hendricks 2018; Byron 2019), claims that the EGH and the GGH can both be considered coherent and well-supported, therefore there is no reasonable grounds to choose between them. The second (advocated for by Madden and Hare 1968; Cahn 1977; Millican 1989; Law 2010; Collins 2019), which I will call the strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence, maintains that the GGH is clearly incoherent or absurd, because the parallel EGH is incoherent or absurd. The third (also explored by Millican 1989), which I will call the strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency claims that if the GGH is true, then the EGH is also true, which constitutes an impossible state of affairs, therefore both must be false.

Although, following Law, I will refer to the general approach as the Evil-god challenge, past names for the same strategy have included "antitheism"[1] (according to New 1993; Murphree 1997), "demonism" (according to Cahn 1977; King-Farlow

[1] This is not antitheism in the Nagelian sense, according to which it is better if Good-god does not exist.

1978; Stein 1990; Morriston 2004), “evilism” (according to Weaver 2015), and “diabolism” (Collins 2019). Now let us examine some defining themes of Evil-god challenges.

## 1.4 The Problem of Good

Probably the most serious challenge faced by classical monotheism is the problem of evil, which poses the awkward question of why an all-good god would permit evil. This atheist leviathan is often illustrated by the following inconsistent triad (three mutually exclusive propositions): (i) Good-god is omnibenevolent, (ii) Good-god is omnipotent, and (iii) evil exists. Long have classical monotheists attempted to reconcile the co-existence of their god and evil by appealing to theodicies, which attempt to explain why Good-god allows evil to endure. If no satisfactory resolution is found, however, one of the triad's propositions must be denied for the problem of evil to be solved.

Classical monotheists tend either to employ the Augustinian technique of denying the existence of evil, thereby rejecting the third pillar of the triad, or advocate process theology by re-evaluating Good-god's omnipotence. Historically, though, those who have amended the first pillar to admit that god cannot be perfectly good tend to veer toward deism rather than ascribing their god any degree of malevolence. According to New, “the reason for the nonexistence of a tradition of antitheism [belief in an evil god] seems therefore to be that it is merely emotionally, not that it is rationally, less inviting than theism” (1993, p. 36). Wallace Murphree corroborates this view, stating that humans are “metaphysical optimists” (1997, p.

81) who are prompted to choose a good god over an evil one for sentimental reasons, rather than an imbalance of evidence or rational argument. In other words, we find the concept of a morally good god more emotionally appetising—not more logical—than a morally bad one. But repugnance is not the only reason why classical monotheists reject a downright evil god; the "problem of good" is also a hurdle for the EGH. Good-god hypothesisers can pose the troublesome question of why, if a single all-powerful, all-evil god exists, so much good exists in the world. Charles Daniels expresses the problem of good as follows: "how, it is asked, can even a modicum of good be compatible with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnimalevolent demon" (1997, p. 177)? Not only is there a modicum of good, though; there's an abundance. The goodness comes both from man and nature, and so we can distinguish between moral goods and physical goods. Moral goods ("such as altruism, generosity, and kindheartedness" (Cahn 2017, p. 16)) are goods that are generated by humans. Physical goods ("such as sunshine, breathable air, and drinkable water" (Cahn 2017, p. 16)) are goods that are not generated by humans.

With regard to moral goods, it seems that Evil-god would not allow humans to demonstrate virtuous or loving behaviour. As articulated by Thomas Vernon, "a significant proportion of human beings are rather a decent sort…honest, hard-working, and generous" (1994, p. 29). Yes, there are many evil persons and actions, but we cannot deny that good people exist. With regard to physical goods, there seems to be many instances of good in nature too, which raises the following questions:

> How do you explain, for example, such things as life-giving rain and sunshine, the frequent incidence of good health, and the bountiful fertility of the soil and sea, not to mention such things as flowers, and sunsets,

> and the magnificence of the starry heavens at night? Above all, how do you explain the pervasiveness of love throughout the entire animal kingdom…how could such good possibly exist if the world were really controlled by an evil *and* all-powerful Deity? (Vernon 1994, pp. 30–31)

Formulated as an inconsistent triad, the problem can be expressed as: (i) Evil-god is omnipotent, (ii) Evil-god is omnimalevolent, and (iii) good exists. Steven Cahn articulates the problem as a restatement of the Epicurean formulation of the problem of evil: “is the Demon willing to prevent good, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is benevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is goodness?” (1977, p. 70). So the question arises: why would Evil-god allow such goods as these?

As noted by Law (2010), the first mention of the problem of good appeared in Edward Madden and Peter Hare's 1968 work, *Evil and the Concept of God*. After establishing the problem of good as a parallel to the problem of evil, they conclude that, although the classical monotheist ideally wants the problem of evil to be solvable and the problem of good to be unsolvable, this, regrettably for them, is not the case. The Good-god hypothesiser must either admit that the problem of good and the problem of evil are both insurmountable, which creates an unassailable obstacle for their belief system, or accept that both can be solved, in which case they must explain why the GGH is preferable to the EGH. Of course, there is the third option of embracing the EGH. I doubt this is a palatable option for the classical monotheist.

Certainly, the problem of good is a persuasive “Exhibit A” for the case against the existence of Evil-god. The jury is out, however, as to whether the problem of evil creates just as much of a stumbling block for believers in Good-god. Evil-god

challengers attempt to sway the jury toward the conclusion that it does. Although Madden and Hare (1968) deem their discussion of the problem of good mere whimsical speculation, for many philosophers it is a challenge that should be taken seriously, as demonstrated by the enduring interest their work generated, and the polemical dialogue that is still now rampant in the philosophical community.

For half a century, philosophers (including Madden and Hare 1968; Cahn 1977; Millican 1989; Stein 1990; New 1993; Vernon 1994; Murphree 1997; Law 2010; Collins 2019) have attempted to undermine traditional theodicies by creating parallel theodicies that can be used to defend the EGH against the problem of good. To do this, they provide justifications for the co-existence of Evil-god and good in a similar way to traditional theodicies that attempt to justify the co-existence of evil and Good-god. If it can be demonstrated that the problem of evil (and corresponding counterarguments) is similar in strength to the problem of good (and corresponding counterarguments) then there is, arguably, no good reason to accept the GGH over the EGH.

## 1.5 Mirror Theodicies

In response to the problem of good, Evil-god hypothesisers construct mirror theodicies that reconcile Evil-god's existence with the existence of goodness. These arguments have previously been referred to as “antitheodicies” (Millican 1989) “demonodicies” (Stein 1990), “cacodaemonies” (Cahn 1977), and “mirror theodicies” (Byron 2019; Law 2016). I will use the term “mirror theodicies”, which seems the most concise appropriate term. Mirror theodicy is more suitable than antitheodicy

since the latter is now used to refer to the thesis that theodicies are not appropriate responses to the problem of evil. Additionally, the term “reverse theodicy” implies a forward (and perhaps correct) direction and a backward (and perhaps incorrect) direction. Mirror theodicy, then, seems neutral and removes this potential linguistic bias. Edward Stein introduces several mirror theodicies that the Evil-god hypothesiser might employ to parallel traditional ones:

> The demonist may say that good provides a necessary contrast to evil. Or she might offer a free will defense of demonism, arguing that the demon, in order to maximize the amount of evil in the world, gave people free will, knowing that although they would sometimes choose good acts, the evil acts which they committed would be worse than merely predetermined evil acts. Finally, the demonist could always fall back on the “last defense” that human beings, in their limited frame of reference, may think there is good in the world, but that the demon, who can see the entire picture, knows that in the long run, all apparently good things are, in fact, evil. (Stein 1990, p. 163)

Evil-god challengers such as Cahn (1977), Stein (1990), New (1993), Murphree (1997), Law (2010), and Collins (2019) have argued that the most influential traditional theodicies can be paralleled with mirror theodicies that justify the co-existence of good and Evil-god. I will now provide explanations of several significant theodicies and their parallel mirror theodicies, although this list is by no means exhaustive.

Probably the most heavy-hitting theodicy constructed by Good-god hypothesisers is the free will defence, which maintains that evil is the price we pay for being free to make our own decisions. The corresponding mirror theodicy maintains that the existence of good in the world is an undesirable but necessary consequence of Evil-god giving us free will, because evil intentionally caused by a free agent is much more despicable than evil caused by a predetermined puppet.

From this perspective, within the EGH a world in which evil (and good) is realised by morally responsible free agents is worse than a world in which only evil is realised by puppets controlled by Evil-god. John Collins (2019) has recently offered further justification for the Evil-god challenge by claiming that the mirror free will theodicy favours the Evil-god hypothesiser if we speculate that free will is intrinsically evil. Basing his supposition on Nietzsche's claim that free will is a "trick of the theologian" (2019, p. 96), Collins argues the following:

> A [god] who really makes people *responsible* for what they do might do so in order that they could become guilty and be punished. If the impulse to find someone responsible for what they do is predominately in order to place blame, rather than to give credit, then perhaps this can be extended to *making* people responsible for their actions. (Collins 2019, p. 96)

If Collins is right, then we have sufficient reason to believe that free will has intrinsic evilness. As a result, the free will mirror theodicy "one ups" the original.

The traditional character-building theodicy endorsed by Irenaeus and, later, by John Hick (1966) suggests that suffering has developmental value for our souls. Conversely, its parallel mirror theodicy suggests that the world is a "vale, not of soul making, but of soul-destruction" (Law 2010, p. 358) or "soul-breaking" (Cahn 1977, p. 72). Goodness exists because it is necessary for our spiritual decline. For example, by giving us a taste of youth before initiating its fading, Evil-god ensures that we feel all the more embittered by the ageing process. Similarly, by providing us with goods such as health, wealth, and happiness, our souls may be more likely to degrade, by submitting to sloth and gluttony. Law calls this the "character-destroying solution" (2010, p. 358).

Another traditional theodicy can be called “first-order evils allow second-order goods”, and it suggests that suffering is necessary for goods of high importance. For example, for one to be charitable (a second-order good) there must first be an object of charity (a first-order evil), and the second-order good trumps the first-order evil. In other words, Good-god thinks that the suffering is worth it. Law's corresponding mirror theodicy (“first-order goods allow second-order evils”) maintains that some first-order goods are necessary for some second-order evils to be realised. For example, by granting good health, wealth, and happiness to some, Evil-god creates resentment in others. Law states, “take jealousy. I cannot feel jealous unless I perceive others to have something worth being jealous of. Evil god had to allow a few of us to have goods (or perceived goods) so that jealousy might exist” (2010, p. 358).

Many theists contend that some evil is a necessary result of the laws of nature that Good-god imposed on the universe, and that the evil is therefore warranted. This means that evils that occur naturally, in the form of events or species that bring about great suffering, can be justified:

> For instance, the kind of laws and initial conditions that produce stable land masses on which we can survive and evolve also produce tectonic shifts that result in earthquakes and tidal waves. Still, the evil of earthquakes and tidal waves is more than outweighed by the goods those laws allow. (Law 2010, p. 366)

This theodicy can also be paralleled by a mirror “laws-of-nature” (as Law brands it) theodicy:

> True, such a law-governed world inevitably produces some goods. For example, by giving us the ability to act within a physical environment, evil god gave us the ability to avoid that which causes us pain and seek

> out that which gives us pleasure. Still, such goods are more than outweighed by the evils these laws allow. (Law 2010, p. 366)

So, perhaps Evil-god created laws of nature to bring about great suffering, but, as an unfortunate consequence, there are some goods brought about as a result.

Of course, there are obvious counterarguments that can be used against all of these mirror theodicies. One might claim, for example, that the amount of good in the world is too high a price for Evil-god to pay to ensure that evil acts are committed by free agents. Luckily for the Evil-god hypothesiser, these counterarguments apply to traditional theodicies as well. Some philosophers (such as Rowe 1979 and Draper 1989) argue that the amount of unnecessary or gratuitous suffering in the world is too high a price to pay for free will to be consistent with the GGH. Unless the GGH can answer the counterarguments more effectively than the EGH can, the claim that the GGH and the EGH are broadly symmetrical in likelihood (the symmetry thesis) still stands.

In an attempt to undermine the problem of evil, some scholars have employed what is known as “sceptical theism”, which asserts that we, as humans, should be sceptical about the ability we have to understand Good-god’s reason(s) for acting (or failing to act!) in a certain way. Simply because we can’t comprehend why Good-god would have a justifiable reason do or allow a certain thing (the sceptical theist’s argument goes) by no means entails that Good-god does not have a justifiable reason to do or allow a particular thing. This is because Good-god would have a much better knowledge about relevant facts of the matter than we do. Sceptical theism can be employed to undercut the problem of evil in the following way. If sceptical theism is true, then we can be sceptical of the claim that gratuitous evils

exist at all. Although instances of evil may appear gratuitous to us epistemologically-limited beings, we are actually not in a good position to judge this. Accordingly, we cannot point to seemingly gratuitous evils to undermine the existence of Good-god.

In response, the Evil-god challenger can maintain that sceptical theism does not help the Good-god hypothesiser gain any ground because they can also effectively employ this stance to question why Evil-god would allow seemingly gratuitous *goods*. The gratuitous goods that critics of the Evil-god hypothesis might point to as undermining Evil-god's existence might not be gratuitous at all, but we simply do not understand the true motivation Evil-god has for allowing these goods.

For advocates of the strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence, mirror theodicies are not meant to be irrefutable; they must only be as persuasive as their traditional counterparts for the Evil-god challenge to remain intact. Law, for example, recognises that the mirror theodicies are intuitively somewhat flimsy, but, critically, if the symmetry thesis holds, then it stands to reason that traditional theodicies are also rather weak. Law recognises that not all existing traditional theodicies can be mirrored exactly, therefore he adapts the claim of previous Evil-god challengers who propose precise alethic equivalence between the GGH and the EGH: the symmetry he advocates is a broad—not an exact—one. I will now explore the symmetry thesis in more depth.

## 1.6 The Symmetry Thesis

As previously mentioned, an integral part of the Evil-god challenge is the claim that the EGH is on par with (or nearly on par with) the GGH with regard to plausibility. In earlier Evil-god literature, Evil-god hypothesisers claimed that the EGH and the GGH are equal in likelihood (a position John King-Farlow (1978) calls “devilish isomorphism”). Contrary to his Evil-god hypothesiser predecessors, Law does not maintain that the GGH and the EGH are exactly alethically isomorphic. Law uses the term “broad symmetry” because he sets out to demonstrate that the EGH and the GGH are only roughly similarly plausible. One reason for this is that not every theodicy or, more broadly, argument for or against the existence of Good-god, has an exact parallel for or against the existence of Evil-god. The “original sin” theodicy, for example, which holds that evil entered the world as a direct consequence of original human sin, as described in the Old Testament, cannot be easily mirrored. Saying this, Vernon (1994) postulates a mirror theodicy called “the doctrine of original virtue” that involves a myth about the first man and woman eating fruit from the “Tree of Goodness”, which is a catalyst for moral goodness being introduced to the world. Yet of course there are no genuine sources to support this hypothesised mirror theodicy, so the Good-god hypothesiser might appeal to religious texts to support the original sin theodicy. Nevertheless, for Law, a broad symmetry in terms of reasonableness is enough to establish that one does not have a good reason to believe in the GGH over the EGH.

The success of the Evil-god challenge is contingent on the symmetry thesis, because it is, if accepted, a basis for requesting justification from monotheists for

their belief in the GGH. Interestingly, as I will discuss later in this chapter, much of the emerging literature objecting to the Evil-god challenge does not attempt to deny the symmetry thesis but aims to undermine the Evil-god challenge in other ways instead.

Law uses the analogy of a set of scales to illustrate the symmetry thesis and asks us to imagine the rationality of each hypothesis as expressed by a pointer on a set of scales. The helpful comparison allows us to picture the struggle between the EGH and the GGH as fluid, with evidence (or lack thereof) on either side pushing the reasonableness indicator back and forth:

> Suppose the reasonableness of the good-god and evil-god hypotheses is in each case indicated by a pointer on a set of weighing scales. Depending on how each of our two scales is loaded—considerations adding to reasonableness being placed on the left of each scale; considerations subtracting from reasonableness being added to the right—the pointer on each scale moves from highly reasonable through a range of positions (fairly reasonable, not unreasonable, etc.) to highly unreasonable. (Law 2010, p. 359)

Those advocating for the symmetry thesis suggest that the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis will arrive at relatively similar positions on the scale. If they support either the strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence or the strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency, they conclude that both scales arrive at the position of unreasonable. If they support the weak Evil-god challenge, then they believe that both scales arrive at a more reasonable position. Those objecting to the symmetry thesis claim that the indicators for each hypothesis land in significantly different places. Those who favour the GGH are adamant that the indicator for the GGH lands squarely on the side of reasonableness (or at least more so than the Evil-god indicator does). It can also be argued that the indicator for the EGH lands at a more

reasonable position than the GGH does when we consider arguments created to mirror traditional philosophical reasoning for Good-god's existence.

## 1.7 The Merits of the Evil-god Challenge

Proponents and critics alike believe that the Evil-god challenge merits serious consideration. There are several clear virtues of the Evil-god challenge, including its unique approach to challenging the GGH, its versatility, and the compelling arguments that support it. The Evil-god challenge is a unique argument against the GGH, and the hubbub Stephen Law's (2010) paper created shows that the philosophical debate about the existence of Good-god is by no means stagnant. While traditional objections to classical monotheism tend to attack the GGH by directly criticising arguments for the existence of Good-god (by disputing the premises or questioning the inferences), the Evil-god challenge adopts a radically different strategy. Rather than objecting in a traditional way to the questionable metaphysical claims that classical monotheistic arguments make, the Evil-god challenge instead develops parallel arguments that are “as metaphysically and epistemically sympathetic as possible”[2] (Nagasawa 2017, p. 159) to traditional arguments for the existence of Good-god but that derive a similar conclusion that—for strong Evil-god hypothesisers at least—is incoherent, absurd, or impossible.

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[2] Nagasawa is specifically referring to ontological parallel arguments here, but the point can be broadened to Evil-god challenges as a whole.

The Evil-god challenge is also extremely versatile and can be applied to any philosophical argument for the existence of Good-god. Usually, Good-god hypothesisers construct their justification for belief in the GGH in a cumulative fashion. Many (including Craig 2011 and Swinburne 2012) argue that, although there might not be one single argument that is truly demonstrative of the existence of Good-god, a persuasive case for the GGH can be made when all the arguments are considered collectively. We can visualise this concept by comparing the GGH to a wall comprised of many rows of bricks. Each row of bricks is analogous to a philosophical argument for the existence of Good-god. When we consider the wall holistically, there is no one brick row that supports the wall entirely, but together they provide a strong foundation for believing the GGH. The Evil-god challenge examines each brick for structural integrity when it creates its mirror arguments. When an argument for belief in Good-god is effectively paralleled, then one row of bricks no longer serves its purpose of strengthening the wall; we can remove it. As we shall see, we can break down each brick row further into single bricks by examining the underlying premises that make up the arguments. Again, if a premise can be effectively paralleled then the row of bricks is broken, and the wall is weakened.

The Evil-god challenge can be applied to various arguments supporting the existence of Good-god, from the ontological argument to theodicies aiming to defend Good-god's goodness in the face of the existence of evil. This means that the Good-god hypothesiser cannot sidestep the challenge by appealing to other arguments for the existence of Good-god if the Evil-god challenge undermines them all. If the challenge undermines one of the arguments that belief is based on—or one of the premises that the argument is based on—then the belief wall is destabilised. Even if

the Good-god hypothesiser is able to prevent their belief-wall from collapsing entirely, its structural integrity is certainly compromised. The Evil-god challenge encourages Good-god hypothesisers to pinpoint the specific “belief-bricks” that operate as the main foundations of their wall (or the main claims that underpin their belief in Good-god). So it might be the case that after examining all the Evil-god parallels, the Good-god hypothesiser realises that their wall is only standing because of one foundational belief-brick upon which several others are piled. This belief-brick could, for example, represent the privation account of evil. Thus the challenge functions not only to help examine the structural integrity of each argument but also to analyse the specific claims the arguments are based on and see how resilient each is[3].

## 1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has served as an introduction to the Evil-god challenge. I detailed the history of the challenge and explained its key elements. I also distinguished between several types of Evil-god challenge. Finally, I considered the merits of the Evil-god challenge, particularly noting that it functions not only to undermine classical monotheism, but also help us to identify the claims on which the classical monotheist’s faith rests. A challenge that is unique and versatile is of little philosophical merit, however, if it is weak. The Evil-god challenge must be convincing and resilient if it is to undermine the GGH successfully. In the following

[3] In Chapter 3, I will discuss the differences between belief-bricks that are intuitions, those that are sensory-experiences, and those that are axioms.

two chapters, I examine the Evil-god challenge in more detail by exploring the concept of evil character and the parallel argument methodology.

# Chapter 2. Evil-god's Evil Character

## 2.1 Introduction

It would be futile to offer an account of the parameters of the Evil-god challenge without thinking about exactly what supernatural creator the Evil-god hypothesis postulates. Stephen Law states:

> Suppose the universe has a creator. Suppose also that this being is omnipotent and omniscient. But suppose he is not maximally good. Rather, imagine that he is maximally evil. His depravity is without limit. His cruelty knows no bounds. There is no other god or gods—just this supremely wicked being. (Law 2010, p. 356)

This hypothesised deity is not the absolute opposite of the god of classical theism; the antithesis of this god would be a completely ignorant, powerless, malevolent being. Therefore, the term "anti-god" used by some philosophers (Millican 1989; Forrest 2012) is misleading. Evil-god is opposite to Good-god in only its moral attributes; Evil-god retains the characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience.

Since the levels of power and knowledge that the two beings possess is the same, we need not enter into a deep analysis of these characteristics. Yet we ought to consider exactly what we mean when we apply the term "evil" or "omnimalevolent" to an omnipotent, omniscient being. As will be shown in Part II of the thesis, much of the confusion surrounding the Evil-god challenge concerns what exactly Evil-god's nature is. There is a tendency to overgeneralise the challenge, which has led to misunderstandings about exactly what the EGH purports to demonstrate. In fact, the majority of the objections posed to the challenge centre on potential internal contradictions or impossibilities of Evil-god's evil nature. In this chapter, I consider

what it means for god to be “evil”. To do so, I explore several prominent accounts of evil character, or, in other words, what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for a being to be truly evil. I argue that when considering Evil-god, (i) many of the objections to each main account of evil character are redundant and (ii) a hybrid account is necessary.

## 2.2 Accounts of Evil-God’s Character

In this section, I will survey several prominent accounts of evil character. To do so, I will examine the nature of “evil-making properties”. Simply put, evil-making properties are particular properties that make a being evil. Note that not all accounts of evil personhood argue for a single type of evil-making property. Indeed I will argue that when it comes to Evil-god, a hybrid account is necessary. The first three accounts focus on the *type* of property that makes one evil. For each account, I will give a brief description and provide an example of at least one hypothetical character who would be considered evil under this account. In some cases, the example will also serve to highlight a problem (or multiple problems) with the approach. I will then explain why applying the account to Evil-god’s character eradicates the alleged problems with each approach.

*Action-based Accounts of Evil Character*

Fundamentally, under action-based accounts of evil personhood (supported by Kekes 1990; Barry 2009), a being is evil if they commit evil actions. This is a popular account of evil personhood, although different scholars set different bars for this

condition being met. The bars are related to factors such as (i) how bad an action must be to be evil, (ii) how often evil actions must be performed for the agent to be evil, and (iii) whether it is merely the action itself or a combination of bad action, negative consequences, and/or malintent that leads to evilness.

Consider Ace, a well-meaning and good-natured child aged thirteen. Ace's psychologist parents, as an experiment, decided to condition Ace to believe that cries of pain and other signs of discomfort are actually signs of pleasure and happiness. So whenever Ace hits, kicks, pinches, or burns an animal or another child, he thinks he is bringing great joy to them. Since he learned to control his limbs, Ace has tortured animals and other children without realising that he is causing them pain. Ace commits many, many extremely awful actions, but only accidentally. Is he evil? Most would be inclined to say no. After all, we don't consider poisonous plants evil since they do not purposefully poison people, and we don't consider animals evil when they act upon instinct.

Now consider Acton. Acton is a brain in a vat. Acton has no ability to commit evil actions, but seriously wishes that he could. Had he a body, he would not hesitate to act on all his evil impulses. Is Acton evil? Many would say that Acton *is* evil, despite being unable to commit evil actions (and they certainly wouldn't support providing Acton a body based on such a judgment!). It seems that we cannot exclude the inner workings of the mind when determining a being's evilness. So a purely action-based account is insufficient to accurately capture evil character. Acton's desires are significant, despite him being unable to possess the ability to act upon those desires.

When considering the moral character of a being who is all-powerful and all-knowing, these latter two characteristics will have a bearing on what conditions are necessary for this being to be evil. A god's evil nature must, for example, include evil actions[4]. Unlike Ace, who is unaware that his actions are evil, an all-knowing god would be aware of any evil actions it commits. And unlike Acton, the evil brain in a vat, a maximally powerful god would be able to act on any evil motivations, affects, or intentions it possesses. If that god desired to intervene in the world, then that god would be able to. If Good-god were motivated to perform a miracle, Good-god would be able to. Similarly, if Evil-god wished to cause a volcano to erupt and destroy a nearby village, Evil-god would be able to. Accordingly, evil action seems an inevitable evil property of Evil-god's moral character, insusceptible to any objections to this account.

*Affect-based Accounts of Evil Character*

Affect-based accounts of evil personhood rely on the feelings or sentiments of the being in question (McGinn 1997). If somebody feels pleasure at the thought or observation of the pain of others, for example, then they would be considered evil under this account. There are, however, problems with this account too.

Consider Affonso. Affonso likes nothing better than knowing that other people are undergoing great suffering. He experiences great joy as a result of watching horrific war documentaries. He squeals in glee to see particularly intense episodes of suffering on the news, the most extreme example of schadenfreude. Yet Affonso has

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[4] I assume here a god that is actively involved in its creation (the universe) after the initial creation process, rather than a prime mover or deistic god.

no motivation for evil action himself. He lives alone, harms no one directly, and is instead gratified only by second-hand suffering. Additionally, Affonso desires to suppress his sadistic emotions. In fact, he actively tries to do good deeds to counteract his feelings, and eventually makes the difficult decision to stop watching the news and war documentaries so as not to indulge his sadistic affects.

The main problem with the affect account of evil character is that affect does not seem to be *enough* to deem someone evil because affects are often non-voluntary. Is Affonso evil? Perhaps, but it seems that someone who had similar affects to Affonso but also who directly brought harm to others would be more evil[5]. We might not be inclined to deem somebody who has malicious feelings evil if they do their best to prevent acting out these feelings. As noted by Calder (2003), often these types of feeling are not voluntary, and perhaps those who experience feelings such as these should be given pity and help rather than condemnation. It seems prudent to disregard a wholly affect-based account of evil character based on these problems.

If Evil-god were evil according to the affect-based account, however, then Evil-god would have the motivation to be evil and would act on the motivation. This is the case for at least two reasons. First, Evil-god is maximally evil, which means that (unlike Affonso) Evil-god would not have a mixed moral personality whereby it experiences evil affects but also experienced desires to repress them. Second, Evil-

[5] Using the term “more evil” insinuates that evil is a degreed characteristic. I will not enter into this debate here, but I take for the purpose of this work that it is.

god—by nature of being the creator of the universe—is a causal force that can act. Accordingly, applying this account to Evil-god makes any objections superfluous[6].

*Motivation-based Accounts of Evil Character*

According to the motivation-based account of evil personhood, a person is evil if they possess a particular type of motivation. Calder (2003) proposes the most developed account of this kind, arguing that if a being experiences “e-desires” (desires to bring about significant harm to others in the absence of an overriding worthy goal) then they are evil.

Consider Mo. Mo has intense e-desires that consume his thoughts while both waking and sleeping. Yet these thoughts are intrusive, and Mo tries futilely to expel them from his conscious and subconscious mind. Mo has been able to prevent himself acting on his motivations to cause harm.

Is Mo as evil as one who acts on evil motivations? If Mo were simply a brain contained in a vat, then is he really as evil as another who acts upon their motivations to cause a great amount of harm too? The main difficulty with the motivation-based account is similar to that of the affect-based account. It seems counterintuitive to claim that the significant element of an evil person’s character is that they have evil motivations that they perhaps may never act upon; so it seems we must reject this type of account too.

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[6] Having affects implies that a being is passible. Hillel Steiner (2002) argues that an evil being must take pleasure in performing evil actions. For Evil-god, then, taking pleasure in evil actions entails a passible version of the EGH.

Applying this account to Evil-god's nature overcomes objections in a similar way to the affect-based account. Evil-god would be able to act upon motivations and, being maximally evil, would not have conflicting desires like Mo. So the objections are not a problem for a motivation-based account of Evil-god's character.

Having described the main accounts of evil personhood with regard to what *type* of property evil-making properties are, I will now turn to accounts of how those properties are *manifested*. The next section describes different accounts of *how* the evil-property is acquired or demonstrated.

*Regularity-based Accounts versus Disposition-based Accounts of Evil Character*

Accounts that place importance on the consistency or frequency of evil-making properties are known as regularity-based accounts (see Kekes 1990). According to this account, a person must possess evil-making properties often (for example, committing frequent evil actions or having frequent evil motivations) or on a regular basis to be truly evil. One big difficulty for this account can be illustrated by the cases of Rebecca and Irene.

Consider Rebecca, who performs daily evil actions. Every day without fail she uses her magnifying glass to burn ants on the ground in her garden. Fortunately for those around her (except the ants, that is), Rebecca never harms human beings or other creatures. Rebecca has no grand dreams of extending the scope of her evil actions, and she is quite content with her (low level) evil acts.

Now consider Irene, who has spent much of her life planning a devastating attack on a company that she used to work for. In the space of a week, all her planning comes to fruition and she enacts her plan to cause a huge amount of

suffering to her ex-colleagues. Under the regularity-based account, Irene is not evil since she has not committed regular evil actions like Rebecca has. Of course this is only a problem for action-based regularity accounts, since clearly Irene has experienced regular evil affects and motivations, but we might still be inclined to argue that Irene is evil (or at least more evil than Rebecca is) if she sporadically acts out her week of terror despite not planning it and not having experienced previous motivations or affects. If the devastation created by someone is both intentional and immense, whether it is regularly distributed or all in one evil chunk does not seem to be the *only* significant factor.

Contrastingly, disposition-based accounts claim that evil persons are *disposed* to have evil-making properties. The motivation for this type of account originates from the claim by some theorists that “not every evil person performs, attempts or intends to perform evil actions” (Russell 2010, p. 232). Most theorists adopt this type of theory over regularity accounts (dispositionalists include Haybron 2002; Barry 2009, 2013; Russell 2010); dispositional accounts, though, are not without criticism.

Consider Diana, who, due to environmental factors in her early life, is disposed to evil thoughts and actions. Aged ten, she tortured her pet kitten, but she subsequently felt so remorseful and guilty that she never committed any further evil actions. Furthermore, her evil thoughts diminished, and by the time she reached adulthood she had developed into an empathetic individual who despised the thought of causing unnecessary harm to other creatures.

One problem with disposition-based accounts that Diana's case demonstrates is that arguably everyone commits some evil actions and experiences evil motivations/affects at one point or another over the course of life. If we exclude the regularity of evil-making properties then it seems that most of us could be considered evil. Since evil is such an extreme term, it seems dangerous and unhelpful to make evil people ubiquitous by our definition (Russell 2010).

Various theorists have added extra caveats or conditions to limit this concern. Perhaps the disposition must be a "strong" one (Barry 2009; Russell 2010), or perhaps the agent must still have the evil disposition despite being in "autonomy-favouring conditions" (Russell 2010, p. 247), which are situations in which the agent is not being restricted from acting in accordance with their character. This precludes situations like "Sophie's Choice", in which Sophie's autonomy was somewhat limited. In response to the dispositional account of evil character, Calder (2015) has argued that this limit seems to be put in place to indulge an intuition that few have (that hardly anyone is truly evil). In fact, many have argued that we are *all* very close to being or becoming evil.

Considering whether Evil-god is evil under the regularity account or disposition account is not a trivial endeavour. Must Evil-god perform evil actions, have evil affects/motivations on a regular basis to be considered evil? Furthermore, must Evil-god perform at the maximal possible regularity or frequency to be omnimalevolent? Is Evil-god disposed to have evil-making properties? These are not questions that I will address here, but in future chapters we can use these distinctions between models of evil character to help set out the parameters for effective Evil-god challenges. For example, it might be the case that for someone

who is a firm adherent to the regularity account, evidence in the world seems to fit more closely with the GGH than the EGH. The final three descriptions I include are of additional theses that have been suggested for accounts of evil character.

*The Consistency Thesis, the Extremity Thesis, the Fixity Thesis, and the Mirror Thesis*

Daniel Haybron (2002) puts forward the notion that for one to be evil, they must demonstrate evil-making properties consistently. This is known as the consistency thesis. Under this thesis, an evil person would never (or almost never) be inclined to be or do good[7].

The consistency thesis lies in opposition to the extremity thesis, which places emphasis on the extreme level of evilness rather than consistency levels of evilness. Someone is evil if their bad qualities (such as maliciousness) are above a certain level—as opposed to demonstrating lower level maliciousness consistently (Barry 2013).

Let's take another hypothetical to evaluate these theses. Connie seems like a saint from an outside perspective. She is empathetic, charitable, and kind to all beings. All beings, that is, except chinchillas. Due to unfortunate early childhood conditioning, Connie despises chinchillas (an extreme version of Watson's "Little Albert" experiment, perhaps). As a result, Connie tortures chinchillas as much as she can when she's not helping with charitable causes and doing good deeds. Is Connie evil? Under the consistency account the answer is "not necessarily", since she is not

[7] Or if they did bring about good, it would not be with intent.

consistently evil (we can imagine, for example, that Connie rarely crosses the path of a chinchilla). Followers of the extremity thesis, though, would argue that Connie's propensity to commit extreme evil by torturing chinchillas might be enough to deem her evil.

With regard to Evil-god, whether one accepts the disposition thesis or the consistency thesis will have a great bearing on what one would expect a universe created and sustained by Evil-god to look like[8]. Rejecting the consistency thesis could explain, for example, why there is lots of apparent good in the world. Perhaps, like Irene, Evil-god is engaged in such a huge overarching plot (think perpetual hell for all humans after death) that apparent goods in this world are relatively meaningless in comparison to the extreme and everlasting suffering after death.

The fixity thesis claims that evil or good character is fixed, meaning that it is very difficult to change one's evil (or good) nature. This means that for one to be truly evil, they would be extremely unlikely to change their moral character. The motivation for this thesis is that it seems against intuition to completely discount evil people who might be able to change. This notion implies that truly evil persons are hopeless cases with little to no chance of redemption. With regard to Evil-god, who is a true paradigm of evil to the extreme, the fixity thesis must apply. Evil-god cannot become good, and its maximally malevolent nature endures (particularly since many classical monotheists consider immutability a necessary characteristic of Good-god).

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[8] See Jack Symes (2017) for further discussion of this distinction.

The mirror thesis (Barry 2009) argues that evil personhood is a mirror image of extreme good personhood, or specifically moral sainthood. This thesis is of particular interest to discussion of Evil-god's character since the Evil-god challenge was constructed as a parallel argument, which entails that Evil-god is a mirror image of Good-god with regard to its moral nature. In fact, it is vital that the Evil-god hypothesiser remembers that Evil-god's moral character must be in direct contrast to Good-god's moral character, otherwise the challenge will fall apart. Evil-god *must* mirror Good-god for the sake of the parallel challenge.

*Evil-God's Evil Character: A Hybrid Account*

I will now explain the relationship between the accounts, specifically why accepting some of these accounts entails acceptance of the other accounts and necessitates a hybrid account of Evil-god's character. With regard to affect and motivation, it follows that a god would not act unless it had the affect or motivation to do so[9]. There would be no reason for accidental action, as all of a divine being's actions would be purposeful. Additionally, the consistency, regularity, and extremity theses must also apply to a maximally powerful being's moral character. If Evil-god is maximally evil, then its great power allows (and, in fact, mandates) it to enact evil to an extreme level and on the most frequent basis possible. Evil-god's evil-making properties are to the highest degree (as necessitated by its maximal malevolence).

[9] Of course, some Good-god hypothesisers claim that Good-god has neither motivations nor affects.

## 2.3 Conclusion

In the case of limited beings, it seems that a hybrid account of evil character is needed to avoid counterintuitive consequences, but in the case of Evil-god, the problems with each account of evil-property aren't too troublesome, since Evil-god is, by nature, able to act on its affects and motivations, and only acts with knowledge and intent. Additionally, it is clear that a hybrid account is inevitable for Evil-god's character too, since particular evil-making properties entail others when applied to an all-powerful being. If Evil-god has an affect or motivation to act, then Evil-god will do so. Finally, the Evil-god hypothesiser can use the distinction between regularity and disposition accounts to explain the spread of good in the world. Now that we've examined Evil-god's character, let's proceed to examining the methodology of the parallel challenge.

# Chapter 3. Analysing the Parallel Argument Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

The Evil-god challenge is a type of parallel argument, which, in turn, is a type of argument by analogy. The strength of the Evil-god challenge relies on the strength of the parallel arguments it constructs. This chapter will analyse the strength of parallel arguments and take a close look at the specific parallel arguments I rely on to formulate Evil-god challenges, with the hope of determining to which structure they must adhere to be effective. I begin by explaining what the parallel argument is. Then I consider the strengths and weaknesses of this form of argumentation in general and explore which conditions the parallel arguments must meet to be successful. The conclusions drawn in this chapter will form the basis of the analysis of the effectiveness of the parallel arguments I construct in Part III of this thesis.

## 3.2 What is the Parallel Argument and What Does It Intend to Achieve?

Parallel arguments have been used for a long time by various philosophers to identify flawed logic in both inductive and deductive philosophical arguments. From Plato using Socrates to parody his interlocutors' flawed logic to Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous violinist example supporting the moral permissibility of abortion, parallel arguments are (usually) employed as a means of refutation, particularly as a way to demonstrate a flawed structure of logical reasoning. In this section, I will

explain what a parallel argument is and explore the general strengths and weaknesses of this approach to argumentation.

Analogy involves a direct comparison between two things for the purpose of casting light on the way(s) in which they are similar. Analogical arguments (or arguments from analogy) rely on the similarity between two things to draw the conclusion that a further similarity exists between those two things. Andrew Juthe defines the parallel argument by refutation, which is a type of analogical argument, as follows:

> The refuting parallel argument is analogous/parallel to an attacked target argument with the difference that it is clearly untenable that it gives reason to believe its conclusion. Thus, there must be something flawed in the reasoning of the attacked target argument. The usual way for the parallel argument to display this is by having obviously plausible premises but an obviously implausible conclusion. (2009, p. 134)

Similarly, Trudy Govier has the following to say about this form of argument (which she calls refutation by “logical analogy”):

> [It is] based on duplicating the “core” of an argument in another argument by varying non-essential aspects while preserving essential ones. The parallel argument is exhibited to be, or argued to be, flawed. Seeing that it is flawed, we are to see the original argument as flawed also (1985, p. 29).

We should not overlook the fact that parallel arguments do not necessarily attempt to refute the conclusion of the target argument. Parallel arguments attempt to refute the *argumentation process* in the target argument. For example, the Evil-god challenges I propose might not attempt to disprove directly the hypothesis that an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god exists, but rather demonstrate that particular *arguments* for the hypothesis are ineffective and more must be done by the Good-

god hypothesiser to prove the hypothesis[10]. It is also important to remember that parallel arguments do not directly attempt to prove *premises* false (by use of counterexample), rather they attempt to prove that the "*relation* between the content of the premises and the content of the conclusion is flawed" (Juthe 2009, p. 152)—although an Evil-god challenge might include justification for why a paralleled premise is as reasonable as its original counterpart. Following Juthe's terminology, I will refer to the argument that is being paralleled as the "target argument" (or TA), and I will refer to the parallel argument as the PA. Parallel arguments are not as common as arguments from counterexample in philosophy (Juthe 2009), and in fact philosophers are not unanimous in their evaluation of the merits of parallel arguments. So, let's consider the benefits and drawbacks of using parallel arguments.

## 3.3 The Strengths and Weaknesses of Parallel Arguments

Much of the traditional discussion about the existence of Good-god focusses on classical monotheists and their opponents reaching a stalemate over the forcefulness of philosophical arguments for and against Good-god's existence. For example, the Good-god hypothesiser argues that defences and theodicies against the problem of evil are adequate to suppress it, whereas the critic denies this, or the Good-god hypothesiser constructs a philosophical argument for the existence of Good-god, and the critic opposes it. The evolution of the Evil-god challenge has

[10] Hence the term "challenge".

offered a unique advancement in the debate in which theists and atheists often find themselves at an impasse. If valid, the strategy offers a weighty response to theodicists and creates potential for the challenger of classical monotheism to gain ground. It also presents compelling reasons for the classical monotheist to re-evaluate their own approach to the discussion and consider exactly why they believe in the GGH. To return to our brick analogy, it will help determine which specific belief-bricks their faith rests on.

Firstly, parallel arguments are universally applicable because they can be constructed to mirror all types of argument. Parallel arguments (at least, good ones) also follow the same logical structure as the target argument, retaining structural isomorphism to demonstrate that the problem lies with the way the TA is formulated. PAs that are used to form Evil-god challenges have the added benefit that the object of the argument (Evil-god) is in the same *domain* as the object of the TA (Good-god). Good-god's counterpart is not a perfect island, an item of food, or a human being. Rather, Good-god's counterpart is an object that is similar in all but one quality (its moral nature). Yujin Nagasawa (2017) notes that the strength of many PAs is that they retain the same underlying metaphysical principles as the TA[11]. Parallel arguments are not universally strong, of course. Whether or not a particular parallel argument is compelling and effective is contingent on many variables.

[11] Although, I will argue that this does not have to be the case for all effective parallel arguments. As will be illustrated later in this chapter, I will claim that it can be acceptable to amend certain metaphysical intuitions that underlie the target argument.

Parallel arguments also have disadvantages, however. Frequently there are problems when PAs use objects in *different domains* to construct the analogy (Gaunilo's well-known "perfect island" challenge falls prey to this criticism):

> First of all, there is always a psychological aspect in the use of analogies that may backfire. Although there is no philosophical difference between same-domain and different-domain analogies, if the analogy is correct the conclusion follows with equal strength (conclusively or inconclusively) according to its argument type regardless of whether the elements belong to the same domains or not. However, in a dialectical situation it may be important to reconstruct a parallel argument with consideration to the audience or interlocutor. There is a psychological inclination to find same-domain analogies more reasonable, as psychological studies have shown. (Juthe 2009, p. 159)

The more dissimilar the PA domain is from the TA domain, the less psychologically appealing the PA is likely to be. So a parallel ontological argument that demonstrates the existence of a perfect island may not be as compelling as a parallel ontological argument that demonstrates the existence of the devil, since the devil is in the same domain as a god, whereas an island is not[12].

Parallel arguments are also notoriously difficult to evaluate. Many scholars have attempted to specify exactly which elements of the PA determine how effective the argument is; but disagreement between these scholars is rife. Accordingly, when a PA is produced in, say, the philosophy of religion, different philosophers will have widely differing perspectives as to how effective the argument is. Finally, as noted by Juthe, there is a dialectical danger when using parallel argumentation that the argument might appear "far-fetched and unserious" (2009, p. 160). This is because

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[12] One might deem domain to be a purely psychologically significant distinction. One might also question exactly *how* close the parallel domain must be to the target domain and what "close" means. Yes, Evil-god and Good-god are both supernatural beings, but they are certainly not in the same *moral* domain.

parallels are frequently proposed as parodies that could (uncharitably) be taken to mock or ridicule the original argument.

## 3.4 Example Parallel Arguments

One topic in the philosophy of religion in which the parallel argument is prominent is the ontological argument. Considering some of the parallel arguments that have been constructed in an attempt to refute the ontological argument can help to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of parallel arguments through the lens of this specific argument for the existence of Good-god. “Parody argument” is the term many philosophers use to refer to certain parallel arguments that attempt to undermine the ontological argument. Let’s take a look at Anselm’s original ontological argument and Gaunilo’s parallel of it:

*Anselm’s Ontological Argument*

1. God is a being than which no greater can be conceived.
2. It is greater to exist in reality and imagination than in the imagination alone.
3. If god does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater being (one that does exist).
4. Therefore, god must exist in reality.

*Gaunilo’s Parallel Ontological Argument*

1. The Lost Island is an island than which no greater can be conceived.
2. It is greater to exist in reality and imagination than in the imagination alone.

3. If the Lost Island does not exist, we can conceive of an even greater island (one that does exist).
4. Therefore, the Lost Island must exist in reality.

Notice that this parallel argument makes some amendments to the original. Specifically, the subject of the first premise is “The Lost Island”, replacing “God”. This is also the case for the third premise and the conclusion, accordingly.

Parallel ontological arguments do not irrefutably disprove the original ontological argument’s conclusion; they purport only to demonstrate that the ontological argument involves flawed logic by showing that another argument structured in a similar way results in absurdity. Additionally, parallel arguments do not explicitly identify precisely what the flaw of the ontological argument is (on their own at least). This means that although ontological PAs might identify a problem with the ontological TAs, it might not be apparent exactly where the problem lies. Finally, the efficacy of parallels is extremely contentious. All PAs of the ontological argument have been heavily criticised by those who claim that the parallel argument does not work for one reason or another.

Let’s consider another very famous parallel argument, which was constructed by Judith Jarvis Thompson (1976) to refute the claim that abortion is wrong. To begin with, we can construct the target argument as follows:

*The Argument for the Immorality of Abortion*

1. Everyone has a right to life.
2. A foetus has a right to life.

3. The foetus's right to life is stronger than the mother's right to decide what happens to her body.
4. Abortion is morally wrong.

Thompson postulates the following parallel to demonstrate the flawed logic of the target argument:

> You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you-we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist now is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you". (1976, p. 40)

The PA can be schematised as follows:

1. Everyone has a right to life.
2. A violin player has a right to life.
3. The violin player's right to life trumps one's right to decide what happens to one's body.
4. Unplugging the violin player is morally wrong.

Notice that the subject of premises 2, 3, and the conclusion has again been replaced: "foetus" has been changed to "violin player". Thompson argues that the conclusion of the PA is intuitively wrong. By creating this parallel, Thompson wants us to recognise the flawed logic of the TA. Again, simply constructing the parallel argument does not provide specific and explicit analysis of why the target argument

is incorrect[13]. Critics of Thompson's parallel argue that there are fundamental morally significant differences between the violin player and the foetus such that the analogy between the two is inappropriate. This only highlights the earlier identified strength of the parallel argument—that it can help one to determine exactly which element(s) of a TA one agrees or disagrees with. Even if the parallel argument is not entirely convincing, it can help further debate by pinpointing significant differences between the TA and the PA.

Now let's consider what conditions a parallel argument should meet to be considered effective. This is a puzzling area, and scholars differ greatly as regards the manner in which analogical arguments (and therefore parallel arguments) should be evaluated[14].

## 3.5 What Makes an Effective Parallel Argument?

A good argument, in general, requires three conditions: relevance, acceptability, and sufficiency (Juthe 2009). Nagasawa maintains that "for an argument by analogy to be effective, two things that are analogized have to be *relevantly and sufficiently similar*" (2017, p. 176). Juthe claims the following about the effectiveness of the parallel argument in particular:

> The strength of refutation by parallel argument is a function of three things, (a) how clearly the parallel-argument and the target-argument are

[13] Of course, after constructing the parallel argument, Thompson proceeds to explain that the target argument fails because there are limits on the right to life.
[14] Providing a detailed history of the specific conditions various scholars have proposed for what constitutes a successful parallel argument is beyond the scope of this chapter. I refer the reader to Paul Bartha (2010) for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.

> parallel; (b) how clearly the premises of the parallel-argument are true or plausible; and (c) how clearly the conclusion of the parallel is untrue or implausible. (2009, p. 143)

So, the parallel argument method is most effective when the PA itself "is *clearly* a parallel argument and is *clearly* flawed" (Govier 1985, p. 29).

Constructing effective parallels is a challenging and painstaking endeavour. Juthe reminds us that "it is obvious that even a seemingly simple…refutation by parallel argument in particular may demand a lot of work if one wants a reconstruction that captures all the argument's features essential for evaluation" (2009, p. 143). It is not surprising, therefore, that Evil-god challenges based on parallel arguments are difficult to analyse and frequently contentious, since the intuitions of the Good-god hypothesiser regarding these three elements may greatly differ from the intuitions of the Evil-god hypothesiser.

Since PAs range from identical sets of premises to sets of premises of which several have been "flipped", critics will wonder whether these PAs are legitimate, particularly when the modifications could be interpreted as *ad hoc*. Recall Govier's claim that we must vary the non-essential aspects of the TA while keeping the essential ones intact. The ambiguity lies in what the "essential" elements of the TA are. How do we decipher which features of the original argument are crucial and thus must be retained for the parallel argument to work? I will now outline the conditions that should be met for a PA to be considered effective[15].

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[15] Whether or not a parallel is effective is difficult to determine and not always clear-cut. Some clearly may be more effective than others, so the level of plausibility must be determined by several factors.

To help us determine the essential from the non-essential, consider the following analogy that illustrates the different options available to the architect of the PA[16]. Let's imagine that each premise of a TA is represented by a card on a table. Every time a card is flipped, this represents a premise being paralleled in an argument. So, if we flip none of the cards, then the layout represents the original argument (like in the case of the PA of the target teleological argument, for example, which postulates the existence of a designer/creator but says nothing about its moral nature). If we flip one of the cards, the argument might be considered stronger because we are retaining all but one of the underlying principles. The more cards we flip, the less effective the argument becomes because the PA becomes increasingly dissimilar from the TA.

There will inevitably be a spectrum of differing opinion as to how many premises can be inverted (and of which type) before the PA fails. One end of the spectrum contends that the argument needs to be exactly parallel with every premise and underlying principle remaining the same, but with only a difference in conclusion (no cards turned). On the other end of the spectrum is the claim that keeping the structure of the argument the same but changing the underlying premises is acceptable (perhaps even flipping all the cards and paralleling all the premises!). The significant factor, as I will argue, lies in the content of the cards being turned—or the *type* of premise that is being changed. In the reminder of this chapter, I outline the specific elements that contribute to the efficacy of the parallel argument. I make the

[16] Thanks to Yujin Nagasawa for suggesting this analogy.

claim that it is acceptable to invert the essential principles if the inversion of said principles can be justified *to a similar degree*.

*Logical Structure*

With regard to analogous logical form, it seems imperative that successful PAs retain the same logical form as their corresponding TAs. If the logical form differs, then the PA should not be considered a parallel whatsoever. An ideal PA would be exactly parallel in structure to the TA, its premises true, and its conclusion either clearly false (to show an absurdity) or at odds with the conclusion of the TA. Recall the three types of Evil-god challenge identified in Chapter 1. Strong Evil-god challenges from incoherence must construct arguments that include a clearly false or absurd conclusion. Weak Evil-god challenges, however, need not construct arguments with a conclusion that is clearly false or absurd, only one that is different from the TA. Strong Evil-god challenges from inconsistency, finally, must create a PA including a conclusion that is logically incompatible with the conclusion of the TA.

*Domain*

As discussed earlier, parallel arguments will work best when they retain the same domain as the TA. Although parallel arguments that use a different domain than their target arguments can hold some weight, the parallel argument is more successful if the domains remain the same. Though, by nature, the Evil-god parallel arguments are in the same domain as the Good-god targets.

*Retains Target Argument's Premises*

It is often not possible to retain every premise of the TA, as frequently one or more premises need to be adapted somewhat or the parallel argument cannot work at all. For example, returning to Thompson's violin player parallel, if all the premises were kept unchanged, but the conclusion was that abortion *is not morally wrong*, the argument would not be effective. It is difficult to determine the rules by which one can amend the target arguments premises while retaining the efficacy of the parallel argument. In the next section, I suggest that we ought to consider the reasonableness of the premises to be the deciding factor.

*The New Premises are Similarly Reasonable*

Now let us consider the inversion or paralleling of underlying principles of premises of a TA. Tim Chambers notes, when evaluating devil parodies, that "the only uncommon feature between Anselm's [ontological] Argument and the Devil parodies involves a discreet shift in the former argument's central description: the substitution of 'lesser' (or 'worse') for 'greater'" (2000, p. 107). Several of the PAs that will be outlined in later chapters constitute similar shifts within one premise (or of one principle) to its inverse (good to evil, greatness of existence to greatness of non-existence, etc.). It is, however, no good simply to invert or parallel a principle of premise and leave it at that. Whichever principle of premise has been modified must be justified to the same extent (or, at least, to a similar extent) as the unmodified original.

Although when we formulate arguments, we often present many premises without justification, if PAs invert a premise and offer no justification for it, the parallel

argument will not be compelling. This is particularly tricky for the Evil-god challenge because the parallel argument is (more often than not) supposed to be an uncompelling or satirical argument where the challenger does *not* accept the truth of the premises (or the conclusion!).

Just how justified a premise is relies on various factors. A premise can be based on an axiom (if it is self-evident), intuition, and/or sensory experience (R. Martin 2016). If the premise in a target argument is axiomatic, then the parallel argument cannot flip it without justification. The original axiom must be retained. If the premise is based on sensory experience (such as the argument from religious experience), the Evil-god challenger must offer reasons why that sensory experience is not to be taken at face value, or explain how sensory experience offers evidence for Evil-god rather than Good-god. Finally, if the premise is based on intuition, the Evil-god challenger must either object to the intuition being an accurate reflection of reality or bite the bullet. They can offer a parallel intuition, but they must be open to the prospect that it will not be accepted by the TA's endorser.

But recall that the Evil-god challenge is just that: a challenge. Accordingly, if a Good-god hypothesiser accepts the original premise of a target argument and rejects the new premise of the parallel argument, it is up to them to explain why the former is justified and the latter unjustified. As Stephen Law (2010) voiced in his original Evil-god paper, parallel arguments invite a response from the Good-god hypothesiser. As such, I am inclined to agree with Patrick Grim, who states the following:

> Successful parody…puts the onus squarely on the defender of the…argument to show why his "possibility" premise is any more worthy

> of acceptance than the similar premises of the parodies; why the acceptance of his premise over its rivals amounts to anything more than an entirely arbitrary adoption of a favorite mythology. (1982, pp. 40–41)[17]

It follows from this viewpoint that if the constructor of the PA offers similarly reasonable justification for the modified premise, then it is the responsibility of the TA endorser to explain why the adapted premise is not as strong as its original counterpart. In the case of the Evil-god challenge, the Good-god hypothesiser cannot simply abdicate the responsibility of justifying their foundational principles and pass the buck to the Evil-god challenger.

I suspect that the biggest problem for the Evil-god hypothesiser will be constructing inverted premises that are not as intuitively appealing to the Good-god hypothesiser as the originals. In cases like these, there is not much the Evil-god hypothesiser can do except reiterate that the Good-god hypothesiser's kaleidoscopic belief system is based only on metaphysical intuition.

## 3.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to put the parallel argument under the microscope to determine whether Evil-god parallel arguments are effective or not. While I acknowledge that some Evil-god parallels are more effective than others based on the number of premises they retain and how closely the parallel argument adheres to the target argument with regard to object domain and logical structure, I also

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[17] Grim is specifically referring to the ontological argument here, but his point can be applied to parallel arguments in general.

recognise that the “flipped” or inverse premises must be similar in reasonableness for the parallel argument to be considered compelling. If there is disagreement about the plausibility of a flipped premise based on differing intuitions between the challenger and the believer of the original premise, then the latter must accept that their support for the original argument is founded only on their intuition(s) as opposed to rational argument.

# Part II. Arguments Against the Evil-god Challenge

# Chapter 4. Types of Argument Against the Evil-god Challenge

## 4.1 Introduction

The Evil-god challenge attempts to undermine classical monotheism by arguing that because the existence of an evil god is similar in reasonableness to the existence of a good god, the onus is on the theist to justify their belief in the latter over the former. In Part I, I defined the Evil-god challenge, distinguished between several types of challenge, presented its history and recent developments, and evaluated the parallel argument methodology. In this part, I outline and address the main objections that have been posed to the Evil-god challenge. To recap, the Evil-god challenge attempts to undermine the Good-god hypothesis (belief in an omnibenevolent deity) by constructing parallel arguments for the Evil-god hypothesis (belief in an omnimalevolent deity). If the Good-god hypothesis (GGH) and the Evil-god hypothesis (EGH) are found to be similar in reasonableness, then Good-god hypothesisers must explain their rationale for accepting the GGH over the EGH[18].

When evaluating the strength of the Evil-god challenge, it is important to remember that not all Evil-god challenges have identical structures; therefore, "Evil-god challenge" is really an umbrella term that describes several forms of Evil-god challenge. I previously identified three types of Evil-god challenge. The weak Evil-god challenge claims that because the EGH and the GGH are both similarly

[18] Note that even if one deems both hypotheses similarly reasonable, they still need to justify their motivation for accepting one over the other.

coherent, reasonable hypotheses, there is no justification for choosing the latter over the former. The strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence contends that the GGH is incoherent or absurd because the EGH is incoherent or absurd, therefore both hypotheses should be rejected. The strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency maintains that if the EGH is true then the GGH is also true, which is impossible because it requires two mutually exclusive propositions to be true. Both hypotheses, therefore, must be rejected. We will see that some objections posed to the Evil-god challenge threaten only one type of Evil-god challenge whereas others attempt to undermine all types of Evil-god challenge.

Most of the emerging literature responding to the Evil-god challenge is critical of it. Opponents have adopted various strategies in an attempt to undermine the challenge. It would be a very difficult task to evaluate the many objections to the Evil-god challenge without trying to categorise them in an effective way. In this chapter, I offer a classification system that will enable us to effectively sort through the objections posed to the Evil-god challenge. In the chapters that follow this one, I will go into further detail about the objections and offer responses that aim to counter them.

## 4.2 Asymmetry, Well-being, and Impossibility Objections

The first classification system I employ distinguishes between asymmetry objections, impossibility objections, and well-being objections. These classifications refer to the manner in which critics specifically object to the Evil-god *challenge*, rather than

attempting to undermine the Evil-god *hypothesis*. For each type of objection, I provide a definition and examples of objections of that type.

*Asymmetry Objections*

Since the Evil-god challenge is reliant on the symmetry thesis, it is unsurprising that many responses to the challenge have focused on denying that symmetry thesis. I call these objections "asymmetry objections", as they contend that the Good-god hypothesis is *more reasonable* that the Evil-god hypothesis, which of course undermines the symmetry thesis[19].

Objectors taking the asymmetry route can adopt one of several approaches. They might argue that traditional theodicies better address the problem of evil for Good-god hypothesisers than mirror theodicies do the problem of good for Evil-god hypothesisers. Alternatively, they might claim that one or more of the traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god—such as the ontological argument, teleological argument, cosmological argument, moral argument, or argument from religious experience—are more convincing than their Evil-god counterparts. They might also claim that the two concepts (Good-god and Evil-god) are not equally coherent. Due to the sheer amount and variety of asymmetry objections, I will adopt Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch's (2020) deconstruction of asymmetry objections into further categories. Each sub-category (intrinsic symmetry, natural theology symmetry, and theodicy symmetry) will comprise one chapter in this part of the thesis.

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[19] Of course, asymmetry objections can go the other way, too, as some might argue that the Evil-god hypothesis is significantly more reasonable than the Good-god hypothesis.

*Well-being Objections*

Other critics accept the symmetry thesis and attempt to undermine the Evil-god challenge using other means. The other main type of objection to the Evil-god challenge takes the form of maintaining that—despite the symmetry thesis holding—belief in the GGH is somehow better for us than belief in the EGH. I call this type of approach "well-being objections". Anastasia Scrutton (2016), for example, proposes that it is simply better for individual and societal well-being to believe in Good-god over Evil-god, which makes the Good-god hypothesis more justifiable accordingly.

*Impossibility Objections*

Finally, some critics claim that the Evil-god *hypothesis* is impossible (what I call impossibility objections). Impossibility objections attack the EGH directly by arguing that the hypothesis itself in untenable for one reason or another. Impossibility objections can be classified further using Yujin Nagasawa's (2017) categories of Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments against perfect being theism[20].

As identified by Nagasawa, typical objections to perfect being theism can be classified into one of three generic categories: "arguments that purport to show the internal incoherence of [god's] individual properties" (Type-A); "arguments that purport to show the mutual inconsistency between [god's] properties" (Type-B); and "arguments that purport to show the mutual inconsistency between the set of [god's] properties and a certain fact about the actual world" (Type-C). These categories can

[20] Perfect being theism is the belief that a perfect being (god) exists. Belief in the Good-god hypothesis can be classified as a type of perfect being theism.

be helpfully employed to classify objections to the Evil-god *hypothesis* (impossibility objections).

The first category of arguments that can be posed to the Evil-god hypothesiser is what Nagasawa refers to as "Type-A" arguments. As stated by Nagasawa,

> Type-A arguments are meant to show that at least one of [god's] properties specified in the [Omni-god] thesis—omniscience, omnipotence, or omnibenevolence—is internally incoherent. From the internal incoherence of at least one of the properties, opponents of the [Omni-God] thesis[21] deduce that there cannot exist an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being. Given the opponent's contention that the perfect being thesis entails the [Omni-God] thesis and that there cannot exist an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being, the arguments conclude that perfect being theism is false. (2017, p. 38)

One example of a Type-A argument against traditional perfect being theism is the so-called "paradox of the stone". By questioning whether an omnipotent being could possibly make a stone that it could not lift, this argument aims to demonstrate that the concept of omnipotence is internally incoherent[22].

Several theorists including Keith Ward (2015) and Edward Martin (2016) argue that an entirely evil god would hate everything, including itself, therefore it would desire to self-extinguish. Others (Swinburne 2012; Ward 2015) claim that the quality of omnimalevolence is incompatible with omniscience. These arguments view the Evil-god hypothesis as internally incoherent as therefore fall into this category.

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[21] The Omni-god thesis states that god is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. It is a type of perfect being theism.

[22] The paradox of the stone can equally be used against the Evil-god hypothesis since Evil-god is omnipotent.

The second type of argument is called the “Type-B” argument. Nagasawa describes this type of argument as follows:

> Type-B arguments are meant to show that even if each of [god’s] properties specified in the [Omni-god] thesis is internally coherent, at least some of them are mutually inconsistent. If some of the properties are mutually inconsistent, then, again, there cannot exist an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being and perfect being theism is false. (2017, pp. 38–39)

Nagasawa provides the example of the argument from Good-god’s inability to sin, which rests on the claim that an omnibenevolent being cannot also be omnipotent because it would not have the power to sin.

Arguments of this type used against Evil-god could include what I call the argument from Evil-god’s inability to do good. This argument attempts to demonstrate that omnipotence and omnimalevolence are mutually inconsistent. If a being is omnimalevolent, that being would be incapable of committing morally good actions or behaving well. If this being is also omnipotent, though, then it should have the ability to do so. As a result, one could argue that Evil-god cannot be both omnipotent and omnimalevolent. Another Type-B argument has been proposed by Ward (2015), who suggests that omnimalevolence and omniscience are incompatible because an omniscient being must have perfect empathy, which is incompatible with omnimalevolence. Christopher Weaver (2015), Charles Daniels (1997), and Richard Swinburne (2012) have all suggested that omniscience and omnimalevolence are incompatible because doing evil comes about as a result of ignorance. According to many Evil-god critics, the qualities of omniscience and omnipotence are incompatible with Evil-god’s omnimalevolence.

The third type of argument is called the “Type-C” argument. Nagasawa describes this type of argument as follows;

> Type-C arguments are meant to show that, even if [god’s] properties specified in the [Omni-god] thesis are internally coherent and mutually consistent, the set of properties is mutually inconsistent with a certain fact about the actual world. If that is true, then, again, the [Omni-god] thesis is false and perfect being theism is also false. (2017, p. 39)

The problem of evil is the juggernaut in this category for the Good-god hypothesis. Likewise, as we know from Chapter 1, the corresponding “problem of good” is extremely awkward for the Evil-god hypothesis. The problem of good questions how a malevolent god would allow the extensive amount of goodness we see in the world. Another example of this type of argument against Evil-god is the argument from religious experience. Richard Swinburne claims that “if there were vastly many experiences apparently of an omnipotent Devil, then that sort of evidence would exist; but there are not such experiences” (2004, p. 318). Moreover, Evil-god sceptics might question why so many people have had religious experiences of Good-god if Evil-god is the sole god in existence.

## 4.3 Responding to Arguments

In every single type of objection discussed above, critics point to specific beliefs that, when one holds them, offer protection against the Evil-god challenge. So what is the best strategy to defend the Evil-god challenge against them?

*Testing Belief-bricks*

As described in Part I, my strategy is to analyse the “belief-bricks” that prevent the Good-god hypothesiser from accepting the Evil-god challenge, or the Evil-god

hypothesis. If the belief-brick is axiomatic, then the parallel argument will be ineffective, unless the Evil-god parallel argument retains the relevant premise of the target argument. If the belief-brick is based on sensory experience, then the parallel argument will attempt to show that rival sensory experiences justify the Evil-god challenge to a similar extent. If the belief-brick is intuition-based, then the Evil-god hypothesiser may only be able to conclude that the Good-god hypothesiser's belief system is based solely on an intuition (or multiple intuitions) that is probably held strongly and therefore would be incredibly difficult to change.

## 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delineated different types of objection to the Evil-god challenge. First I distinguished between objections that object to the symmetry thesis (asymmetry objections), objections that accept the symmetry thesis but still reject the Evil-god hypothesis for non-alethic reasons (well-being objections), and objections constructed to undermine the Evil-god *hypothesis* (impossibility objections). I then used Nagasawa's distinction between Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments to further categorise impossibility objections. Finally, I outlined my strategy for responding to the objections by identifying the belief-bricks that the objections are reliant on. In the subsequent chapters of Part II, I will turn my eye to the specific objections that have been posed to the Evil-god challenge.

# Chapter 5. Arguments Against the Intrinsic Symmetry Thesis

## 5.1 Introduction

As we know, the success of the Evil-god challenge is contingent on the claim that the EGH is broadly similar in reasonableness to (or more reasonable than) the GGH, so its force is tied to the strength of the symmetry thesis. Some critics (Peoples 2011; Forrest 2012; Ritchie 2012; Hendricks 2018; Page and Baker-Hytch 2020) argue that the two hypotheses are not symmetrical, that the GGH is significantly more reasonable than the EGH, and that the symmetry thesis fails as a result.

Remember that strong Evil-god challenges do not attempt to prove that Evil-god exists in actuality, so strong Evil-god hypothesisers need not solve every problem posed to the EGH. Only objections that either (i) apply solely to the EGH (and not the GGH) or (ii) damage the EGH more than the GGH pose a serious threat to this type of Evil-god challenge. For example, the problem of good is perhaps the biggest problem one could pose to the EGH, but if the corresponding problem of evil for the GGH is equally threatening, the two problems in effect cancel each other out. Of course, if it is established that arguments against the EGH are stronger than arguments against the GGH, then this creates a serious obstacle for any Evil-god challenge to overcome.

Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch helpfully classify intrinsic symmetry as the thesis that “the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all evil deity is about as intrinsically plausible and coherent as the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all good deity” (2020, p. 490). In this chapter, I will outline the main objections of this type that have

been established to undermine the Evil-god challenge. To be successful, this type of objection must clearly show that the GGH is somehow significantly more reasonable than the EGH. Let us now consider some of the proposed asymmetries that critics have presented.

## 5.2 The Argument from Axiarchism

Peter Forrest (2012) takes an interesting idiosyncratic approach to undermining the symmetry thesis. Drawing on consequentialist ideas, he argues that if an omnipotent, omniscient being exists, it is more likely to act well, despite not holding the intrinsic quality of goodness. His argument proceeds with the claim that a god without moral character would act well, which leads him to the conclusion that the GGH is more likely than the EGH. Forrest presents the case that it is more likely (50% likelihood) that a creator would have no moral character than it is that it has intrinsic goodness (25% likelihood) or intrinsic badness (25% likelihood). Forrest bases his claim on the thesis of ontological simplicity[23]. If this is a correct evaluation of probability outcomes, and if Forrest can demonstrate that a god without moral character acts well, then there is a 75% probability that a single creator god would act well. In his attempt to demonstrate that a god without moral character acts well, Forrest employs axiarchism: the claim that everything in existence exists for a good purpose. According to his argument, if a universe-creator were without moral inclination, it

[23] Ontological simplicity maintains that it is not reasonable to multiply beyond necessity. In this case, Forrest claims that we should not assign a creator god more qualities than is necessary.

would do good nonetheless, because the universe—along with everything in it—must exist for a good purpose.

Axiarchism is certainly a belief-brick that supports the wall of the GGH. So what can the Evil-god hypothesiser do in a situation like this? Of course, they could simply deny the truth of axiarchism and suppose that not everything in the universe exists for a good purpose. They might look further into the intuition of axiarchism in the hope of finding reasons to deny it. John Collins offers an interesting retort of this type, namely that it is based on a false analogical assumption between humans and god:

> Our experiences of our own actions and temptations are at best inductive evidence for a more restricted axiarchism that applies only to ourselves, or to typical people, but not for abnormal or divine beings. Both axiarchism and antaxiarchism are sweeping claims about all agents, human and divine…divine motivation might function quite differently from that of typical people. Indeed, by Forrest's own lights, the motivational structure for [god] differs *fundamentally* from that of humans, since we have desires, virtues, vices, and characters, but [god] does not. And even though it is true that people do not always act according to their moral character, this too makes for a disanalogy with [god]; [god] never acts out of character. So Forrest's own claims about [god] undermine arguments that extrapolate from our being directly motivated by the good—provided that we really are—to [god's] being the same way. (2019, p. 104)

So, Collins suggests, even if axiarchism does apply to human beings, we cannot suppose that it is a universal principle that applies to god too. In addition—and this is something Forrest himself notes—it is not clear how the Good-god hypothesiser is helped by the notion that an amoral god is more likely than either a good god or an evil one.

But this is a belief-brick that is intuition-based. The notion that everything exists for a good reason is a metaphysical intuition that is not self-evident or based on sensory experience; it cannot be *proven* wrong.

The Evil-god hypothesiser might alternatively try to defend the claim that a parallel principle, “antaxiarchism” (that everything exists for a bad purpose) is a similarly reasonable position to hold[24]. There is little hope of this argument exerting prescriptive power over a Good-god hypothesiser, though. That is due to the belief-brick being based on intuition alone.

## 5.3 Conclusion

Recall from Part I that my strategy is to identify the fundamental belief-bricks that the Good-god hypothesiser’s belief wall is built from. If a Good-god hypothesiser has an intuition-based belief-brick of axiarchism, then the Evil-god challenge will find it very difficult to completely remove that belief-brick from the wall. The best they can hope to do is identify axiarchism for what it is: a metaphysical intuition.

[24] Forrest considers and rejects this strategy.

# Chapter 6. Arguments Against the Natural Theology Symmetry Thesis

## 6.1 Introduction

Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch (2020) define the natural theology symmetry thesis as follows: “natural theological evidence (e.g. the apparent ‘fine-tuning’ of the universe; phenomenal consciousness; religious experience; and objective moral values and duties) lends roughly equal support to GG and EG alike” (2020, p. 490). In this chapter, I detail several proposed asymmetries regarding evidence from natural theology. Note that I will also make my own detailed claims about the symmetry of the teleological argument and the argument from religious experience (and Evil-god parallel arguments of this type) in Part III of this thesis.

## 6.2 The Argument from Moral Source

Glenn Peoples (2011) claims that the moral argument for Good-god's existence is more plausible than any moral argument for Evil-god. According to Peoples, there can be no goodness without Good-god as a basis for that goodness. Similarly, William Lane Craig mirrors Plato’s Euthyphro Dilemma to refute the EGH:

> Suppose we concede for the sake of argument that an evil Creator/Designer exists. Since this being is evil, that implies that he fails to discharge his moral obligations. But where do those come from? How can this evil god have duties to perform which he is violating? Who forbids him to do the wrong things that he does? Immediately, we see that such an evil being cannot be supreme: there must be a being who is even higher than this evil god and is the source of the moral obligations which he chooses to flout, a being which is absolute goodness Himself. In other words, if Law's evil god exists, then [Good-god] exists. (2011)

According to Craig, then, Evil-god must inevitably be subject to some other more powerful moral code. If Evil-god is flouting morality, then morality must exist external to Evil-god.

In response to Peoples and Craig, the Evil-god hypothesiser can offer two rejoinders. First, they might simply deny moral realism. In order to do so, however, they must adopt an antirealist approach to morality. Moral antirealism, however, is subject to several large challenges, so it might not be in the Evil-god hypothesiser's best interests to go down that path. Second, the Evil-god hypothesiser might attempt to reconcile moral realism with the existence of an evil god by claiming that Evil-god, who has created morality, has established a morality of evil. Perhaps, contrary to Thomas Aquinas's "synderesis rule[25]", it is not the case that human nature is to veer toward good action. As Graham Oppy (2004), Stephen Law (2010), and Christopher Weaver (2015) all identify, it seems obvious that moral agents do not always aim towards the good, and some commit evil actions knowingly, so it seems that the Good-god hypothesiser cannot rely solely on a posteriori evidence to prove this belief-brick.

The Evil-god hypothesiser might also suggest a parallel with their own tenet, the "anti-synderesis rule", which we could define as follows: moral agents have a natural inclination to veer towards bad or evil actions. Unless the Good-god hypothesiser can offer more evidence for the synderesis rule, there seems to be no good reason to favour it over the mirror rule.

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[25] The synderesis rule contends that human beings possess a natural inclination towards the (morally) good.

Finally, the Evil-god hypothesiser might also point out that the Euthyphro Dilemma is just as much of an issue for Good-god hypothesisers as it is for Evil-god hypothesisers. If the dilemma is problematic for both camps, then the symmetry thesis still pertains.

Yet we have now identified another belief-brick that entails that the Good-god hypothesiser whose wall includes this brick will not be convinced by the Evil-god challenge. The reason for this is that they hold the intuition that Good-god is necessarily the source of all goodness in the world[26] as evidenced by humans veering towards the morally good.

## 6.3 Arguments from Alstonian Internalism and Phenomenal Conservatism

Perry Hendricks (2018) offers several reasons why Good-god hypothesisers might reject the symmetry thesis[27]. First, he suggests that if one accepts Alstonian internalism, then one is justified in accepting the GGH over the EGH. This is because Alstonian internalism endorses the view that one has good reason to believe in that which is a socially established doxastic practice. He states, “the good-god theist who partakes in the Christian doxastic practice and follows Alston in respect to justification should view good-god theism as significantly more reasonable than evil-god theism” (Hendricks 2018, p. 556). For Alstonian internalists, then, belief

[26] The Evil-god hypothesiser might also argue that this reasoning is circular.
[27] It should be noted that Hendricks does not endorse these philosophical standpoints himself but speculates that Good-god hypothesisers might undermine the symmetry thesis if they subscribe to these perspectives.

in the GGH may be justified on account of it stemming from Abrahamic doxastic traditions. Second, Hendricks argues that proponents of the GGH who find the modal ontological argument convincing might be justified endorsing the GGH if the modal ontological argument for Good-god cannot be mirrored by a modal ontological argument for Evil-god. Third, Hendricks contends that if a Good-god hypothesiser accepts "phenomenal conservatism"[28], then the "seeming" they have that Good-god exists might be enough to justify their belief in the GGH.

I think Hendricks is right to say that if one accepts Alstonian internalism or phenomenal conservatism, they have justification for accepting the GGH over the EGH. If a Good-god hypothesiser uses Alstonian epistemology as a justification for accepting the GGH, however, then they must surely admit that if there were an established tradition of believing in Evil-god, they (and others) would be justified in believing in Evil-god. I doubt that many Good-god hypothesisers would want to admit that their belief in Good-god is solely based on a tradition that is so culturally reliant and that could potentially change in the future. Similarly, if a Good-god hypothesiser relies on phenomenal conservatism, it seems that they must acknowledge that (i) if one day it seemed to them that Evil-god exists, they should change their view and (ii) if one really believed in Evil-god because it seemed to them that Evil-god exists, that belief would be justified to the same degree. I doubt that many Good-god hypothesisers would want to accept the GGH merely because there is an established tradition of believing in Good-god or that it "seems to them" that Good-

[28] According to Hendricks, if one is a phenomenal conservatist, then they believe "that if it seems to them that *p*, that this gives them justification (or evidence or reason) for believing *p*" (2018, p. 556).

god exists[29]. Finally, although Hendricks is correct to say that if the modal ontological argument for Good-god is sound and impossible to mirror successfully, then proponents of this argument would have justification for belief in the GGH, some have proposed that the modal ontological argument can be successfully paralleled (I discuss potential parallels of the ontological argument in Part III).

## 6.4 Conclusion

We have now identified two more intuition-based belief-bricks: phenomenal conservatism and Alstonian internalism. Yet these belief-bricks come with caveats: those who include them in their wall must accept the ramifications, specifically that if it *seemed* to them that Evil-god existed, then they should accept the EGH, or if they lived in a society in which there were doxastic traditions pertaining to the existence of Evil-god, then they should accept the EGH. These caveats perhaps weaken the belief-bricks.

[29] I will return to the discussion of on what foundations beliefs must be based on order to be rationally justified later in this thesis.

# Chapter 7. Arguments Against the Theodicy Symmetry Thesis

## 7.1 Introduction

As we know from Part I, Stephen Law (2010) has offered several solid mirror theodicies that purport to establish rough symmetry between them and the original theodicies that they mirror, and John Collins (2019) has provided additional support for them. A few theodicists have recently published counterarguments to the mirror theodicies, alleging that they are not even roughly symmetrical. In particular, Kyle Keltz (2019) and Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch (2020) have retorted that the privation account of evil offers a compelling reason to reject the symmetry thesis. In this section, I will outline the main arguments they pose and provide responses.

## 7.2 The Argument from the Privation Account of Evil

The evil-as-privation account rests on the premise that good and evil are ontologically asymmetrical. Advocates for the privation account of evil explain that since evil is not a substance in the same way that goodness is, Good-god did not create evil. As a result of this contention, Good-god is absolved of responsibility for instances of evil that exist in the world. In response to Epicurus's famous wondering, "whence cometh evil", the privation theorist's answer is not simply "it doesn't", though; the privation theorist does not deny the existence of evil outright but instead argues that evil's ontology should be seen in a different light. This account was later adopted by theologians like Thomas Aquinas and, more recently, defended by philosophers such as Herbert McCabe (1981), Bill Anglin and Stewart Goetz (1982),

and William Lane Craig (2011). Let's consider Augustine's famous exposition of the privation account of evil:

> And in the universe, even that which is called evil, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our admiration of the good; for we enjoy and value the good more when we compare it with the evil. For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely, the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else. (Augustine 2009)

Under the privation account, then, there is a significant difference between a privation and simply a lack of a particular thing. The underlying assumption of the privation account is that there is a right way for things to be actualised; every thing has a potentiality that ought to be actualised. According to Aquinas, if evil is present, then some potentiality has not been properly actualised. Of course, the privation account is not easily inextricable from the religious views of its developers. According to Augustine and Aquinas, every entity created by Good-god has some sort of intrinsic aim or end, which is also designed by god. If an entity is lacking something *that it is meant to have*, then that lack should be viewed as a privation. For example, if a human being is born without eyes, this absence of eyes can be defined as a privation because humans are meant to be born with eyes. That a chair

has no eyes, though, is simply a *lack* of eyes since Good-god did not intend chairs to have eyes.

Kyle Keltz (2019) attempts to use the privation account of evil to undermine the Evil-god challenge, arguing that the former gives us good reason to accept the Good-god hypothesis over the Evil-god hypothesis. Philosophers who, like Keltz, accept the evil-as-privation account believe that evil and good are ontologically asymmetrical for several reasons that I will break down here. The first reason is that evil cannot be a substance because it is a failure to actualise some potentiality that should be actualised. According to Keltz, “evil is the lack of a good that ought to be in something” (2019, p. 693). The second reason is that evil is a corruption of goodness, whereas that opposite—that goodness is a corruption of evil—cannot be true. According to those who endorse this view, every instance of evil that exists is a corruption of a goodness that is metaphysically prior to it. The third reason relates to the source of good and evil. Proponents of the evil-as-privation account argue that evil has no source, whereas good does. In the same way that light has a source, but shadow does not. We can summarise the underlying claims of the evil-as-privation account as follows:

1. The actualisation principle: Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality (goodness is not a failure to actualise a potentiality).
2. The corruption principle: Evil is a corruption of goodness (goodness is not a corruption of evil).
3. The source principle: Evil has no source (goodness does have a source).

There are a couple of reasons why the privation account of evil appears to undermine the Evil-god challenge. Firstly, if the privation account of evil cannot be paralleled, then this means that the symmetry thesis is incorrect. Keltz claims that Aquinas's understanding of god's goodness is based on a priori reasoning that goodness and being are convertible. Secondly, it can be argued that if the privation account offers an accurate characterisation of evil, then any talk of an all-evil being is nonsensical because evil does not exist as a feature of some substance (in the case of Evil-god, an attribute of that particular being).

Classic responses denouncing the privation account of evil claim that it does not effectively characterise all instances of evil, such as pain and murder (Kane 1980; McCord Adams 1999; Calder 2007); questioning why a good god—even if not directly creating evil—allows these absences of good to persist (Calder 2007); or arguing that evil and goodness should be understood in a descriptive way, defining actions and natures but not substances. Todd Calder (2007) and John Collins (2019), however, have claimed that the privation account of evil can be undermined by creating a parallel privation account of good that is similarly reasonable. This method involves accepting as true the underlying assumption of the evil-as-privation account (that it makes sense to consider a conception such as evil a privation) and constructing a parallel account that is just as plausible. If the parallel privation account of good meets the conditions of the symmetry thesis, then the Good-god hypothesiser cannot use the privation account of evil to escape the Evil-god challenge.

## 7.3 The Parallel Privation Account of Good

We previously read a passage describing Augustine's privation account of evil. Let's now consider a parallel of the original text. This time, it will outline what a good-as-privation account might look like:

> And in the universe, even that which is called good, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our contempt of the evil; for we abhor and decry the evil more when we compare it with the good. For the Almighty Evil God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely evil, would never permit the existence of anything good among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and evil that He can bring evil even out of good. For what is that which we call good but the absence of evil? In the lives of animals, peace and stability mean nothing but the absence of conflict; for when a solution is effected, that does not mean that the goods which were present—namely, the peace and stability—go away from the lives of animals and go elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the peace and stability are not a substance, but a deficiency in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the evil which we call conflict—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called virtues in the soul are nothing but privations of natural evil. And when they are eradicated, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.

Although Collins (2019) postulates a privation parallel to defend the Evil-god challenge, Calder's (2007) argument was constructed with the purpose of directly discrediting the evil-as-privation account. He claims that "we can just as easily say

that goodness is the absence of evil as we can that evil is the absence of goodness" (2007, p. 375). According to Calder, there are clear examples one can use to support this claim. He claims that "health is just as much an absence of disease as disease is an absence of health, and justice is just as much an absence of injustice as injustice is an absence of justice" therefore "perhaps all created being is evil and goodness is the absence of evil" (2007, p. 375). Similarly, consider this passage from Collins:

> The [Evil-god hypothesiser] may avail herself of a similar argument for a privation theory of good, in which being is evil and good the absence of being. Note that Augustine says when a cure of the body or soul is effected, the evil—disease or wound in the body, vice in the soul—does not go away and dwell elsewhere. Poor as this argument is, it can be aped as follows: when a body becomes ill, or a soul becomes vicious, the body's health or the soul's virtue is not transferred elsewhere. The body is a substance, and thus something evil, and the goods are accidents, privations of the natural evil. (2019, p. 88)

The notion that good is a privation of evil has not been taken seriously by any philosophers that I am aware of. Rather, it has been postulated only as a means to undermine the privation account of evil. Calder (2007) concludes that both theories work equally well but are clearly incompatible, thus both should be rejected in favour of a "non-privation" account of evil (and, accordingly, a non-privation account of goodness). Likewise, Collins (2019) claims that the privation account of evil *can* be effectively paralleled, but that as the good-as-privation account is poor, both accounts should be rejected. Both Collins and Calder, then, construct challenges from incoherence.

To attempt to effectively parallel the evil-as-privation account, we need to explore paralleling the further principles that underpin it[30]. So, let's consider the three principles identified earlier and observe whether the good-as-privation account can successfully mirror them.

*The Actualisation Principle*

According to Keltz, all existing entities have a potential to be actualised. This claim relates to the Aristotelian notion that all entities have a purpose, or *telos*. Aquinas built on this notion to form the theory that an evil action or evil being is an action or being that falls short of what it ought to be. This—critically—assumes that what an action or being ought to be is good. This is a result of Good-god being (i) the source of all being and (ii) all-good. Of course, when we mirror the account, Evil-god is not only the source of all being but also of all evil[31]. So, the parallel actualisation principle claims that every action and being's potential is to be evil (as willed by Evil-god), therefore any good action an entity brings about is a case of that entity falling short of its purpose.

*The Corruption Principle*

The term corruption immediately lends itself to something positive becoming something (more) negative and has connotations of changing for the worse. To avoid begging the question, it might be helpful to rebrand this principle the "alteration" or

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[30] As specified in Chapter 3, the paralleled premises (or belief-bricks) must be considered similarly reasonable as those in the original argument. To do so, we need to determine whether they are axiomatic, based on sensory experience, or based on intuition.

[31] Note that Thomists would strongly object to the coherence of this parallel claim because they argue that goodness is *the same* as being. This objection will be tackled at a later point.

“distortion” principle. So, can the good-as-privation account successfully claim that good is a distortion of evil? Again, we must consider that Evil-god is the source of creation and morality to determine the answer. If Evil-god is all-evil, then Evil-god cannot create good as a substance. Since Evil-god intends all actions and beings to be evil, any instance of good must be the distortion or alteration of evil by human will rather than Evil-god’s will. Although Evil-god causes everything in the universe to exist, it is human beings that distort or intentionally alter evil things to become good things. In a similar strategy to Good-god hypothesisers who claim that intentionally creating human beings with free will is a greater good that trumps the evils that humans cause, the Evil-god hypothesiser can claim that allowing free will is a greater evil because evil done from malice is worse than evil that was predetermined by Evil-god (Law 2010). On this account, then, one concept is still a distortion or change of the other. The difference is that it is goodness that has distorted evil.

*The Source Principle*

Recall that under the evil-as-privation account there is a source of goodness but not a source of evil. The good-as-privation account can also claim that there must necessarily be a source of the substance that is not a privation; the source of evil is Evil-god. To summarise, the good-as-privation theorist can mirror the three earlier identified principles as follows:

1. The actualisation principle: Good is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. The corruption principle: Good is a distortion of evil.
3. The source principle: Evil has a source.

We can schematise the argument put forward by evil-as-privation theorists as the following:

1. Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. Evil is a corruption of goodness.
3. Evil has no source.
4. If Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality, is a corruption of goodness, and has no source, then Evil must be a privation of good.
5. Evil is a privation of good.

Accordingly, the argument for good as a privation can be constructed thus:

1. Goodness is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. Goodness is a corruption of goodness.
3. Goodness has no source.
4. If goodness is a failure to actualise a potentiality, is a corruption of evil, and has no source, then goodness must be a privation of evil.
5. Goodness is a privation of evil.

*Mirroring Evil-as-privation Analogies*

Many evil-as-a-privation accounts include specific analogies to strengthen their position by appeal to intuition or analogical reason. Let’s consider some analogies that are frequently employed to illustrate evil as a privation of goodness. By doing so, we can determine whether the parallel privation account can construct analogies that are similarly reasonable.

A very common analogy in support of the privation account is that of darkness and light. Darkness, privation theorists argue, should be considered an absence of light. Light is a substance that is somehow meant to be apparent. If things are the way they ought to be, shadow should not exist. Next, consider a shirt with a hole in it. Evil-as-privation theorists might argue that evil is a privation in the same way holes in a shirt are privations of the shirt fabric that should exist instead of the holes. Holes in a shirt that was designed to be hole-less are examples of a flaw or distortion of what the shirt is meant to be. The holes themselves do exist, but they exist as a lack of what should be there. In the same way, privation theorists argue, instances of evil exist, but they exist only as a lack of what ought to be the case. Finally, consider the example of blindness. The privation theorist argues that blindness is a privation because all humans should be born with sight. Sight is a faculty that humans ought to have.

So, if we consider the examples that have been posed by privation theorists in the past (shadow, shade, or darkness where there should be light; holes where there should be fabric; and blindness where there should be sight), the privation accounts of goodness and evil can seem intuitively asymmetrical. Surely it is counterintuitive to say that light should be considered an absence of darkness; fabric an absence of holes; and sight an absence of blindness. Prima facie, the model fits the “negative” element of a thing being a privation of a positive thing. It would be better if the light were prominent over the darkness, if the holes were not in the shirt, and if the eyes were not blind. Another common example used by privation theorists is that of sickness. When we are sick, it is because we are not how we should be. We might say that we do not feel “100%” or that we do not feel “right” when we are under the

weather. It seems strange, though, to think that the opposite could be true, and that health should be viewed as a privation of sickness.

Of course, the analogies selected by privation theorists are those that appeal to our intuitions. Let's consider some analogies that the good-as-privation theorist might select to appeal to intuition. To begin with, it will suit our purpose to choose things that intuitively seem like natural states, but that are negative or evil in some sense. Now imagine a world where poverty is rife, where sickness (of varying degrees) is normal, and where people become increasingly frail the more time they spend in that world (this might not take too much imagining on our part). We might say that wealth should be considered an absence of poverty, that having a clean bill of health is an absence of sickness, and that not becoming frailer over time is an absence of becoming increasingly frail. I choose these examples to highlight the underlying assumption of privation accounts that the potential that *ought to be actualised* is always, to them, a positive one.

Naturally, acceptance of the privation parallel claim above would entail that the evil-as-privation account and the good-as-privation account are similarly reasonable. But it is unlikely to persuade any Good-god hypothesiser who has founded their faith on the evil-as-privation belief-brick. So let's examine why the Good-god hypothesiser might reject the good-as-privation parallel. To do so, we will go down another level of the belief wall and consider the foundations of the evil-as-privation account.

## 7.4 The Convertibility of Being and Good

This section will consider another important Thomistic claim: that goodness is identical with being. We will see that the convertibility of being and goodness is the fundamental basis of several arguments that aim to establish the Good-god hypothesis. In the vein of the Evil-god parallel, I will argue against the convertibility of being and goodness proposed by Aquinas and Augustine and their contemporary followers by claiming that it is just as reasonable to accept the convertibility of non-being and goodness. If this intuition-based belief-brick can be effectively paralleled, then it can underpin the parallel good-as-privation account.

The privation account of evil is a corollary of the convertibility of being and goodness. The notion that goodness and being are interchangeable is a prominent element of Thomistic theism, championed not only by medieval theologians but also by Thomistic theists today (see, for example Feser 2014; Oderberg 2014). The position is nicely summarised by Jan A. Aersten as follows:

> "Being" and "good" are interchangeable terms in predication…Wherever "being" is predicated of something, the predicate "good" is involved as well. That must imply that "good" is here not a concept that adds a real content or a new quality to "being", as a result of which "being" is restricted. For in that case there would be no question of convertibility. (1985, p. 449)

Called the convertibility claim or the interchangeability thesis, this view has gained traction in recent years after originally being postulated by the medieval philosophers such as Boethius, Augustine, and Aquinas. Aquinas's construction of the principle was heavily influenced by Aristotle's claim that the quality of goodness relates to the quality of desirability. If a thing is good, then it is also desirable. In fact, David S. Oderberg defines good as "a single property capable of definition as that which

satisfies a thing's natural appetites, or that which fulfils a thing's nature" (2000, p. 37). Aquinas built on this notion and identified the concept of desirability with that of perfection, believing that things desire their own perfection (Aertsen 1985).

It is often difficult to distinguish between the ontological notion of goodness (or, perhaps what we would call greatness) and the moral notion of goodness. Kelly Clark provides this helpful summary of Aquinas's views on the relationship between Good-god and goodness:

> Being and goodness, according to Aquinas, are transcendentals; they transcend the categories; they don't serve as properties which categorize anything since they apply to everything. Everything has being and is good. God is good in this ontological sense. To exist is good; so everything that exists is good. God is the most real existent. So [god] is the highest good. How does Aquinas establish the connection between being and goodness? How does he argue that "goodness and being are really the same"? Very roughly and briefly put, his argument may be put as follows:
>
> 1. To say that something is good is just to say that it is desirable.
> 2. Something is desirable to the extent that it is perfected.
> 3. Something is perfected to the extent that it is in being.
> 4. Hence something is good to the extent that is in being.
> 5. Hence goodness and being are the same. (2001, p. 17)

As a result of this contention, Thomists cannot comprehend the existence of evil, including the paradigm of evil, Evil-god. For followers of Aquinas, existence is fundamentally good, and non-existence is evil (or, at least, a privation of good), therefore the axiological assumptions the evil-as-privation theorist commits to render the good-as-privation parallel impossible.

Let's clarify why this assumption exists. Recall that according to the source principle, there is necessarily a source of goodness, whereas there is no corresponding source of evil. According to this principle, all good stems from the ultimate source of goodness just as light must have an ultimate source. Also recall

the actualisation principle, which claims that there is a specific aim or purpose to all things that is a clear blueprint for what they ought to be like; Good-god has a plan of how every single individual entity should be actualised. Encompassed in this idea is the Thomistic notion (referred to as the synderesis rule) that human beings naturally incline towards the (morally) good. Things ought to be good, therefore when they are not, what we see is a lack of what ought to be. Good, under this model, is inextricably associated with being. If this is the case, then everything that exists is good (hence evil entities and actions are considered not to exist in the same way as everything else). Oderberg makes the bold statement that "the old scholastic principle of the 'convertibility' of being and goodness strikes nearly all moderns as either barely comprehensible or plain false" (2014, p. 345)[32]. As before, let's continue with a parallel attempt: the convertibility of *non-being* and good.

## 7.5 The Convertibility of Non-being and Good

Although Keltz rightly recognises that "a privation view of good would entail that existence is undesirable, and nothingness is the ideal state of all things" (2019, p. 694), he does not consider the possibility that Aquinas's assumption can be effectively paralleled by the Evil-god hypothesiser. To him, it is absolutely unjustified.

Calder recognises and dismisses this criticism by claiming that the good-as-privation theorist does not need to justify the parallel between identifying goodness

[32] Although he proceeds to defend it thereafter.

with being and identifying goodness with non-being (and, accordingly, evil with being). He states:

> It is not fair to criticize the privation account of goodness by charging that it implies that the absence of being (i.e., evil) exists and that goodness consists in the absence of the absence of being—which would be absurd. To interpret the privation account of goodness in this way thus misses the point which is that according to this alternative to the privation account of evil, all created being is evil and goodness consists in a lack of being. (Calder 2007, p. 375)

According to Calder, there is no point in the objector arguing that the underlying principle of the evil-as-privation account should remain the same. Yet he refrains from exploring what a parallel principle of the convertibility of being and goodness might be like. The good-as-privation theorist, it seems, needs to do a little more work to establish the symmetry thesis between the target account and the parallel account. If we can provide a similarly reasonable notion that existence is bad, or evil, then the good-as-privation account retains symmetry to its original counterpart.

To achieve this aim, we can employ David Benatar's axiological asymmetry argument for support. Benatar argues that "there is a crucial difference between harms (such as pains) and benefits (such as pleasures) which entails that existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence" (2006, p. 30). In other words, it is worse to exist than not to exist. Axiological asymmetry, as Benatar brands it, involves the following argument[33]:

1. the presence of pain is bad, and that
2. the presence of pleasure is good.

[33] Note that Benatar constructs this argument to support his anti-natalism rather than to endorse the Evil-god challenge. Anti-natalism argues that procreation is wrong.

> However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the absence of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that
>
> 3. the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas
> 4. the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (Benatar 2006, p. 30)

Chris Byron (2019) has proposed that Benatar's contention that never existing is better than existing can be used to support the Evil-god challenge. It can also be employed to add weight to the good-as-privation account. If non-existence is better than existence, then it makes sense to think of non-existence as good and existence as bad. There are two options that one could take when employing Benatar's argument to support the good-as-privation parallel. The first is to claim that Benatar's argument is at least plausible, therefore the Thomist must respond to it. The second is to claim that Benatar's argument may not work, but that the onus is on the Thomist to respond to it because it is no less plausible than Aquinas's claim that existence is interchangeable with good. Both approaches entail that the Thomist provides good reason why their claim is stronger.

Keltz seems to consider the repercussions of this type of parallel account in the following passage:

> A reverse Thomistic theodicy would entail that the evil god is unjust in that it distributes being to its creature although it has determined they should have no being. The evil god's actions are hateful in that it gives being to creatures because non-being is desirable. (2019, p. 695)

Keltz denies the possibility of such a state of affairs because he assumes that existence and goodness are interchangeable based on Thomistic principles, which are intuition-based.

We can schematise the argument of the convertibility of non-being and goodness like so:

1. To say that something is good is just to say that it is desirable.
2. Something is desirable to the extent that it is perfected.
3. Something is perfected to the extent that it is in non-being.
4. Hence something is good to the extent that is in non-being.
5. Hence goodness and non-being are the same.

I anticipate that the most hotly contested parallel premise will be premise 3. What does it mean to say that something is perfected by not existing? Is this similarly reasonable to the claim that something is perfected to the extent that it is in being? For something to be perfect, it must be free from faults. Clearly, existing things all have faults[34]. So perhaps the only way for a thing to be perfect is for it not to exist. If perfection of actual beings is impossible, then perfection must only be possible in non-existence[35]. In addition, if Evil-god exists, then Evil-god is the source of all being, therefore the state of being must be bad (and the state of non-existence good). Just as Thomists believe that Good-god is good in virtue of creating being, Evil-god is evil in virtue of creating being. Aquinas thought that Good-god imparting existence to human beings was the ultimate good act. Similarly, one can argue that Evil-god imparting existence is the ultimate evil act.

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[34] Except, perhaps, Good-god itself.
[35] Note that I am postulating the interchangeability of non-being and good as a means to a parallel, not as a plausible principle.

Keltz is correct to say that if one accepts all Thomistic intuitions as true (specifically the evil-as-privation account and the convertibility of goodness and being), then the privation account of goodness is incompatible with them. If, however, the underlying Thomistic principles can themselves be paralleled, there seems to be no good reason to accept the evil-as-privation account as more reasonable than the good-as-privation account. In the next section, I will consider the objection that there is a compelling a posteriori reason to deny what we might call a "Benatarian" model of the value of existence in favour of a Thomistic model.

*Objection: There is A Posteriori Evidence for the Convertibility of Existence and Good*

One response to my parallel that the evil-as-privation theorist might propose is that it does not make sense to conceive of existence as evil since living creatures seem to desire and value existence so forcefully and intuitively. Indeed Keltz argues that "since things desire (or tend toward) their perfection, and since something is only perfect insofar as it exists as an ideal instance of its kind, being is interchangeable with goodness" (2019, p. 691). Perhaps, then, there are a posteriori reasons to favour the notion that existence is good. Keltz, in fact, hints at this when he says, "human beings desire happiness and the perfection of their natures. They do not desire their destruction" (2019, p. 695). This position asserts that there are a posteriori reasons to accept that existence is identical with good, specifically that existing beings that have the ability to desire their own existence rather than their own non-existence. Keltz continues, "a privation view of good would entail the belief that existence is undesirable…a privation view of good could only be warranted if inanimate, animate, and rational agents alike naturally tended toward and/or sought

their destruction" (2019, p. 696). Even if we ignore the difficult truth that many people do desire their own non-existence, there are two reasons to hypothesise that Evil-god is compatible with the evidence that humans (and other creatures that have the capacity to desire) seem to desire to exist.

First of all, Evil-god is evil. So, of course Evil-god would not want to make it easy for human beings to escape the evil that is existence. By instilling a false intuition that existence is good in his creations, Evil-god is preventing them from taking the easy way out. Evil-god deceives individuals by programming a "natural" mechanism that desires to preserve life. Little do the creatures know that their existence itself is actually bad and, in the words of Benatar, it would be better for them never to have been. Second, under Thomistic theism, taking one's own life or the life of another is considered an unforgivable sin, such is the force of the belief that existence is good. Again, the deceit-loving Evil-god might enjoy indoctrinating individuals with the belief that the fail-safe is off limits to anyone who does not want to be destined to a negative relationship with their creator and the determiner of their afterlife.

Although Thomistic theists are unlikely to be convinced by such speculations, at least this privation parallel offers reasons behind the parallel principle that non-existence is good and explanation as to how Evil-god is compatible with the a posteriori evidence for the claim that existence and goodness are interchangeable. One might claim that it is now up to the Thomist to explain why the claim that goodness and being are interchangeable is more reasonable than the claim that being and evilness are interchangeable.

## 7.6 An Analysis of the Privation Parallel

Although this chapter is included in Part II of this thesis because it is a response to objections from Keltz (2019) and Page and Baker-Hytch (2020), it will nonetheless be prudent to analyse the parallels proposed in this chapter using the methods described in Chapter 3. In this case, I have identified the underlying principles of the privation account of evil and mirrored the principles that underpin the argument.

*The Target Principles Underlying the Privation Account of Evil*

1. The actualisation principle: Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality (goodness is not).
2. The corruption principle: Evil is a corruption of goodness (goodness is not a corruption of evil).
3. The source principle: Evil has no source (goodness does have a source).

The argument for accepting a privation account of evil would look something like this:

*The Target Argument for the Privation Account of Evil*

1. Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. Evil is a corruption of goodness.
3. Evil has no source.
4. If Evil is a failure to actualise a potentiality, is a corruption of goodness, and has no source, then Evil must be a privation of good.
5. Evil is a privation of good.

*The Parallel Principles Underlying the Privation Account of Good*

1. The actualisation principle: Good is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. The corruption principle: Good is a distortion of evil.
3. The source principle: Evil has a source.

The argument for accepting a privation account of good would look something like this:

*The Target Argument for the Privation Account of Good*

1. Good is a failure to actualise a potentiality.
2. Good is a corruption of evilness.
3. Good has no source.
4. If Good is a failure to actualise a potentiality, is a corruption of evil, and has no source, then good must be a privation of evil.
5. Good is a privation of evil.

In the case of the argument above, I have paralleled the underlying principles of the privation account of evil. My strategy was to invert *all* the underlying principles of the evil-as-privation account and show that the inversions of the underlying principles are similarly reasonable. Clearly, any PA that retains that three original target principles and concludes that good is a privation would be nonsensical, so it was necessary to create inverse counterparts to the underlying principles in this case.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Privation Account | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓* | ✗ |

Figure 1 An Analysis of the Privation Parallel

In this case it was necessary to parallel some of the premises involved in the argument for evil as a privation. Although I have argued that the paralleled premises are similarly reasonable, this will be questioned by Thomists who have a staunch intuition about the convertibility of being and goodness.

## 7.7 Conclusion

I have attempted to defend the privation parallel (and, as a result, the Evil-god challenge) against criticisms that it is not as effective as the evil-as-privation account. Overall, I have contended that it is just as reasonable to view good as a privation of evil as it is to view evil as a privation of good (that is, not reasonable whatsoever). As a result of this, the claim that Thomistic accounts of good and evil tip the balance of reasonableness towards the GGH over the EGH fails. The objections the Good-god hypothesiser makes in response to the privation parallel rest on several intuition0based belief-bricks that some Good-god hypothesisers hold. This demonstrates that the privation account of evil is itself an edifice reliant on further foundational belief-bricks.

## 7.8 Asymmetry Objections: General Conclusion

As we reach the end of Chapter 7, it seems that—as it stands—significant asymmetry between the EGH and the GGH has not been sufficiently proven. If the Good-god hypothesiser can demonstrate a stark and significant imbalance of argument strength in Good-god's favour, then the Evil-god challenge will be undermined—but that imbalance has not yet been clearly shown. The Good-god hypothesiser cannot bypass the challenge under the aegis of the privation account of evil, since it is based on intuitions. The Evil-god hypothesiser can also attempt to demonstrate that the asymmetry actually benefits the EGH, by claiming that one or more of the parallel arguments constructed for Evil-god's existence are more convincing than their traditional counterparts[36]. Besides, even if it could be shown that the GGH is slightly more probable than the EGH, that may not be enough of an imbalance for some individuals to reject such a deeply rooted and strong belief as faith in Good-god. Perhaps this is part of the reason why much of the recent work critiquing the Evil-god challenge accepts the symmetry thesis and employs other strategies in an attempt to threaten it. These strategies will be evaluated in the chapters that follow.

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[36] I will argue in Part III that the argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god is stronger than the argument from religious experience for the existence of Good-god.

# Chapter 8. Well-being Objections

## 8.1 Introduction

Some critics maintain that although the EGH is not logically impossible, it is not as epistemologically plausible as the GGH despite the symmetry thesis standing. In a 2016 paper, Anastasia Scrutton claims that although the EGH is broadly similar in reasonableness to the GGH, there is good reason to believe in the latter over the former because it is more pragmatically desirable. Drawing on pragmatic encroachment[37], Scrutton claims that it is better to believe in Good-god than Evil-god because belief in a malevolent deity is detrimental to individual well-being and societal well-being, whereas belief in a benevolent deity is beneficial in these regards. In this chapter, I analyse Scrutton's well-being objection and explain why it is not effective against strong Evil-god challenges.

## 8.2 Pragmatic Encroachment

Scrutton attempts to undermine the Evil-god challenge by arguing that belief in a good god is more justified than belief in an evil god, despite the alethic similarity of the two hypotheses. Drawing on the epistemological theory of pragmatic

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[37] Briefly, pragmatic encroachment is the supposition that if believing proposition *a* results in better practical consequences than believing proposition *b*, it is more justifiable to accept proposition *a* than proposition *b*. In this model, practical considerations encroach on epistemological considerations.

encroachment, Scrutton claims that is it more reasonable to believe in a benevolent deity than a malevolent one because belief in the latter (i) is detrimental to one's well-being and (ii) has worse moral consequences, whereas belief in the former (i) is good for one's well-being and (ii) has better moral consequences. In this chapter, I critically respond to Scrutton's argument by proposing that even if belief in a good god results in better consequences than belief in an evil god does, pragmatic encroachment does not undermine the Evil-god challenge. I further argue that pragmatic encroachment potentially undermines itself in this instance.

After briefly explaining Scrutton's argument, I will present two objections that can be posed in response. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate that the epistemological approach Scrutton relies on—pragmatic encroachment—undermines itself in this instance. I also employ the classification system described in the previous chapter, by which we can distinguish between different types of Evil-god challenge. By utilising the distinction made in Chapter 1, we can determine that Scrutton's argument only undermines one type of Evil-god challenge: a type that makes no claims about the absurdity or incoherence of the EGH.

Scrutton offers a distinctive reason as to why we would be more justified (and therefore rational) to believe in Good-god over Evil-god. She purports that there are pragmatic motives for accepting the GGH over the EGH, claiming that:

> Despite not being alethic, the practical reasons for preferring one option over the other are in fact epistemic grounds for preferring one over the other, such that we would be less rational or justified if we chose to believe evil-God hypothesis than if we chose to believe classical theism. (Scrutton 2016, p. 346)

Her overall argument can be schematised as follows:

1. The EGH and the GGH are similarly likely (the symmetry thesis)[38].
2. If two hypotheses are similarly likely, it is more rational to believe in the one that has better consequences (pragmatic encroachment).
3. Belief in the GGH has better practical consequences than belief in the EGH.
4. It is more rational to believe in the GGH than the EGH.

As previously mentioned, Scrutton takes Law's symmetry thesis for granted for the purposes of her paper. Her second premise relies on a relatively new epistemological theory, pragmatic encroachment[39]. Scrutton argues that one of two alethically similar hypotheses can gain justifiability simply by being more practically attractive than the other. She states that "practical considerations such as what is at stake are epistemically significant: they can raise or lessen the extent to which your belief is justified or the amount of knowledge you have, even if the alethic considerations remain the same" (2016, p. 347). Scrutton's reasoning for the third premise is two-fold. First, she claims that belief in Good-god is better for our individual well-being. Second, she asserts that belief in Good-god is better for societal well-being. She concludes that "it is more reasonable to live as though classical theism is true because classical theism is just as likely to be true as evil-God hypothesis but is more conducive to human well-being" (2016, p. 353). Overall,

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[38] Of course, if it is discovered that the EGH is *more likely* than the GGH, then the first premise is false, and the argument is unsound as a result.

[39] In brief, pragmatic encroachment adopts "the slogan that the practical encroaches on the epistemic" (Kim 2017, p. 7). It embraces the idea that "practical considerations can alter the epistemic status of beliefs—they can make the belief more, or less, justified" (Scrutton 2016, p. 347).

Scrutton proposes that, when given the choice, we might choose to believe the GGH over the (similarly likely) EGH because it is better for us[40].

## 8.3 Responses to the Argument from Pragmatic Encroachment

I will now detail two objections to Scrutton's contention that practical considerations elevate the GGH on the reasonableness scale against the corresponding EGH. The first objection contests Scrutton's second premise—that if two theories are similarly likely, it is more rational to accept the one that has better consequences—and suggests that pragmatic encroachment undermines itself in this instance. The second objection alleges that Scrutton has missed the point of the Evil-god challenge; Evil-god hypothesisers are not arguing in earnest that the EGH should be adopted as a belief system.

*Pragmatic Encroachment is Incompatible with the Existence of Good-god.*

To recap, pragmatic encroachment is the thesis that epistemic value is added to propositions that have better practical consequences. Conversely, if propositions have worse practical consequences, epistemic value is detracted. Let us imagine a world in which pragmatic encroachment is universally accepted.

The police discover a brutally murdered man and find persuasive DNA evidence that points the finger of culpability at Sid. It comes to light that Sid has an

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[40] Note that Scrutton recognises that her assertion only holds true for binary choices such as choosing between the EGH and the GGH, admitting that her argument "does not preclude options other than belief in evil-God or good-God" (Scrutton 2016, p. 355).

identical twin, Sam, who is the true perpetrator. It is beyond reasonable doubt that one of them committed the crime, but there is equally compelling evidence against each twin. Sid, who is suicidal, doesn't mind being handed the death penalty, whereas Sam (who has vowed to be a model citizen from hereon) desperately desires to live. Bereaved friends and family of the victim simply want someone, be it Sid or Sam, to be convicted of the crime (and punished accordingly). The practical consequences of the jury adopting the belief that Sid committed the crime are better than the practical consequences of the jury adopting the belief that Sam did the deed; the propositions have the same epistemic value for the jury based on the evidence they have. According to pragmatic encroachment, the jury should send Sid to his death if they have an understanding of the consequences of their actions. Despite this, it seems intuitively wrong that Sid should be punished for his brother's crime: it is a miscarriage of justice and an unfair distribution of retribution[41].

To take a broader example, imagine that in 1,000 years' time all physical evidence for the Holocaust has been eradicated. Humans debate whether the Holocaust took place, with evidence being equal on both sides. If the propositions (i) the Holocaust did take place and (ii) the Holocaust did not take place are equally likely, then let's say society decides to accept proposition (ii), because it is better for individual and/or societal well-being. Perhaps the pragmatic encroachers conclude that it would be distasteful to believe that mankind committed such atrocities or that

[41] The pragmatic encroacher might reply that although we are slightly more justified in believing that Sid committed the crime this pragmatic consideration should not tip the balance when making a legal decision. In response, I would argue that the onus would be on them to explain why the practical consequences should not be considered on such occasions.

conflict would be reduced by agreeing that the event did not occur. It is, of course, arguable whether accepting proposition (ii) would really have better practical consequences, but the point is this: if, hypothetically, it would be better for individual and societal well-being to believe that the Holocaust did not occur, pragmatic encroachment suggests that we are more justified in believing that proposition (ii) is true. Again, this seems intuitively wrong[42]. Ultimately, it seems that pragmatic encroachment can lead to injustice.

Of course, the consequentialist might argue that sacrificing justice for better positive practical outcomes is not a good enough reason to disqualify pragmatic encroachment altogether. In this case, however, Scrutton is employing pragmatic encroachment to justify belief in the GGH, which means that it should at least be compatible with that which it is justifying. So, let's consider the implications that potential injustice might have on the compatibility between pragmatic encroachment and the existence of Good-god. I will argue that some serious tension is apparent between the GGH and a utilitarian system like pragmatic encroachment, and the case can be made that pragmatic encroachment is self-refuting as a result. To see how, we can reflect on what the specific consequences might be for individuals who adopt a potentially unjust epistemological system in a world where the GGH is true and Good-god really exists. The following passage from the Bible gives an insight

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[42] Perhaps this example only seems intuitively wrong because we know that the Holocaust *did* occur, but I argue that even in the case of an event that, based on available evidence, has equal likelihood of occurring as not occurring, it is still absurd to claim that it is less justified to believe that it occurred simply because of its detrimental effect on our well-being.

into how Good-god views instances of injustices (like the aforementioned case of Sid and Sam):

> Whoever says to the guilty, “You are innocent,” will be cursed by peoples and denounced by nations. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come on them. (Proverbs 24:24-25)

Good-god seems to value justice, reward those who behave in a just manner, and punish those who do not, as can be seen in these extracts from the Old Testament: “Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right” (Psalm 106:3) and “Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity, and the rod they wield in fury will be broken” (Proverbs 22:8). Similarly, the following excerpt, also from the Old Testament, explains the consequences of behaving justly or unjustly in detail:

> This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin. (Jeremiah 22:3-5)

If we presume that an omniscient god knows the motivations one has for deciding to choose proposition *a* over proposition *b*, Good-god would know if one chose to believe *a* over *b* simply because it had better practical consequences. The seeming value that Good-god places on truth and the punishments Good-god inflicts on those who reject truth in favour of good consequences for themselves are shown in the following passage from the New Testament, as explained by the Apostle Paul to the Romans: “But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Romans 2:8). These are just some of the many

scripture selections that strongly imply that Good-god might disfavour and punish individuals who adopt pragmatic encroachment.

Perhaps, then, Good-god hypothesisers have convincing pragmatic reasons for embracing just decision-making: they will be disciplined by Good-god if they do not. If the jury chooses to punish the innocent Sid, rather than the real guilty party, this may have severe ramifications for their well-being: Good-god will punish them[43]. Similarly, if, in the hypothetical postulated earlier, a society decided to adopt the belief that the Holocaust did not happen only to improve their well-being, it seems that Good-god would punish such behaviour. If we adopt pragmatic encroachment, then in certain situations unjust consequences might result—injustices that are prohibited by Good-god in religious texts. Accepting pragmatic encroachment, therefore, could be seen to be incompatible with the existence of Good-god. On the other hand, Evil-god, who would desire to maximise injustice among other evils, would have fewer qualms about individuals adopting pragmatic encroachment. In fact, Evil-god would probably enjoy an epistemological system that is not based on truth and which potentially results in injustice. To sum up, there seems to be a fundamental conflict between the GGH and pragmatic encroachment. If this is the case, then the alethically-challenged theory could undermine itself when being utilised to weigh the reasonableness of the GGH against the reasonableness of the EGH.

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[43] Of course, it is arguable whether a truly good god would punish people in this way, but I am employing selections of scripture from classical monotheism as one example of the GGH. As far as I am aware, all main branches of classical monotheism agree that Good-god advocates justice and disapproves of injustice.

*The Evil-god Challenge Does Not Advocate Belief in Evil god.*

For now, let us put aside the previous objection and grant all Scrutton's original premises: the symmetry thesis, pragmatic encroachment, and the notion that Good-god is better for us than Evil-god. Even then, the Evil-god challenge can remain untarnished by Scrutton's contention. Really, the only counterargument that needs to be posed against it is that the Evil-god challenge is not intended to advocate a belief in Evil-god; it is (generally) intended to be a strategy to highlight the absurdity or incoherence of the GGH. Scrutton puts forward the following argument:

> We are not rational to act as if [the EGH] is true given that [the EGH] is likely to result in a diminishment of our well-being, and given that [the GGH] is equally likely to be true and more likely to be good for us. We are therefore not rational to believe in an evil [god] rather than a good one. (2016, p. 354)

Most Evil-god hypothesisers, however, are not attempting to argue that believing in an evil god is rational. Rather, they are claiming that belief in Evil-god *and* belief in Good-god are similarly preposterous. Since they are not aiming to convert individuals to hold a real belief in Evil-god, Scrutton's argument is redundant against the Evil-god challenge. As an illustration of this point, consider the following hypothetical case:

Susan is attempting to prove to her friend, Steve, that some markings through a woodland area are the tracks of a unicorn by pointing out particular characteristics of the markings. Steve believes that the markings are naturally occurring and not created by any creature. In an attempt to enlighten Susan, Steve constructs a parallel argument to postulate that the tracks were made by a werewolf (something that Susan desperately disagrees with—she is afraid of werewolves after all!). Steve

establishes that all the available evidence points to the werewolf hypothesis as much as it does the unicorn hypothesis. If Susan were to say to Steve, “well, even though the hypotheses are equally likely based on the evidence, it would be better for my well-being to believe that the markings were created by a unicorn rather than a werewolf, so that is the more justified hypothesis”. Clearly, Susan is missing the point of Steve's argument. Steve constructed a hypothesis that he himself does not believe to show Susan how absurd hers is; he is not offering it as a viable alternative. Steve is attempting to show Susan that neither hypothesis should be accepted. Similarly, Law's Evil-god challenge is not intended to offer a feasible hypothesis or prove that Evil-god actually exists.

Since strong Evil-god hypothesisers are not attempting to convert individuals to belief in Evil-god or make normative claims about the beliefs one should adopt, Scrutton's argument is redundant. The EGH is a challenge to the GGH, not a serious alternative. Even if believing in Good-god is better for one's well-being than believing in Evil-god, the EGH is used only as a tool to deny the rationality of belief in Good-god, so Scrutton's objection fails to damage strong Evil-god challenges.

Although Scrutton’s argument fails to undermine the type of Evil-god challenge that Law develops, other types of Evil-god challenge could be susceptible to it. Really, the term “Evil-god challenge” (singular) can be misleading, and as I outlined in Chapter 1, there are distinct forms of Evil-god challenge, only one of which is undermined by Scrutton’s argument. Bearing in mind these distinctions, it is clear that Scrutton’s argument is defunct when applied to strong Evil-god challenges, because they hold that both hypotheses are unreasonable. Her argument does, however, apply to one version of the Evil-god challenge: the weak Evil-god

challenge. This is because the weak Evil-god challenge considers the EGH to be a reasonable position to hold. It seems, then, that only the weak Evil-god challenge might be susceptible to Scrutton's argument, whereas strong Evil-god challenges are not undermined.

Ultimately, the Evil-god hypothesis creates a challenge to classical monotheism, not to a serious alternative to it, just like Steve's werewolf hypothesis was meant to challenge Susan's unicorn hypothesis, not offer a feasible alternative. Even if believing in Good-god is better for our well-being than believing in Evil-god, the EGH is used only as a tool to deny the rationality of belief in Good-god. Besides this, the Evil-god challenge makes no claims about how people should live their lives. It is not a normative or motivational argument that advocates living as if an evil deity actually exists. Clearly, a substantial number of people already believe in Good-god. Evil-god hypothesisers might agree that holding a belief in Good-god is better than sincerely believing in Evil-god. Ultimately, even if pragmatic encroachment is a sound epistemological approach, it does not weaken the strong Evil-god challenge.

## 8.4 Conclusion

I have attempted to show that pragmatic encroachment is self-refuting when applied to the debate concerning the reasonableness of the EGH and the GGH, because there is a tension between the consequences of pragmatic encroachment and the established moral standards that come from Good-god. I have also tried to demonstrate that even if we accept all Scrutton's premises, strong Evil-god

challenges still stand, because they are not intended to provide a serious alternative to the GGH, rather they exist to show that both hypotheses are incoherent, absurd, or inconsistent. Perhaps the Evil-god challenge can be undermined; but if it can, it is not because of pragmatic encroachment.

## 8.5 Well-being Objections: General Conclusion

Due to the nature of strong Evil-god challenges, we can generalise to say that no well-being objection will succeed against them. No matter how good it is for our well-being to accept the GGH or the EGH, that has no bearing on strong Evil-god challenges because the challenger deems *both* hypotheses preposterous. This means that the Good-god hypothesiser cannot evade strong Evil-god challenges by appealing to the practical benefits of believing in the Good-god hypothesis over the Evil-god hypothesis.

# Chapter 9. Impossibility Objections

## 9.1 Introduction

Much of the recent literature disputing the Evil-god challenge questions whether the EGH is even possible. Several critics (Daniels 1997; Ward 2015; Weaver 2015; Page and Baker-Hytch 2020) have denied the logical possibility of the existence of Evil-god by appealing to the internal inconsistency of the hypothesis. If the existence of an evil god is a logical impossibility, they claim, then it is senseless to postulate it in the first place. This line of attack bypasses the symmetry thesis because it claims that the question of whether the EGH and the GGH are similar in reasonableness is redundant if the EGH is impossible in the first place. Recall that we can split impossibility objections into Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments.

## 9.2 Type-A Arguments Against the Evil-god Hypothesis

Recall that Type-A arguments against the EGH purport to show that one of Evil-god's characteristics is internally incoherent. Arguments against the internal coherence of omniscience and omnipotence need not bother us, since Good-god possesses these qualities too, so the only Type-A argument against the EGH would be to argue that omnimalevolence is incoherent. As far as I am aware, no one has argued that the quality of omnimalevolence is intrinsically impossible yet the quality of omnibenevolence is possible. So we can assume, at least for now, that Type-A arguments will not hinder the Evil-god hypothesis unless also hindering the Good-

god hypothesis. At this point, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of what Evil-god's character is like. Recall from Chapter 2 that Evil-god's evil nature mirrors Good-god's good nature, so the account of evil character that one adopts will be isomorphic to the account of Good-god's good character. As a result of this, the Good-god hypothesiser would find it very difficult to deny the possibility of omnimalevolence while still maintaining the possibility of omnibenevolence.

## 9.3 Type-B Arguments Against the Evil-god Hypothesis

Charles Daniels (1997) uses the Platonic argument from Gorgias to claim that Evil-god—by virtue of being omniscient and omnipotent—would not do evil, because no moral agent knowingly and willingly commits evil. In other words, the existence of Evil-god is impossible because omnimalevolence is incompatible with omniscience and omnipotence. He explains as follows:

> Evil is a product of ignorance—clever, willful, dogmatic, insensitive ignorance. But an omniscient, omnipotent being has no such ignorance and cannot be or do evil, although such a being can do what *we* in ignorance erroneously judge to be evil. Like the rest of us, an omniscient, omnipotent being wants most what is good, but unlike the rest of us such a being knows in total detail what things are good and how to get and keep them and to avoid whatever is bad. Thus, an omniscient, omnipotent, omnimalevolent being cannot exist. (Daniels 1997, p. 180)

Daniels asserts that all agents desire what is good; therefore, it is a conceptual truth that all agents reject what is bad. As a result of which, no agent—including a god—will knowingly commit evil actions, so the EGH is impossible: an evil god simply cannot exist.

In response, (as we have said before) it could be claimed that Daniels wrongly assumes Aquinas's synderesis rule—that humans will always veer towards the good unless they are ignorant of it.

Weaver, though, employs a Kantian stance that relies on his versions of moral rationalism[44] and reasons internalism,[45] to bypass the obvious objection to Daniels's argument that moral agents sometimes do bad knowingly. Consider his explanation[46]:

> If we were to suppose that evilism is true at a metaphysically possible world *w*, at *w* the god of *evilism* (call it EG for evil god) would know of all its moral obligations. Given *moral rationalism*, EG would have good reasons to fulfill its moral duties, though EG would be constitutionally such that it cannot fulfill such moral duties. But if EG had good reason to fulfill its moral obligations at *w*, then (given *modest (reasons) internalism*) it would be possible for EG to be motivated to fulfill its duties. Moreover…it would be possible for EG to desire to fulfill all of its moral obligations. Any possible world featuring a state of affairs wherein EG desires to fulfill all of its moral obligations, and is motivated to fulfill those obligations, is guaranteed to be a world at which at least one good state of affairs obtains. The moral agent responsible for that state of affairs obtaining is of course EG. EG cannot be essentially such that it promotes evil in all of its actions, for it is a truism, given *moral rationalism* and *modest (reasons) internalism*, that we are obligated to desire what is right. Desiring to perform right actions so as to promote the good, and forming goals so as to achieve the promotion of good is itself the promotion of good by right action. *Evilism* is therefore impossible. (Weaver 2015, pp. 13–14)

According to Weaver, then, moral agents are under the obligation to desire what is right, which Evil-god would not do; therefore, the existence of Evil-god is necessarily impossible. Weaver's Kantian approach to the Evil-god challenge is underpinned by

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[44] Moral rationalism is "the thesis that duties and/or moral obligations either strictly imply practical reasons for action or are identical to such reasons" (Weaver 2015, p. 10).
[45] Weaver defines reasons internalism as "For any moral agent, *a*, necessarily, if *a* has a good reason to ϕ in circumstance C*, then possibly *a* will desire to ϕ in C*" (2015, p. 12).
[46] Weaver refers to the EGH as "evilism".

a similar theory to Daniels's: that all moral agents desire what is right, therefore unless one is a theist "with Kantian leanings" (2015, p. 13)—as Weaver refers to this stance—his argument fails to undermine the Evil-god challenge. If one rejects either moral rationalism or reasons internalism, his argument is defunct.

Another response the Evil-god hypothesiser can make is to claim that Evil-god does not have to be rational to be omniscient (this is something that Weaver considers and rejects). As Collins also notes, maximal goodness does not entail necessary goodness because perhaps "god is morally better if it freely chooses the good over evil, rather than being good of necessity" (2019, p. 106), in which case god's moral nature must necessarily be freely chosen.

Keith Ward also attempts to nullify the Evil-god challenge by presenting several arguments intended to demonstrate that an omniscient, omnipotent being cannot conceivably be evil. To do this, he claims that the following three propositions entail an inconsistent triad: (i) god is omnipotent, (ii) god is omniscient, and (iii) god is omnimalevolent. Ward details several arguments to support this claim: (i) the argument from knowledge of suffering, (ii) the Platonic argument, (iii) the Kantian argument, and (iv) the mental pathology argument. Although I will address each argument that comprises the quartet of impossibility arguments, the focus of my attention will be on Ward's first argument, which he defends most thoroughly and which I believe to be the strongest and most interesting.

*Responding to Arguments 2-5*

Ward's second argument employs Platonic ideas in an attempt to establish the necessary interconnectedness of god and goodness. Describing the "usual Christian

view" (2015, p. 46) of goodness as objective and part of divine nature, Ward contends that god necessarily possesses whatever qualities are intrinsically good: "if goodness is objective and if objective and necessary truths are part of [god's] nature, then [god] will necessarily not be evil" (2015, p. 46). That is to say that there are objective values of goodness, god embodies them all, and must act in accordance with them. In contrast, "there is no argument from evil to the existence of supreme evil. For evil is not of intrinsic value" (2015, p. 46). If this is the case, then Evil-god cannot exist because goodness is intrinsically bound up with the concept of god, and to speak of Evil-god is as self-contradictory as speaking of a four-sided triangle. Ward then claims that evil is of what he calls "intrinsic disvalue" (2015, p.46), which means that no rational being could value it for its own sake. A wholly evil being would necessarily have to embody all disvalues (Ward gives the examples of weakness, ignorance, and depression) and must desire itself not to exist. As an omnipotent being, this god would have the ability to act on its desire and would will itself out of existence.

Ward claims that goodness is of objective, intrinsic value and it is bound up with the concept of good-god. In response, we can make two alternative claims: (i) perhaps there is no such thing as objective, intrinsic goodness, and (ii) there is an evil parallel of Ward's claim: evilness is of objective, intrinsic value and it is bound up with the concept of Evil-god. Claim (i) assumes an anti-realist approach to morality and contradicts Ward's account of goodness by claiming that there are no objective moral facts. Ward does not present an argument for the objective, intrinsic value of goodness or an argument against its alternatives and, without these, his Platonic argument cannot be successful. Claim (ii) suggests that Evil-god is the ultimate form

of evil, and so whatever Evil-god derives pleasure from (the pain and suffering of its creation) has intrinsic value simply because evil-god desires it. Evil-god could very well be a sadist that enjoys the pain of others and, therefore, the pleasure gained from the pain and suffering of sentient beings would be intrinsically valuable. Although I do not claim that this Evil-god parallel is sound, it undermines the force of Ward's argument, nonetheless.

Let us move on to Ward's Kantian argument. According to this argument, "an omnipotent being would choose to act rationally, not irrationally, if only in order that it could discern efficient means to its goals, and understand how to build a universe" (2015, pp. 46–47). After establishing that god is rational, Ward outlines the Kantian notion that a rational being knows that any principle that applies to a being in a particular situation will apply equally to any being of that type in a similar situation. He uses this supposition to infer that a perfectly rational being would not trigger the undesirable condition of pain in others if that being found pain undesirable itself. Ward concludes from this that a rational god must be a good god.

I have two responses to Ward's Kantian approach. Firstly, god and human are very different types of being. Ward seems to be presuming two claims, (i) that god cares for humanity and (ii) that god views humans as similar to itself, both of which are unfounded. Human preferences could be completely unimportant to god. Besides, even if god is perfectly rational, this does not mean that god desires for all intelligent beings exactly what god desires for itself. For example, it would be absurd to conclude that because god desires to continue to be omnipotent, god would want all intelligent beings to have this quality. God could be a unique being and one that would not impose its own preferences onto those it created. In other words, god

does not follow the divine golden rule, that is the rule of treating people as it wishes to be treated itself.

A second strategy to countering the Kantian argument is to deny that it is necessarily rational to do good. By adopting the view that Evil-god is an ethical egoist, i.e. a moral agent that should act in a way that promotes its own self-interest, it can be maintained that, for Evil-god, rationality is acting in accordance with its own egoistic preferences. As such, Evil-god would be inclined to maximise the suffering of sentient beings. It would be a mistake to assume that the attributes of rationality and goodness are inextricably linked, thus Evil-god could be rational and evil without contradiction. It could be objected that the intrinsic goodness of an action gives an agent immediate good reason to perform that action, whereas the evilness of an action does not provide an agent with the same motivation. In response, I would argue that because Evil-god's desire for evil would be divine, the desire itself serves as an immediate motivating factor for evil actions. Evil actions would be intrinsically valuable simply because Evil-god desires them. Besides, even if the objection stands, this does not demonstrate that rationality and evil are necessarily mutually exclusive, only that goodness and rationality may be linked in a way that evilness and rationality are not.

Ward's penultimate argument is an argument from mental pathology and relies on the supposition that an entity that gains pleasure from cruelty is pathological, which I take to mean mentally unhealthy or diseased. According to Ward, one agent would only take pleasure in another's pain when the former is treating the latter as "sub-personal" (2015, p. 48), or a lesser being than itself. Ward

explains that the treatment of another as sub-personal is based on false or inadequate belief, which is a flaw that an omniscient being would not have.

If we accept Ward's contention that cruel behaviour manifests as a result of one entity believing itself to be superior to another, then I contend that it is reasonable to allow the possibility of god behaving cruelly. If ever there were an appropriate example of a relationship where one being is superior to another then surely it would be between the creator of the universe and its creation. It is entirely plausible to maintain that god regards humans as sub-personal because, to god, they are! Of course, denying the intuitively appealing anthropocentric view that humans are intrinsically valuable and not just the pleasure-enhancing instruments of an omnipotent, omniscient being will not be a popular stance to hold, but it need only be demonstrated that this state of affairs is *possible* to overcome Ward's inconsistent triad. It seems reasonable to assume that god could be not only perfectly powerful and completely knowledgeable but superior to humans and, accordingly, misanthropic. If this is the case then, given Ward's assumptions, there is nothing pathological about god treating humans cruelly.

Having addressed all but one of Ward's arguments for the inconsistent triad of omnipotence, omniscience, and evil, I now turn to the most forceful of his approaches, which explores the nature of god's omniscience.

*Responding to Argument 1: The Argument from Knowledge of Suffering*

Ward's first attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of Evil-god aims to establish that an omniscient being would not intentionally cause suffering to others due to a

particular type of knowledge that god must necessarily possess: knowledge of suffering.

To begin with, Ward suggests two reasons why certain beings may intentionally cause harm to others. Firstly, as a result of the evolutionary process, it learns over time that harming others promotes its own survival. Consequently, the being becomes habituated to the enjoyment of such behaviour. Ward concludes that this reason could not apply to god because god has not evolved and so has no rivals that must be vanquished in order to secure its own survival. The second reason Ward proposes is a being gaining pleasure from the suffering of others; a reason he dismisses for an omniscient being. Contending that god must either have feelings or not have feelings, Ward speculates that if god does not have feelings, it would not take pleasure in harm, since it cannot feel. Thus, god must have feelings. If god has feelings, then god would not desire other entities to suffer because, crucially, it would share in their suffering.

Ward's reasoning can be presented as follows: god is omniscient; therefore, god knows everything. If god knows everything, then god has "perfect empathy" (2015, p.45): the quality of experiencing the exact mental states each individual person feels (including mental states of suffering). As a rational being, god must desire to experience pleasurable mental states and have an aversion to painful mental states (including those resulting from its perfect empathy). As an all-powerful being, god can realise these desires and would therefore cause happiness and not harm. Ward concludes: "an omniscient being cannot desire anything that causes pain or discomfort to itself, or to others if it must share in that discomfort" (2015, p. 45). In other words, as a result of its perfect empathy god only desires to cause humans to feel what it desires to feel itself—the equivalent of a divine golden rule.

God would treat others only as god wished to be treated, because it feels the effects of the treatment along with the subject of the treatment.

Ward concludes by stating, “an omnipotent being has no competition, and feels the feelings of others, so it has no reason to cause pain and good reason to cause happiness in others” (2015, p. 45). Although I agree with Ward that an evil god has no competition for power, I will refute each of the other contentions individually. I have formulated the argument to identify each step individually:

1. God has perfect empathy.
2. A being with perfect empathy would experience pain when other beings experience pain.
3. God would not choose to experience pain.
4. God would not intentionally cause other beings to experience pain.

To sum up, as a result of its perfect empathy, god would choose humans to feel pleasure and not pain because it feels the effects of the treatment alongside them. Here lies the apparent inconsistency between omniscience and omnimalevolence and Ward’s basis for rejecting the possibility of an evil god.

To argue against this conclusion, I propose four retorts. The first two challenges highlight problems with the quality of perfect empathy that Ward ascribes to god: an identity problem and a moral problem. The third challenge aims to establish that even if we accept god’s perfect empathy, this does not necessitate that god is good. The fourth challenge is a version of the problem of suffering that is particularly problematic for the concept of god that Ward puts forward.

The first problem faced by perfect empathy is an identity problem. To perfectly empathise with a being, *x*, another being, *y*, must not merely know exactly what *x*'s experience feels like, but experience it themselves, which appears impossible for two ontologically distinct beings. It seems that unless god and god's creation are one and the same (as is the case with pantheism), the personal phenomenal experiences, or qualia, felt by entities within creation cannot also be felt in exactly the same way by its creator. In other words, god cannot have phenomenal knowledge of every single experience.

Besides the identity problem, there are moral complications when considering the compatibility of perfect empathy with god's other attributes. If an omnipotent, omniscient being has a relationship of perfect empathy with another being, it must empathise exactly and completely with the other. Let us consider the extent of this claim for a moment. Good-god would have to experience precisely what it feels like to desire to murder someone in cold blood; to desire to rape an innocent child; and to desire to end its own life. Surely that is not possible for a god from whom maximal goodness stems. Similarly, Evil-god would have to share in the feelings of altruistic behaviour, love, and compassion, which is against its nature. This view of omniscience is problematic for classical theists and Evil-god hypothesisers alike. Furthermore, if god desires to reduce the amount of pain and suffering humans experience solely because it wants to avoid the corresponding pain, rather than because it cares about human welfare, this implies that god is selfish—a conclusion that does not seem to be compatible with the characteristic of omnibenevolence that classical theists ascribe to god. Surely if god is the source of goodness, this

goodness should not be performed by god simply for its own benefit, while using human agents as a means to an end.

Of course, philosophers have puzzled over the nature of god's omniscience for centuries, and there is not the scope to firmly establish the nature of this divine attribute here. Suffice it to say, there seem to be difficulties with the concept of perfect empathy that should be investigated before ascribing this quality to god. But let us assume along with Ward that god does possess perfect empathy. My third challenge is intended to demonstrate that even if we allow a perfectly empathetic god, this being could still be evil without contradiction.

Empathy, I argue, entails neither sympathy nor compassion. A moral agent could understand what it feels like to be painfully scourged and not enjoy the feeling themselves, but this by no means prevents them from gaining pleasure from whipping their dog, or even their child. In fact, it is conceivable that, in certain cases, empathy may cause the agent enjoying the suffering of another to enjoy it even more. A sadistic torturer may have been tortured themselves and empathise with their victim accordingly, but this experience may serve to heighten their own awareness of the victim's pain and consequently their enjoyment of the torture. Many people experience schadenfreude, the pleasure gained from seeing others suffer or fail, from the satisfaction of seeing an enemy receive their comeuppance to gratification from watching a murderer executed. Similarly, Evil-god's enjoyment of suffering could be intensified by its perfect empathy.

It may be criticised that the previous examples are not relevant to this debate as they refer to beings with limited, rather than full, empathetic knowledge, and that a

perfectly empathetic entity would not be subject to these feelings. In response, it could be proposed that Evil-god values its own pleasure above all else. Perhaps Evil-god is akin to a divine ethical egoist and cares only about the maximisation of its own pleasure, derived exclusively from the pain of others. For a sadist, desire is the suffering of others; for a masochist, self-suffering brings pleasure. Evil-god could be a sadist, enjoying others' pain; a masochist, enjoying its own pain; or indeed (as this model implies) a sadomasochist, enjoying both the pain of others and its own pain—the ultimate schadenfreude, if you will. Arguably, therefore, god may desire suffering while retaining perfect empathy.

Ward might respond by saying that being a sadist or a masochist is incompatible with omniscience, because subscribing to either sadism or masochism is irrational, and omniscience entails rationality. In response, I would argue that in order to show that sadism and masochism are irrational, one must prove a particular type of moral realism—it cannot be derived from logic alone. For moral realists, moral facts actually exist and are independent of an agent's beliefs, and this claim should by no means be taken for granted. Remember, to deny Ward's inconsistent triad we must only show that a being possessing omniscience and omnimalevolence is *possible*.

My final challenge is a version of the problem of suffering that has undesirable consequences for Ward's model of Good-god's character. If Ward is right to say that Good-god must necessarily be both perfectly empathic and perfectly good, then the fact that we do suffer suggests that Good-god cannot exist. Surely Good-god would avoid every single instance of human suffering, so as to experience only pleasure as a product of its perfect empathy. This problem of suffering is especially forceful

against Ward's concept of Good-god, which includes the attribute of perfect empathy and leads to a potentially insurmountable inconsistent triad.

Overall, it seems that even if we overlook the potential problems with ascribing the attribute of perfect empathy to god, there are *still* difficulties with the claim that perfect empathy necessitates Good-god's goodness. It can be concluded, therefore, that Ward's argument from the knowledge of suffering fails, and that no inconsistent triad is established based on Evil-god's omniscience and omnimalevolence.

According to Ward, the concept of Evil-god is incoherent because omnipotence, omniscience, and evil form an inconsistent triad. The reasons cited for this inconsistent triad are multiple: (i) that god would have perfect empathy and would not want to generate pain it would simultaneously experience itself, (ii) that goodness is necessarily an intrinsic quality of god, (iii) that god is necessarily rational and a rational being would only do good, (iv) that desiring to cause pain is pathological, something god cannot be, and (v) that Evil-god would not be worthy of worship. Conversely, I have argued (i) that perfect empathy is compatible with Evil-god, (ii) that goodness is not a necessary intrinsic quality of god, (iii) that a rational being could desire pain, (iv) that desiring to cause pain is not necessarily pathological, and (v) that Evil-god does not need to be worthy of worship to exist. It is important to emphasise that I do not actually present the case for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, evil being; its purpose is merely to demonstrate that Evil-god is not vulnerable to Ward's proposed inconsistent triad. If I have succeeded in this task, then the Evil-god challenge still stands.

## 9.4 Type-C Arguments Against the Evil-god Hypothesis

Type-C arguments propose that the EGH is incompatible with some sort of evidence in the world. In the philosophy of religion, this type of argument usually comes in the form of the problem of evil or against specific philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god that are based on evidence in the world. Accordingly, Type-C arguments against the Evil-god hypothesis will come in the form of the problem of good or arguments against mirror arguments for the existence of Evil-god.

I have already discussed how Evil-god hypothesisers can respond to the problem of good in Chapter 1. Furthermore, in Part III of this thesis I will be demonstrating how to parallel philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god with mirror arguments purporting the existence of Evil-god. So we do not need to discuss Type-C Arguments here.

## 9.5 Impossibility Arguments: General Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered responses to impossibility objections. I have argued that some impossibility objections rely on intuition-based belief-bricks such as axiarchism or reasons internalism. I have also argued that some impossibility objections fail to undermine the Evil-god challenge for other reasons. Interestingly, Stephen Law claims that impossibility objections are superfluous anyway, and that the Evil-god challenge is still effective even if the EGH *is* impossible. Consider his response to critics who put forward impossibility objections:

> The point is this: even supposing an evil god is, for some reason X, an impossibility, we can still ask the hypothetical question: setting aside the fact that so-and-so establishes that an evil god is an impossibility, how reasonable would it otherwise be to suppose that such an evil being exists? If the answer is “highly unreasonable”, i.e. because of the problem of good, then the evil-god challenge can still be run. We can still ask theists to explain why, if they would otherwise reject the evil-god hypothesis as highly unreasonable, do they not take the same view regarding the good-god hypothesis? (Law, 2010, p. 372)

If Law is right, then even if the EGH is logically impossible, we can still postulate the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being to show the absurdity of the parallel GGH[47]. Let us consider the example of Susan and Steve from Chapter 8 to demonstrate Law's point. Let's say that instead of postulating that a werewolf made the tracks, Steve proposes that they originated from “a werewolf that has never existed in human form”. Susan objects to Steve's argument to say that anyone who knows anything about lycanthropy knows that werewolves must necessarily have had human form at some point, yet it does not seem to be absolutely integral for Steve's reductio argument that “a werewolf that has never existed in human form” is possible. Even if this being is impossible, Steve can still hypothesise its existence to demonstrate the ridiculousness of Susan's unicorn claim.

A final tactic the strong Evil-god hypothesiser can employ is to argue that the GGH is also impossible, therefore leaving the symmetry thesis intact. For example, they could apply the logical problem of evil to propose that due to the existence of evil, Good-god is impossible. Alternatively, they could argue that the existence Good-god is logically incompatible with other elements of classical monotheism. If

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[47] Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch refer to this strategy as the “bracketing move” (2020, p. 490).

both hypotheses are impossible, then the GGH does not emerge as more reasonable than the EGH. Although it is outside the scope of this thesis to detail potential incompatibilities, potential elements of classical monotheism that scholars have deemed incompatible with the existence of Good-god include the dispersion of souls to heaven and hell (see Schoenig 1999), the seemingly contradictory biblical accounts of Good-god (see Bradley 2000), and the dispersion of miracles (see Howson 2011; Overall 1985).

# Part III. Philosophical Arguments for the Evil-God Hypothesis

# Chapter 10. Philosophical Arguments for the Evil-god Hypothesis: An Overview

## 10.1 Introduction

Although most literature surrounding the Evil-god challenge has focused on the relationship between the problem of evil and the problem of good, some philosophers have applied the Evil-god challenge to traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. As expressed by Steven Cahn, “if demonists or theists can produce any other evidence in favour of their positions, they may be able to increase the plausibility of their views, but unless they can produce such evidence, the reasonable conclusion is that neither [Evil-god] nor [Good-god] exists” (1977, p. 73). In this section, I will present and discuss the application of the Evil-god challenge to philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. This technique involves crafting Evil-god parallel arguments that mirror traditional philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. If the symmetry thesis remains in force for each of these arguments—that is if the target arguments can be effectively mirrored—then there does not seem to be a good reason for endorsing arguments for the existence of Good-god over the parallel arguments for the existence of Evil-god.

## 10.2 The Cosmological Argument

For obvious reasons, I do not dedicate an entire chapter to the cosmological argument: in its various forms, the cosmological argument purports only to demonstrate the existence of an ultimate being that grounds motion, causation, or contingency, rather than a specifically good being. It can therefore be concluded that the argument demonstrates the existence of Evil-god just as much as it does the existence of Good-god, so long as it is accepted that Evil-god would have just as much reason to ground them as Good-god. As voiced by Wallace Murphree, “so far as [cosmological arguments] go, there is no clue as to whether the creator-sustainer-orderer is good or evil” (1997, p. 77). It is worth noting, then, that because these two arguments are not intended to provide information about the moral status of the deity, they presume equal reasonableness whether postulating a good god or an evil one. The cosmological argument is unique in this sense. Unlike other arguments, it is neutral because it only purports to establish the existence of an ultimate being while remaining silent about the being's moral or axiological status.

The table below illustrates an analysis of the parallel cosmological argument, which retains the same logical structure, domain, and conclusion as the target cosmological argument. This is an example of a parallel argument that it would be difficult to refute.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Cosmological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | ✓ |

Figure 2 An Analysis of the Parallel Cosmological Argument

# Chapter 11. The Evil-god Parallel Argument from Design

## 11.1 Introduction

Many theists cite evidence of design in the world to strengthen the case for the existence of Good-god. Teleological arguments travel from the intuition that the natural world seems to exhibit elements of design (whether citing specific complex natural features or adducing the overall "fine-tuned" nature of the world) to the conclusion that a designer is responsible for the existence of the world. The parallel argument from design for the existence of Evil-god similarly uses evidence from the world to postulate a designer. Evil-god design arguments, in contrast, focus on features of the world that indicate an evil architect. As Christopher New asserts, "who but a malevolent being…would arrange for the enormous sufferings caused in the world by natural calamities and human actions alike?" (1993, p. 38).

In this chapter, I construct an Evil-god challenge that invites theists to explain why, based on evidence of design, believing in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god is significantly more reasonable than believing in an omnipotent, omniscient, evil god. I intend to demonstrate that apparent design in the world evidences the existence of an evil god as much as it does a good god, and, consequently, that the argument from design should not be considered a watertight argument for the existence of Good-god. This is because for each of the forms of the teleological argument, a similarly strong parallel argument for the existence of Evil-god can be constructed that satisfactorily mimics it. The Evil-god challenge to the

teleological argument, therefore, invites theists to explain why evidence of design demonstrates the existence of Good-god more so than the existence of Evil-god.

The teleological argument (also known as the argument from design) travels from the intuitive notion that the natural world appears to exhibit elements of design to the assertion that there exists a designer who contrived the world. The elements of design cited by theists depend on the version of the design argument that is being endorsed. Some design theorists point to the complexity and functionality of natural features of the world, such as the human eye: elaborate systems that perform effectively. Others make comparisons between the world and man-made artefacts to draw similar conclusions about the designer of the former based on knowledge of the latter. Many refer to the fine-tuned nature of the universe, claiming that the probability of the universe being “just so” unintentionally is so incredibly unlikely that it indicates purposeful design.

Classical monotheists tend to agree that the argument from design cannot independently prove the existence of a supremely good god, rather it points to a world-designer without providing many clues about this architect’s attributes. Some theists (Craig 2011; Swinburne 2012) have contended that the argument from design, although not a stand-alone argument for the existence of a good god, can successfully be used as part of a cumulative case for the existence of such a being. For Richard Swinburne (2012), the argument from design is a persuasive inductive argument that should be used in combination with other inductive arguments to further the case for Good-god’s existence.

Although, in his 2010 paper, Stephen Law is predominantly concerned with employing the Evil-god hypothesis to address the problem of evil for theists, he does mention the possibility of using the Evil-god hypothesis to form challenges against traditional arguments for the existence of Good-god:

> Suppose, for example, that the universe shows clear evidence of having been designed. To conclude, solely on that basis, that the designer is supremely benevolent would be about as unjustified as it would be to conclude that it is, say, supremely malevolent, which clearly would not be justified at all. (Law 2010, p. 353)

Law is suggesting here that theists should not use the argument from design alone to conclude that a supremely benevolent being exists that designed the world.

To formulate my Evil-god challenge, I intend to demonstrate that the traditional argument from maldesign (that apparent design in the world infers the existence of an evil god) is no weaker than the argument from design for Good-god. I claim, however, that the argument from maldesign does not constitute strong evidence for the existence of an evil god (making this challenge a *strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence*). From this I conclude that the attempt to further establish the existence of Good-god from evidence of design in the world fails. The argument can be presented as follows:

1. If evidence of design for Good-god is not stronger than evidence of design for Evil-god, then if we fail to establish the existence of Evil-god by appeal to evidence of design, we also fail to establish the existence of Good-god by appeal to evidence of design.
2. Evidence of design for Good-god is not stronger than evidence of design for Evil-god.

3. We fail to establish the existence of Evil-god by appeal to evidence of design.
4. We fail to establish the existence of Good-god by appeal to evidence of design.

In the sections that follow I will further define the concept of Evil-god, provide a brief outline of the traditional argument from design, and present my parallel argument from “maldesign” long with its implications for Good-god hypothesisers. Finally, I will address several objections that could be raised in response to this Evil-god challenge.

## 11.2 The Argument from Design

The argument from design, or the teleological argument, is not a single argument but rather an umbrella term for a group of arguments attempting to substantiate the existence of Good-god by appealing to evidence of design. The argument from design is a common argument utilised to argue for Good-god’s existence, despite the numerous challenges that have attempted to undermine it over the years.

The characteristic that binds arguments from design is the contention that our world displays evidence of design: evidence that is best explained by the existence of a designer. Whether appealing to apparent purpose, complexity, or fine-tuning, supporters of the teleological argument believe that Good-god is the best explanation for such features of the natural world.

## 11.3 The Parallel Argument from Design

The argument from maldesign is an inductive, a posteriori argument for the existence of Evil-god that uses apparent evidence of design and purpose in the universe and world to postulate a designer and proposes that said designer is of an evil moral nature. Just as there are many versions of the argument from design, the maldesign argument can be expressed in various forms. After introducing the argument in general, I will outline several formulations of the argument from maldesign[48].

As the argument from maldesign parallels the traditional argument from design, I assume the premise that there is evidence of design in the world. I attempt to demonstrate that “the multitude of interwoven adaptations by which the world is constituted a theatre of life, intelligence, and morality, cannot reasonably be regarded as an outcome of mechanism, or of blind formative power, or aught but purposive intelligence” (Tennant 1930, p. 121), except I will argue that this purposive intelligence is evil.

*The Analogical Argument from Maldesign*

Traditionally, analogical arguments from design compare either the world itself or natural features within the world to man-made artefacts, and they use this resemblance as a tool to derive similar conclusions about the contriver of the world as they do about the designer of man-made artefacts. Although this type of design argument no longer enjoys the popularity it once possessed, having fallen prey to

[48] I first explored this parallel in a master’s thesis completed at the Institute of Education.

many successful attacks, the analogical design argument is still intuitively appealing to many classical monotheists. The argument can be presented as follows:

1. The world bears similarity to a complicated manufactured machine.
2. Complicated manufactured machines were designed by intelligent beings.
3. Similar effects have similar causes.
4. The world was designed by an intelligent being.

The design theorist might stop at this conclusion, but might also add on a more specific conclusion that this intelligent being is Good-god:

5. The world was designed by Good-god.

Over the years, theists have proposed several different artefacts to liken to the world (or natural features within the world), but whether utilising the watch, telescope, ship, or house, analogical teleologists maintain that they can make similar inferences about the designer of the artefact and the designer of the world. The analogical argument from maldesign uses a similar method to evidence Evil-god. Many artefacts could be employed to compare with the world in order to infer an evil designer. Here is one such example.

There is an ancient legend in Indian mythology that details the life of Ashoka, a powerful emperor who lived in India in 3rd century BCE and ruled much of the subcontinent for several decades. The legend goes that Ashoka was a harsh and terrible ruler. One story recounts how one of Ashoka's concubines stole the leaves from his favourite tree and how he punished her by burning her and the other 499 concubines to death. Another relates how Ashoka killed eighteen thousand heretics because of the misbehaviour of one. These, along with several other tales,

demonstrate the “cruel and impetuous temperament” (Strong 2014, p. 41) of Ashoka. A third tale tells of Ashoka building a house of torture as a means of administering punishment more easily. The building was adorned with beautiful ornaments and expensive decorations. It was designed to entice people into its depths, and, once inside, they found themselves in an elaborate torture chamber, where they would perish in masterly yet macabre mortality machines. Despite appearing beautiful on the outside in order to tempt visitors through its gates, unseen tortures were housed within[49].

We can compare this torture chamber to the world. Based on the analogy, it does not seem unreasonable to claim that the world is a product of an evil designer, just as it would be imprudent to deny that the torture chamber was designed by a cruel architect with evil intentions. This analogy purposefully includes the idea that the torturous machine has the appearance of beauty, since it cannot be denied that our world exhibits great surface beauty. According to the argument, Evil-god has designed a beautiful tapestry of beautiful natural features inhabited by living organisms, that appears to be designed with great beauty and goodness in mind. Some of the natural features, despite their enticing appearance, are perilous, and some of the inhabitants, despite looking benign, are ultimately dangerous. The Australian Box Jellyfish, for example, looks like an ethereal sea angel but can kill sixty humans with the touch of a tentacle; or the berries of the Deadly Nightshade, which have a deliciously sweet taste but contain a lethal poison.

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[49] This example was adapted from my master’s thesis.

The analogical argument from maldesign establishes a similarity between the world and a complicated manufactured torture machine, designed by an evil and intelligent being. From this, it infers that the world itself must have been designed by an evil, intelligent being: Evil-god.

*Evidence of Design in the World*

Over the years, teleologists have used many real-life examples of apparent design in the world. Alleging that certain things within nature are most viably the products of deliberate and skilful design, they point to phenomena like the human eye and argue that it is such an incredibly complex functional system that it is unlikely (or even impossible) that it came about by an arbitrary chain of events. One modern interpretation of this line of reasoning is irreducible complexity, which attempts to prove that certain natural features in the world are complex in a way that excludes even the possibility of coming about by the process of evolution.

The argument from evidence of maldesign in the world uses examples of natural features to establish the existence of Evil-god. Rather than focusing on the ingenious and beautiful aspects of design, it focuses on those natural features that demonstrate evil design—or maldesign. In John Wisdom's gardener parable (1944), two people stumble upon a garden and wonder whether or not it is maintained by a gardener. The believer is adamant that an invisible gardener has tended the neglected garden, whereas the non-believer is certain that no gardener exists and that the garden has grown naturally. Now consider this adapted version of the parable.

A husband and wife visit a botanical garden and stroll through the various exhibits. They happen upon one display that looks astoundingly beautiful, smells deliciously fragrant, and is so enticing to the two explorers that they decide to venture in to appreciate its sensual aesthetics. The couple express awe and wonder at the experience and agree that the display must have been designed by a lover of nature: a gardener who wishes the public to be able to enjoy its glory. Unfortunately, in addition to the many pretty-looking and perfumed harmless plants, some innocuous vegetation inhabits the display. It is home to the innocent-sounding Gympie-Gympie plant, which, if brushed against, causes humans to feel like they are "being burnt with hot acid and electrocuted at the same time" (Marina Hurley, quoted in Blevins 2017, p. 41). A few Manchineel plants (also known as the Death Apple Tree) thrive, bearing delicious-looking fruit that, when eaten, cause throat-bleeding and excruciating pain (incidentally, its sap also causes severe blistering that can lead to death). While the husband is fortunate only to encounter the harmless flora, the wife takes a different path, eats a death-apple, and is stung by Gympie-Gympie. While writhing in pain on the floor, she curses the evil gardener. The husband exclaims "but there are only a few venomous plants, the rest are lovely—don't curse the gardener so!". Sadly, his wife is in too much agonising pain to hear his protestation.

This botanical display is comparable to our world. Yes, there are aesthetically pleasing features and uncountable awe-inspiring natural wonders that could lead one to infer a benevolent designer. However, significant evidence exists that could be used to argue for an evil designer. Even if we focus on the underlying laws of nature rather than specific examples within the system, we see evidence of maldesign.

Take, for example, the process of natural selection by which sentient beings propagate. As Richard Dawkins states:

> The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. (1995, p. 85)

In addition to the suffering caused by predator to prey, Stephen Pinker highlights just how much suffering animals of the same species inflict on one another. He writes,

> On top of all the miseries inflicted by predators and parasites, the members of a species show no pity to their own kind. Infanticide, siblicide, and rape can be observed in many kinds of animals; infidelity is common even in so-called pair-bonded species; cannibalism can be expected in all species that are not strict vegetarians; death from fighting is more common in most animal species than it is in the most violent American cities. (2002, p. 163)

Natural selection, a fundamental system for sustaining life in the world, is another example of maldesign. Although it is unclear why Good-god (who is all-powerful to boot) would design such a selfish, callous, and incredibly painful process to promote the continuation of a species, it makes sense that Evil-god would implement such a system.

*The Fine-tuning Maldesign Argument*

The fine-tuning of the universe is believed by some to be the strongest version of the argument from design. This contemporary form of the design argument uses relatively recent scientific information to support the claim that the universe is improbably tailored, or “fine-tuned”, to life. If a fish could consider its surroundings after being born into a carefully planned and constructed aquarium, where the water temperature and pH levels are just right for its survival, it might arrive at the

conclusion that its habitat was clearly designed and built by a clever agent who brought about this set of conditions. Similarly, considering the physical laws that govern our universe, adherents to the fine-tuning argument maintain that it is reasonable to conclude that the life-welcoming universe was created to be this way intentionally. So how does this lead to the existence of Good-god? Plantinga explains:

> The basic idea is that such fine-tuning is not at all surprising or improbable on theism: [Good-god] presumably would want there to be life, and indeed intelligent life with which (whom) to communicate and share love. Of course, this life could take many different forms (indeed, perhaps it has taken many forms). But it doesn't seem at all improbable that [Good-god] would want to create life, both human life and life of other sorts; and if he wanted to create human life in a universe at all like ours, he would have been obliged to fine-tune the constants. (2011, p. 199)

In other words, the fine-tuned nature of the universe is compatible with, and even offers evidence for, a creator god for whom it was necessary to produce life to fulfil its desire to spread goodness by creating sentient beings with whom it can communicate and love.

Examples of fundamentally essential physical constants in the universe, without which life would not be able to endure, are held up as evidence of a designer. Not only physical laws within the universe such as gravity, but constants defining the creation of the universe itself, are considered by many scientists to be incredibly improbable. Had the big bang happened with a slight variation in its force, for example, conditions would have been such that it would not have resulted in star formation. The relationship of mass between the proton and the neutron and the nuclear force that binds them together are other examples of fine-tuning. If just one

of the parameters of the universe were minutely different, life may not have been viable.

The fine-tuning maldesign argument agrees that the universe is fine-tuned for the possibility of life but offers a unique perspective on the intent or purpose of the designer. The unlikelihood of the universe's perfect conditions for life leads to the likelihood of a designer: and that designer is Evil-god. But why would Evil-god create conditions for life to exist, one might ask. The fine-tuning maldesign argument proposes that Evil-god has created a cosmological utopia to ensure the enjoyment it will secure from the inevitable suffering that these conditions bring about. A universe without life is a non-suffering universe since suffering is contingent upon sentience. Suffering cannot exist if no entity exists to experience pain, therefore Evil-god would not be maximally evil if Evil-god did not create sentient life that has the capacity to—and indeed will—suffer. The fine-tuned nature of the universe is a designedly ideal place to realise Evil-god's goal to maximise suffering.

I have constructed maldesign arguments to parallel each main traditional argument from design. I have proposed the analogical maldesign argument: that the world is like a torture chamber created by Evil-god; the argument from evidence of maldesign: that Evil-god purposefully designed certain prima facie evil elements of the world; and the fine-tuning maldesign argument: that the universe is fine-tuned for life so that Evil-god can enjoy the suffering that results. If it is accepted that the argument from maldesign for the existence of Evil-god is just as likely as the argument from design for the existence of Good-god, then there is no good reason to accept the latter over the former, when appealing to evidence of design in the world.

## 11.4 Objections to the Parallel Argument from Design

I will now address three objections to the argument from maldesign. The first two objections weaken the argument from maldesign and the traditional argument from design equally, therefore they do not create a serious challenge for the Evil-god challenge.

*The Maldesign Argument is Weak.*

It could be argued that the argument from maldesign is not a strong inductive argument for the existence of Evil-god. Perhaps it could be claimed that the analogy of the world to a torture chamber is a feeble one. Besides, perhaps (as claimed by Hume 1779; Darwin 1860; Mill 1874; Rowe 1979) the comparison of the world to a watch, or any other man-made artefact, is inappropriate. Maybe there are naturalistic explanations for apparent design in the world, and perhaps the world is so finely tuned because if it were not, then we would not be here to observe it.

The argument from maldesign, however, need not answer these concerns, because the same concerns apply to the traditional argument from design. The argument from maldesign need not provide a strong analogy, rather it must only provide one that is as strong as the comparison used in the parallel argument from design (of course, this objection would be problematic for weak Evil-god challengers who purport to demonstrate that the GGH and EGH are *both* reasonable positions to hold, but I am proposing a strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence here). The argument from design does not attempt to prove the existence of Evil-god, or even

claim that the Evil-god hypothesis is likely. Rather, it is formulated to demonstrate that the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis are *both* unlikely. The burden of proof, therefore, falls on the design theorist to provide such a strong argument from design that it tips the balance of likelihood toward Good-god rather than Evil-god.

*Why is There So Much Good in the World?*

Another tack the critic might take is to contend that there is simply too much good in the world to consider it the opus of Evil-god. The Good-god hypothesiser could certainly cite many wonderful things in the world to counter the idea that apparent design in the world points to Evil-god rather than Good-god. As explained in Chapter 1, Law (2010) calls this objection the problem of good. Just as objectors to Good-god adduce the problem of evil, objectors to the Evil-god hypothesis may cite good and beauty in the world as a challenge to its existence.

I have two responses to this objection. First, as Law says, we can respond to the problem of good by appealing to mirror theodicies. To recap, some reasons why Evil-god might include good in his creation are: (i) *free will*: although Evil-god hates good, by giving people free will the evil that they commit becomes worse through the moral responsibility of the agents, as opposed to humans simply being mechanistic, sadistic puppets; (ii) *character-destroying*: having some beauty and good in the world allows the relativity of evil to be even worse when it occurs. By having a few successful, happy people, the rest of humanity suffer all the more in comparison. By reversing traditional theodicies, we can meet the problem of good in the world.

My second response mirrors the common claim that existence is intrinsically valuable, by arguing that it is intrinsically bad. Consequently, bringing a sentient being into existence, no matter the quality of its life, causes it harm (Benatar 2006). What is more, it could be claimed that human lives are, in general, very bad, yet humans are subject to a bias that inclines us to believe the reverse: that existence holds intrinsic value and that human lives are generally good overall (Benatar 2006). This notion, if true, strengthens the Evil-god challenge by explaining why the perceived imbalance of goodness over evil is merely an illusion.

*The Maldesign and Design Argument are Equally Highly Reasonable.*

Critics may object that although design arguments and maldesign arguments are broadly symmetrical, neither are absurd, therefore accepting the Good-god and the Evil-god hypotheses to argue for multiple deities with diverse moral attributes. Perhaps after weighing up all the evidence the most likely conclusion is that the designer is neither all good nor all evil, but a mix of good and evil or, alternatively, multiple deities of which some are good, and some are evil. In many belief systems (Greek and Roman mythology, Hinduism, Manicheanism, Paganism, the Yoruba religion, and Zoroastrianism, among others), the supreme being (or beings) is not entirely good. In Hinduism, for example, the Trimurti, a supreme power comprised of three deities of mixed moral characteristics, is responsible for creating, sustaining, and destroying the world.

While it is true that the argument from maldesign does not offer a parallel argument to belief systems of this nature, this does not constitute an ominous threat due to the parameters I imposed at the beginning of the chapter. The strong Evil-god

challenge advocated for here is not meant to contest belief systems that include deities of mixed or neutral moral characteristics; its purpose is only to refute the Good-god hypothesis specifically.

## 11.5 An Analysis of the Parallel Argument from Design

I will now analyse the parallel argument proposed in this chapter. To do so, let's review the target argument and consider how the parallel argument is amended accordingly.

*The Target Argument from Design*

1. The world bears similarity to a complicated manufactured machine.
2. Complicated manufactured machines were designed by intelligent beings.
3. Similar effects have similar causes.
4. The world was designed by an intelligent being.

And remember that the design theorist might stop at this conclusion, but might also add on a more specific conclusion, that this intelligent being is Good-god:

5. The world was designed by Good-god.

*The Parallel Argument from Design*

1. The world bears similarity to a complicated manufactured machine.
2. Complicated manufactured machines were designed by intelligent beings.
3. Similar effects have similar causes.
4. The world was designed by an intelligent being.

And remember that the design theorist might stop at this conclusion, but might also add on a more specific conclusion, that this intelligent being is Evil-god:

5. The world was designed by Evil-god.

The parallel argument here is particularly compelling because it accepts every premise of the target argument but arrives at a different conclusion. Since this argument is inductive, the Evil-god hypothesiser does not need to do much work in order to create such a parallel. The cosmological argument for Evil-god follows a similar structure; it retains all the original premises of the target traditional cosmological argument and arrives at the conclusion that the world was designed by an intelligent being. As demonstrated in the table below, this fulfils all the criteria identified in Chapter 3 for an effective parallel. Note that the table would look slightly different if the parallel proceeded to conclude that the designer was Evil-god rather than Good-god. In that instance, the conclusion would not be retained.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Teleological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | ✓ |

Figure 3 An Analysis of the Parallel Argument from Design

## 11.6 Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate the symmetry of the traditional argument from design and the argument from maldesign by offering forms of the latter that parallel

the former. I have maintained that because the argument from maldesign fails to establish the existence of Evil-god, so the argument from design fails to establish the existence of Good-god. Perhaps there is an alternative form of design argument that does not exhibit broad symmetry when being compared to its corresponding maldesign formulation and is not undermined as a result. Until teleologists can construct a design argument that offers clear asymmetry towards Good-god over Evil-god, the equivalence in likelihood still stands. As far as I am aware, no such design argument exists.

Due to the analogous nature of the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis based on evidence of design in the world, it is up to the Good-god hypothesiser to comment on whether the argument from design offers just as much evidence for Evil-god as Good-god. If I have succeeded in showing that the designer is just as likely to be all-evil as all-good, then the design argument cannot be used as a stand-alone argument for the existence of Good-god. To return to our belief-wall analogy, the particular belief-brick row is evidence-based. But through our Evil-god parallel we have shown that the row of bricks that represent the design argument is flimsy and should be removed from the wall of belief.

# Chapter 12. The Evil-god Parallel Argument from Religious Experience

## 12.1 Introduction

It is often thought that religious experiences provide support for the cumulative case for the existence of the god of classical monotheism. In this chapter, I formulate an Evil-god challenge that invites classical monotheists to explain why, based on evidence from religious experience, the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god (Good-god) is significantly more reasonable than the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, evil god (Evil-god). I demonstrate that religious experiences substantiate the existence of Evil-god more so than they do the existence of Good-god, and, consequently, that the traditional argument from religious experience fails. First, I argue that many encounters of evil, such as demonic possession and sensory experiences of evil, could be considered religious experiences that support the existence of Evil-god. Second, for several reasons religious experiences of Good-god could be explained by the EGH just as well as the GGH. As discussed by Stephen Law (2010), Evil-god could be putting on a guise of goodness to give various religious experiences to people around the world with the intention of creating contradictory religious beliefs. Once accepted, these contradictory belief systems inevitably cause multitudinous disputes that, in turn, precipitate great evil and suffering. Furthermore, Evil-god could enjoy the deception that false religious experiences of Good-god create. If religious experiences of Evil-god and Good-god are more satisfactorily explained by the EGH than the GGH, then

the existence of religious experiences is more consistent with the EGH than the GGH, and the balance is tipped toward the former.

The argument from religious experience purports to derive the existence of Good-god from the existence of perceived experiences of Good-god, such as miracles, answered prayers, feelings of awe and wonder, or even direct sensory experiences of Good-god. The strong version of the argument claims that religious experiences prove the existence of Good-god, whereas the weak version claims that religious experiences provide evidence for Good-god's existence and, hence, justify belief in Good-god. Traditional objections to the argument from religious experience tend to focus on discrediting the validity of accounts of experiences of this type, claiming instead that they can be explained away naturalistically. What I develop in this chapter is radically different from traditional objections. I formulate a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god and challenge theists to explain why their argument from religious experience for a good god is significantly more reasonable. To do this, I intend to demonstrate that the traditional argument from religious experience is weaker than the parallel argument I develop.

Although religious experiences are frequently used to strengthen the case for an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god, I suspect that they are rarely, if ever, employed to strengthen the case for an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent god. Naturally, this is because few, if any, argue in earnest that an evil god actually exists. Richard Swinburne, however, implies that there is no argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god because there are no religious experiences that support the existence of such a being:

> Religious experiences in non-Christian traditions are experiences apparently of beings who are supposed to have similar properties to those of [Good-god], or experiences apparently of lesser beings, or experiences apparently of states of affairs, but hardly experiences apparently of any person or state whose existence is incompatible with that of [Good-god]. If there were vastly many experiences apparently of an omnipotent Devil, then that sort of evidence would exist; but there are not such experiences. (2004, p. 318)

I intend to directly oppose this line of thinking and formulate an argument that employs religious experiences to evidence an evil god. Of course, this challenge is not intended to assert that an evil god really exists. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that if evidence for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god is not significantly stronger than evidence for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent god, then there is no good reason to believe in a fully good god over a fully evil god when considering religious experience alone. Consider Swinburne's assertion below regarding the burden of proof for religious experiences:

> In the case of religious experiences, as in the case of all other experiences, the onus is on the sceptic to give reason for not believing what seems to be the case. The only way to defeat the claims of religious experience will be to show that the *strong* balance of evidence is that there is no [Good-god]. In the absence of that strong balance, religious experience provides significant further evidence that there is a [Good-god]. (Swinburne 2010, p. 118)

My Evil-god challenge from religious experience boomerangs this statement and places the onus squarely on the theist to provide a good reason for not believing in an evil god, based on evidence from religious experience that will be subsequently provided. I begin by elucidating the concept of religious experience and explaining the traditional argument from religious experience for the existence of a good god. Next, I formulate a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god. Finally, I address some of the main objections that could be made against my Evil-god challenge.

## 12.2 What are Religious Experiences?

The term “religious experience” has been used to describe various phenomena over the years, therefore it will be helpful to define the term, categorise the concept, and provide examples of each type before proceeding to the challenge itself. Note that I am endorsing a strong Evil-god challenge here. Recall that strong Evil-god challenges are distinguished from weak Evil-god challenges in that they claim that the Evil-god hypothesis (and therefore the parallel Good-god hypothesis) is absurd, incoherent, or inconsistent and should not be taken seriously (see Chapter 1).

William James (1902) proposed several necessary conditions that an experience must meet to be considered religious. According to James, the experience must be transient (temporary), ineffable (impossible to describe in words), noetic (of epistemic value), and passive (uncontrollable). It is particularly difficult to categorise experiences of a religious nature because, as noted by Caroline Franks Davis, “there are so many religious traditions and so many types of experience within those traditions” (Davis 1989, p. 29). I utilise Davis’s helpful classification system, which organises religious experiences into six categories: interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical.

*Interpretive Religious Experiences*

Interpretive religious experiences are experiences “in which a remarkable or beneficial event with no specifically religious characteristics is attributed to a divine

source by a person with prior religious beliefs" (Davis 1989, p. 35). Swinburne offers the following example:

> I pray for my friend to get better from cancer and he does. Since we do not normally know in any detail the exact state of his body when he had cancer, nor do we know in any detail the natural laws which govern the development of cancer, we cannot say whether the recovery occurs because of natural laws or not. The pious believer believes that [Good-god] intervened, and the hard-headed atheist believes that only natural laws were at work. (2010, p. 102)

Although Davis (1989) includes the condition that interpretive religious experiences always involve prior religious belief in her definition, it could be argued that one who has an unusual experience may not have already formed a religious belief but rather develops one as a direct result of the event. In general, interpretive religious experiences are less persuasive than other types of religious experience since they are usually based on previously established religious views.

*Quasi-sensory Religious Experiences*

Quasi-sensory religious experiences are occurrences "in which the primary element is a physical sensation or whose alleged percept is of a type normally apprehended by one of the five sense modalities" (Davis 1989, p. 35). Quasi-sensory experiences can be auditory (for example, hearing voices), visual (for example, seeing visions or hallucinations), tactile (for example, feeling pain or being touched), or, perhaps less commonly, olfactory and/or gustatory (smelling and tasting respectively).

In the mid-1800s, a French child named Bernadette was reported to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary that requested that she dig for a spring of water and establish a religious site at that spot. Reportedly, Bernadette subsequently witnessed water spout from the ground. Although quasi-sensory religious experiences can be

direct, like the previous example, they can also be indirect—like seeing the image of the Virgin Mary in a piece of toast.

*Revelatory Religious Experiences*

Revelatory religious experiences “comprise what their subjects may call sudden convictions, inspiration, revelation, enlightenment, ‘the mystical vision’, and flashes of insight” (Davis 1989, p. 39).

The biblical tale of Paul’s encounter with Good-god on the road to Damascus is an account of a supernatural being having such an effect on a subject. Paul’s experience, which resulted in his conversion to Christianity, is explained in the following passage from the New Testament: “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-16). The full account, believed by some to be a first-hand narrative from Paul himself, explains how a divine voice revealed to him a new way of thinking, which resulted in his conversion to Christianity.

*Regenerative Religious Experiences*

Regenerative religious experiences “tend to renew the subject’s faith and improve his spiritual, moral, physical, or psychological well-being” (Davis 1989, p. 44). This category of religious experience is broad, and experiences of this type are usually accompanied by a religious activity such as praying or meditating. An individual undergoing a regenerative religious experience feels that the presence of a supernatural power has precipitated in them a physical, moral, or cognitive change.

Among other rituals, baptism can induce this type of response. Consider the following testimonies, taken from a study of spirit baptism in the Pentecostal church: “when it *happened*, I felt totally different on the inside. It was just like something woke up inside me that had been asleep” and “It’s just you had this energy, this, ‘You know, I can take on the world now. God’s on my side, and I can take on the world, and I can win’” (Williamson and Hood 2011, p. 549). Both sources reference a positive change in well-being that was brought about by the rite in which they participated.

*Numinous Religious Experiences*

A numinous religious experience can be defined as “the feeling that mortal flesh is somehow despicable in the face of eternal majesty” (Davis 1989, p, 48). Feelings of awe, wonder, dread, terror, insignificance of the self, and fascination, among others, comprise numinous religious experiences (Davis 1989, p. 48). Rudolph Otto, who originally defined this type of experience, describes it as follows:

> It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures. (1958, p. 12)

Accounts of numinous religious experiences appear in the Bible:

> Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD. The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. (Ezekiel 10: 4-5)

Religious experiences of this type frequently occur as a result of observing natural phenomena. Consider the following report:

> When we were traveling to Oregon for my grandmother's funeral I saw a rainbow that was so unbelievably close it was as if it came right through the car. Physically I felt frightened at first and then enormously elated. I felt very much that it was a sign or a symbol of something. I'm still kind of coming to terms with it. (Wuthnow 1978, pp. 62–63)

In this first-hand account, the reporter describes the feelings of terror, elation, and majesty indicative of the numinous experience.

*Mystical Religious Experiences*

Mystical religious experiences can be defined as experiences with the following characteristics: "(i) the sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality; (ii) the sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space, and the individual ego; (iii) a sense of 'oneness'; and (iv) bliss or serenity" (Davis 1989, p. 54).

Practices such as prayer and meditation can evoke this type of experience. An individual describing her experience of transcendental meditation recounts, "I should say I've had a going into one's self, but at the same time seeming to split off from my own personality… It was almost like falling into an abyss. You lost all sense of body or time" (Hay 1979, p. 171). Personal experiences during which individuals feel at one with their god during worship also fall into this category, as illustrated by the following account of a teenager visiting a place of worship: "In adolescence after receiving instruction for confirmation, one day in Church I prayed for Christ to come into my life. A sense of relief, the peace of God, something fantastic" (Hay 1979, p. 173).

It should be noted that these classes of religious experience are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many religious experiences do not fall neatly into just one category. This is evidenced by the example of Paul's religious conversion, which

could be classified as quasi-sensory, revelatory, and mystical. Now that I have outlined a classification system, let us proceed to examine how religious experiences can be used to postulate the existence of Good-god.

## 12.3 The Argument from Religious Experience

In its strongest form, the argument from religious experience infers the existence of Good-god from first-hand, second-hand, or even third-hand experiences of Good-god. Although few theists give credence to this version by arguing that the existence of Good-god can be irrefutably proven through religious experiences alone, many (see Alston 1991; Geivett 2003, Kwan 2009; and Swinburne 2004) contend that religious experiences add credibility to the hypothesis that Good-god exists and should therefore be used as part of the cumulative case for the Good-god hypothesis.

Two of the main objections sceptics direct toward individuals who either witness or hear accounts of religious experiences are (i) that those who have religious experiences should not believe that they come about as a direct result of a god and (ii) that those who are told of these religious experiences should not believe the testimony they hear. Swinburne offers two basic principles to oppose these objections: the principle of credulity (PoC) and the principle of testimony (PoT). Swinburne sets forth the PoC as follows:

> I suggest that it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present (and has some characteristic), then probably *x* is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so. And similarly I suggest that (in the absence of special considerations) apparent memory is to be trusted. If it seems to a subject that in the past he

> perceived something or did something, then (in the absence of special considerations) probably he did. (2004, p. 303)

In other words, if I experience the presence of a supernatural being, *x*, then I should believe that *x* is present unless there are relevant factors that contradict the belief that such a state of affairs obtains. He continues, "from this it would follow that, in the absence of special considerations, all religious experiences ought to be taken by their subjects as genuine, and hence as substantial grounds for belief in the existence of their apparent object—God, or Mary, or Ultimate Reality, or Poseidon" (2004, p. 303). From this we can take it that Swinburne's principle is not restricted to beliefs about only Good-god.

Swinburne's PoT argues for a similar intuition with regard to testimony, claiming that "(in the absence of special considerations) the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them" (2004, p. 322). According to this principle, then, one should trust the allegations of others who have had religious experiences, unless they are known to tell falsehoods, remember events incorrectly, or are prone to aggrandisement. If these two principles are taken to be true then religious experiences should not be discredited or ignored, and although they cannot irrefutably prove the existence of Good-god (or some other supernatural being) they can certainly support the case for such an entity. We can formulate the target argument for the existence of Good-god from religious experience as follows:

*The Target Argument from Religious Experience*

1. Religious experiences should be believed by subjects who experience them (in absence of special considerations) (PoC).

2. Subjects who report religious experiences should be believed (in absence of special considerations) (PoT).
3. Subjects experience religious experiences.
4. Subjects report religious experiences.
5. Religious experiences exist.

Some proponents of the traditional argument from religious experience may want to add the following conclusion:

6. Good-god exists.

Let us now construct a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god.

*The Parallel Argument from Religious Experience*

1. Religious experiences should be believed by subjects who experience them (in absence of special considerations) (PoC).
2. Subjects who report religious experiences should be believed (in absence of special considerations) (PoT).
3. Subjects experience religious experiences.
4. Subjects report religious experiences.
5. Religious experiences exist.

Some proponents of the parallel argument from religious experience may want to add the following conclusion:

6. Evil-god exists.

## 12.4 The Parallel Argument from Religious Experience

To put the Evil-god challenge from religious experience into effect, I assume, along with Swinburne, the PoC, according to which religious experiences should prima facie be taken to be true, and the PoT, according to which we should take for granted that those who have had such experiences are telling the truth, unless compelling evidence to the contrary is provided. Although both principles are contentious, I will employ them for the sake of constructing my parallel argument. I also assume along with the theist that religious experiences are cognitive events that genuinely occur and that are causally related to some supernatural being[50].

There are two approaches that the Evil-god hypothesiser can adopt to formulate an argument from religious experience. The first is to utilise distinct examples to claim that people have had direct religious experiences of Evil-god. The second is to argue that religious experiences evoked to support Good-god can equally be evoked to support Evil-god. I will employ the first approach in the section that follows. The second approach will be employed in the objections section of this chapter, in which I explain why religious experiences that prima facie offer evidence of Good-god are actually compatible with the existence of Evil-god. The table below illustrates the combined aims of the approaches to demonstrate that the Evil-god hypothesis is, overall, more compatible with religious experience than the Good-god hypothesis.

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[50] Recall from Chapter 3 that one attraction of the Evil-god challenge is that it often grants the underlying metaphysical premises of its Good-god parallel despite arriving at a significantly different conclusion.

| | Existence of Evil-god | Existence of Good-god |
|---|---|---|
| Experience of Evil-god | Compatible | Incompatible |
| Experience of Good-god | Compatible | Compatible |

Figure 4 Compatibility of Experiences of Evil-god and Experiences of Good-god

Let us now consider religious experiences that can be used to strengthen the argument for the existence of Evil-god. For the purpose of clarity, I will separate these examples into the same categories defined earlier: interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical. The examples can be further classified into two distinct types. The first type comprises “bad” religious experiences of a supernatural being (henceforth BREs), which result in negative consequences for the agent having the experience (for example, being possessed by a demon). The second type comprises “good” religious experiences of a supernatural being (GREs), which result in positive consequences for the agent having the experience (for example, bargaining one’s soul with an evil force in exchange for material gains). For each category, I will provide at least one first-hand account alongside general examples. Most of the testimonies included were taken from Merete Jakobsen’s 1999 study on negative religious experiences, where participants shared personal encounters with evil.

*Interpretive Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

People frequently interpret unfortunate or negative events in their lives as signs from the supernatural world. Some theists subscribe to the view that misfortune is a result of a flawed moral character or punishment for previous sins. If one contracts a disease, for example, some religious denominations believe that the affliction is a punishment from Good-god. This belief may stem from the huge array of biblical passages, particularly in the Old Testament, that indicate Good-god's vengeful nature. Consider the following:

> If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the LORD your God—the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses. (Deuteronomy 28:15)

This is just one of many passages in the Bible where it is either implied or directly stated that Good-god inflicts plagues, diseases, or afflictions on individuals, due to their past actions or even the actions of their ancestors (Talmage 1915). It does not seem to be a stretch to equate negative life events like this to BREs caused by an evil being, and arguably these events are more compatible with Evil-god than Good-god. That terrible experiences often happen to good people seems to infer the existence of Evil-god more so than Good-god (this point will be discussed at further length in the objections section of this chapter).

There are plenty of examples of individuals' successes being attributed to deals made with an evil supernatural being, namely the devil. The following examples are GREs because the subject is positively affected by the experience. Robert Johnson, a 20th century musician, was said to have met the devil at a

crossroads and bargained with his soul in exchange for mastery of the blues guitar. St. Theophilus of Adana, a sixth century cleric, was widely believed to have sold his soul to the devil for career advancement. It is said that he rose to bishophood as a result of the pact. Nicolò Paganini was accused of selling his soul to the devil in exchange for the musical genius he inherited. Witnesses even claimed to have seen the devil next to the Italian violinist as he performed his works in front of large crowds. Although these recorded GREs are not attributed to Evil-god in name, they could certainly be interpreted as experiential evidence for the existence of an evil supernatural being.

*Quasi-sensory Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

Direct sensory encounters with evil are more common than one might think (Jakobsen 1999). There is a plethora of biblical accounts of sensory experiences of the devil. In the book of Genesis, the devil is seen in the form of a serpent by Eve. As noted by Wright, there was “a virtual explosion of demonic activity” (2006, p. 141) in the New Testament. In Matthew 4:8, for example, the devil shows Jesus a vision of the kingdoms of the world to bribe the son of Good-god to worship him.

The existence of Jesus as Good-god incarnate is one of the main tenets of Christianity and the most significant example of Good-god revealing itself to the world, frequently in the form of miracles performed by Christ. Antithetically, in many belief systems, the antichrist is an incarnation of the devil and the literal form of evil (McGinn 1994). Bernard McGinn explains that “the antichrist must recapitulate evil, just as Christ recapitulates all good” (McGinn 1994, p. 59). Although the antichrist is

mentioned many times in the Bible, the following is a particularly vivid visual description:

> Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. (Revelation 13:11–14)

This reported quasi-sensory BRE depicts an entity that is the epitome of evil showing itself to the world. Since age and remoteness are enemies of verifiability, however, and because many theists believe that the Bible should be read symbolically rather than literally, let us consider some more recently alleged cases of malevolent entities directly interacting with humans.

Numerous individuals in contemporary society have endured direct sensory experiences of evil beings. One witness recounts the following:

> I awoke in the night with a terrible feeling of oppression in the room and my heart seemed to stop beating when I saw hovering near the ceiling in a far corner a luminous, grinning, grimacing gargoyle-like face, not static but pulsating. I was instantly wide awake and filled with terrible fear and anger that this thing should come and manifest itself to me. I remember picking up anything within reach and flinging it at the grinning evil face and like a flash it darted to within inches of my face. I was petrified and felt as if I was suffocating in a blanket of evil. (Jakobsen 1999, p. 11)

Another witness describes her visual encounter with the devil in grisly detail: “a brownish-black demon with close-set beady black eyes, pointed ears and forked tail. In his right hand he carried a 3 pronged fork: in his left hand he carried a long pair of pincers. He was surrounded by rat-like devils” (Jakobsen 1999, p. 22).

Existing relics and images of evil supernatural beings can be referred to as evidence for indirect quasi-sensory religious experiences. Although there are relatively few known examples of images of the devil on profane objects, the likeness of the devil on a Budapest bathroom tile that would not wash off and the viral internet photograph that captures a “demon” on a road in Arizona seem to fit the bill.

*Revelatory Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

The phrase “the devil made me do it” is now commonly used as a tongue in cheek excuse for bad behaviour. Throughout history, however, the belief in direct possession of a human being by an evil being such as a demon or devil is prominent within a range of religions—including some branches of classical monotheism. When an individual is bewitched by an evil force, he or she endures the sudden change of outlook that is illustrative of a revelatory experience. As well as the numerous stories of New Testament characters possessed by the devil or a demon, there are many accounts in recent history of people possessed by evil forces. Possibly the most famous account is that of Roland Doe (a pseudonym), who the Catholic Church claimed was a victim of demon possession. The case was used as the basis for the book and, later, popular horror film, *The Exorcist*.

Visionary killers belong to a class of serial killer who believe they are compelled to commit murder by supernatural entities. Perhaps the most infamous case is David Berkowitz—also known as the Son of Sam—who killed thirteen people in the 1970s after hearing the devil, through the guise of a dog, commanding him to kill. As disturbing is the case of Dennis Rader, also known by his alias, The BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill), who avowed that a demon prompted him to murder ten people

over the course of sixteen years. In 2009, Texan mother Otty Sanchez acted on a satanic voice that ordered her to eat her new-born baby.

Detailed personal accounts of interactions with evil also offer evidence of revelatory BREs. One testifier describes being plagued by evil forces within her: “I realised that I had the forces of evil within me and that I was being tormented by the devil…I started to weep for all the demands I had made on my husband all our married life…I could not allow him to be himself” (Jakobsen 1999, p. 13). The change of mindset apparent in this account is indicative of a revelatory BRE.

*Regenerative Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

Although GREs like deals with the devil can result in improvements to a subject’s moral and spiritual condition, Davis’s definition of a regenerative religious experience seems to assume god’s moral nature, since she specifies that the result of said experience must be positive. To avoid begging the question, I suggest an amendment to the definition of this category. Rather than necessarily improving it, this type of religious experience can also be a catalyst for negative change in spiritual, moral, physical, or psychological well-being; in other words, it can be degenerative (a BRE) or regenerative (a GRE). The following testimony describes a churchgoer’s BRE:

> My body was like a black pit, as big as a bucket, wide open for *anything* to enter! Appalled, I held my arms tightly across myself to close up this awful hole. What did I shut out? From that moment, and for the next two years, I had no interest in my church going. I seemed to be completely cast out from a feeling of nearness to God—and what was worse I did not want to be near. (Jakobsen 1999, p. 18)

Another participant reports, “I felt that I had been possessed by a dark and terrible force, which was bent upon destroying me” (Jakobsen 1999, p. 29). These

testimonies are clear examples of evil encounters that took a negative psychological or spiritual toll on the agent suffering the experience.

*Numinous Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

Many people have experienced the overwhelming and awful feeling of the presence of evil acting in the world. The following testimony describes, in detail, an evil numinous encounter such as this:

> A year and a half ago I was asleep in the night, and woke very suddenly and felt quite alert. I felt surrounded and threatened by the most terrifying and powerful presence of Evil. It seemed to be localised within the room. It seemed almost physical and in a curious way it 'crackled', though not audibly. It was also extremely 'black' and I felt overwhelmed with terror. I stayed rigid in my bed for several minutes, wondering how to combat this blackness. I felt it was a manifestation directed very personally at me, by a Power of Darkness. I was overwhelmed by despair and a desire to go out and kill myself by jumping in the Thames nearby, but I knew that I must withstand this. (Jakobsen 1999, p. 10)

The "Power of Darkness" referenced in this BRE was a manifestation so strong that it prompted the recounter to consider ending his own life.

*Mystical Religious Experiences of Evil-god*

This category of religious experience is broad and, like the numinous experience, defined by the response of the subject undergoing the religious experience rather than the intrinsic nature of the incident. Those who participate in evil deeds, for example the visionary killers referenced earlier, may feel that they are part of a oneness with the evil that was the impetus for their actions. Similarly, individuals who suffer demonic possession sense that they are fully embodied by the evil that possesses them. The feeling of experiencing an ultimate reality of evil is recounted in the following testimony:

> I was out one night in Sussex…and when I came to a ruined building, I felt the presence of something evil, which made me feel extremely uncomfortable and frightened…On no other occasion in my life have I had such an over-powering feeling of the presence of evil which invoked such fear in myself. (Hay 1979, p. 172)

When experiencing BRE's of this nature, individuals often feel that they are in the presence of absolute evil, as is illustrated in the following account:

> In the October of the autumn '51 I went through the most terrible darkness. Of all the darkness and desolation I had suffered this was the ultimate. There are many, many dark nights of the soul in mystical experience, but this was the blackest of them all. I thought I was in the hands of great evil and, being by nature innately religious, I went to my bedroom to pray. There was no [god] to pray to, so I said "If I am in the hands of great evil, please take me out of this". (Jakobsen 1999, p. 12)

The experiences detailed above can be used as evidence to postulate the existence of Evil-god in the same way that Good-god hypothesisers use religious experiences to surmise the existence of Good-god. Note that there are examples of GREs and BREs in my parallel argument from religious experience; it seems that BREs and GREs alike can be interpreted as acts of Evil-god. If, based on religious experience alone, the Evil-god hypothesis seems at least as reasonable as the Good-god hypothesis, then this establishes that there is no compelling reason to believe in the latter over the former; the Good-god hypothesis is as equally implausible as the Evil-god hypothesis[51]. Now let us consider several objections that could potentially tip the balance of reasonableness toward the Good-god hypothesis.

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[51] Of course, as we have seen, there may be other, non-alethic reasons why one might accept the Good-god hypothesis over the Evil-god hypothesis (Scrutton (2016) for example, argues that it is better for one's well-being to believe in Good-god and Hendricks (2018) suggests that some theists might consider their "seeming" that Good-god exists or traditional doxastic practices good enough reason to accept the Good-god hypothesis).

## 12.5 Objections to the Parallel Argument from Religious Experience

I will now address four objections to the argument from religious experience for Evil-god. The first three objections are untenable because they undermine the argument from religious experience for the existence of Good-god to the same extent to which they undermine the argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god. The final objection applies only to the argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god, but I will attempt to undermine the objection in a way that shows the Evil-god hypothesis to be stronger than its Good-god counterpart.

*There are Naturalistic Explanations for Religious Experiences.*

The main objection to the traditional argument from religious experience is that there is a difference between the subjective phenomena of a religious experience and the true objective reality of the world (Flew 1966). Objectors claim that advocates of the veracity of religious experiences make a flawed logical leap from subjective qualia to objective reality, and the existence of the experience is not sufficient to establish ontological proof of a supernatural being. Specifically, it is argued that the perceived objects of the experience are imagined, therefore no religious experience can be truly validated. For example, scientists claim there is now a fairly solid naturalistic explanation for near-death experiences during which subjects believe they have experienced the afterlife. This challenge, which developed alongside cognitive and neurological advances, is reductionist—claiming that religious experiences can be reduced to more basic experiences than experience of the supernatural, and

naturalistic—maintaining that all religious phenomena can ultimately be explained by natural phenomena.

This objection is a knife that cuts both ways because it applies to the traditional argument from religious experience for Good-god and the argument from religious experience for Evil-god alike; overall, it helps neither hypothesis gain ground. Although some Good-god hypothesisers may be tempted to claim that religious experiences of an evil supernatural entity are only explainable by psychosis, whereas experiences of a benevolent one stem directly from a real being (Hardy 1979), there is no compelling reason to treat these two types of experience differently. Since the aim of the Evil-god hypothesis is to undermine the Good-god hypothesis—not to establish the existence of Evil-god—the Evil-god hypothesiser does not mind objections like this that threaten the argument from religious experience for Good-god equally[52].

*Experiences of Evil are Encounters with the Devil.*

The Good-god hypothesiser could protest that if religious experiences are viewed holistically, they suggest the existence of a good deity (Good-god) and an evil one (Evil-god), as experiences of both entities are common. From this, it could be maintained that the argument from religious experience for Evil-god is not a threat for theists who believe in both Good-god and an evil supernatural force. After all, many denominations of Christianity maintain a theistic dualism that affirms the existence of

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[52] Note that this objection would be effective against weak Evil-god challenges, which claim that the Evil-God hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis are both reasonable and justifiable positions to hold.

both Good-god and the devil, although this belief has diminished substantially in recent years (See Delbanco 1995; Jakobsen 1999).

To respond to this challenge, we need only include theistic dualism in the Evil-god hypothesis by speculating the existence of a lesser, benevolent god (or perhaps some sort of "fallen demon") that co-exists with Evil-god but has proclivities toward good rather than evil. This could suffice to explain the existence of religious experiences of Good-god in a world where Evil-god dominates[53].

The Good-god hypothesiser might then counterargue by asking why Evil-god would allow a benevolent deity to exist in the first place. A similar problem is apparent in traditional theistic dualism. Brian Hebblethwaite explains, "I find grave incoherence in the idea that [Good-god] might be thought to be sustaining a created universe containing fallen irredeemable, non-human spirits and allowing them to interfere with the human world" (quoted in Dow 1980).

Two common theistic explanations for why Good-god allows the devil to persist are (i) because it can bring about greater good, "deeming it to be more befitting His power and goodness to bring good out of evil than to prevent the evil from coming into existence" (Augustine 2009, p. 73) and (ii) Good-god's goodness will ultimately defeat evil. Similarly, the Evil-god hypothesiser can maintain that the supreme Evil-god allows a lesser benevolent deity to exist (i) to bring about greater evil (creating false hope that Good-god exists, for example, is one greater evil that

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[53] Bear in mind that I make no claims about the levels of causal power each of these hypothesised beings is able to exert. I only claim that whatever traditional theistic dualism is adopted by the Good-god hypothesiser can be mirrored by the Evil-god hypothesiser.

Evil-god realises through distributing GREs) and (ii) Good-god's goodness will eventually be defeated by Evil-god's evilness. The theistic dualist seems to be stuck in a quandary whereby they must either allow the consistency of dualism in both the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis or deny both. Again the objection is nullified because it is applicable to both hypotheses.

*Bad Religious Experiences are Not Dispersed Universally.*

One common challenge to the traditional argument from religious experience is the question of why Good-god would choose to reveal itself to some people and not to others. Surely if a god is all-loving, that god would disperse GREs universally. The same objection can be mirrored to the argument from religious experience for Evil-god. If a god is omnimalevolent, surely that god would want to inflict as many BREs as possible.

To respond, I argue that the Evil-god hypothesis is compatible with the dispersion of BREs and GREs. Since Evil-god would enjoy maximising evil, it could be argued that injustice is an evil that Evil-god would appreciate. Evil-god would create injustice by providing GREs and BREs to undeserving individuals. Good-god hypothesisers might contest this by arguing that there are persuasive reasons why Good-god would distribute religious experiences unjustly. They may, for example, make use of traditional theodicies or evoke the theory of Divine Silence. In response, I suggest that these explanations can be mirrored by the Evil-god hypothesis.

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Evil-god might administer experiences of Good-god because it enjoys instilling the false belief that Good-god exists. In fact, the Evil-god hypothesis provides a more satisfactory explanation for dispersion of

religious experience than the Good-god hypothesis does since it can explain why Evil-god would disperse religious experiences unfairly, while the Good-god hypothesis cannot satisfactorily explain why an omnibenevolent being would inflict BREs on good people or refrain from giving good people GREs. With respect to this issue, the Evil-god hypothesis seems more plausible than the Good-god hypothesis.

*Too Many Experiences of Good-god Exist.*

It is not just one or two cases of religious experience of Good-god that have been chronicled through history, but an abundance. Even if we can explain why there are some religious experiences of Good-god, it could be argued that the number of these experiences vastly outweighs the number of experiences of Evil-god; when comparing the numbers, we seem to find the Evil-god hypothesis lacking.

I have three responses to this objection. Firstly, it is extremely difficult to make a clear-cut comparison between the actual number of religious experiences of a benevolent supernatural being and those of a malevolent one. Studies have shown that alleged cases of demonic possession are rife in a large proportion of societies (See Bourguignon 1976; Jakobsen 1999).

Jakobsen notes that many informants who sent in accounts of evil encounters did not broadcast the experiences because they did not want to scare loved ones, to be thought crazy, or to be disbelieved, as explained by the following statement:

> Try to express your belief in the approachable and utterly accessible spiritual being, you have come to know, and immediately you are aware that you are considered a crank by some, a servant of the non-existent devil by others, and a source of embarrassment to your family. So what does one do? In most cases the answer would appear to be, maintain

> strict silence about one's private revelations for fear of being considered a fool, or worse. I wonder just how many people alive today are doing just that. (Jakobsen 1999, p. 3)

There is certainly a stigma associated with evil encounters, and many who experience them conclude that "staying silent is the safest approach" (Jakobsen 1999, p. 4). It is not surprising to learn that individuals who encounter evil nowadays do not come forward to disclose their experiences. Urbain Grandier was burned at the stake for his alleged deal with the devil, the Salem witch trials turned out very badly for those suspected of dark arts, and the Albigensian Crusade is just one of many savage persecutions of those suspected to be dealing with evil forces. Contrastingly, within denominations such as Catholicism, recipients of miracles or religious experiences of Good-god are venerated, offered fame and positive praise, and even proffered sainthood. Historically, those who have had demonic religious experiences have not enjoyed the same benefits or rewards. Even today individuals are executed for being suspected of dabbling in the dark arts in certain places. In Saudi Arabia, for example, witchcraft is punishable by death. Even in countries that do not impose illegal status on practices like this, victims of evil encounters can face extremely negative consequences. If an individual proclaims communication with an evil supernatural being, they would likely be committed to an institution for psychiatric treatment or at least socially shunned. Even if religious experiences of Evil-god were ubiquitous, we would expect subjects to avoid divulging the incidents to escape the persecution they would likely face. Jakobsen states that many people who have had evil encounters have kept completely mum about their experiences because "it is much more satisfying to share with others the encounters with a loving

[god] or beautiful mystical experiences in nature than it is to narrate a gruesome, horrifying and deeply disturbing encounter with the devil" (Jakobsen 1999, p. 6).

But perhaps this is not a fair explanation of why reported experiences of Good-god outweigh reported experiences of Evil-god. An anonymous reviewer suggests that positive near-death experiences outweigh negative ones 2-1. Another reviewer points out that, historically, many people have avoided reporting experiences of Good-god for fear of persecution as well (for example, Jews in the fifteenth century and other maltreated minority religious groups throughout history). Ultimately, it is simply extremely difficult to know whether there have been more experiences of Good-god than of Evil-god.

Let us grant the Good-god hypothesiser this imbalance and accept that the number of religious experiences perceived to be caused by Good-god does outweigh those perceived to be caused by Evil-god. My second response offers another explanation of why those perceptions might exist by suggesting that the natural psychological tendencies of humans induce positive interpretations of experiences that postulate a benevolent cause if the alternative is a malevolent cause. Even if we do allow that there is an imbalance between perceived religious experiences of Good-god and Evil-god, wishful thinking and confirmation bias play a huge part in interpreting religious experiences. Wishful thinking is a cognitive bias that occurs when an individual's beliefs are influenced by their desires, and much evidence points to the pervasiveness of this bias (Babad and Katz 1991; Baergen 1993). Consequently, it could be argued that subjects of religious experiences would much rather believe that these experiences were caused by a benevolent force than a malevolent one, since the former is more desirable than the latter. For example, if an

individual experiences a BRE, he or she would be more likely to believe that either (i) it was a punishment for bad behaviour imposed by a benevolent god or (ii) it will eventually lead to a reward, rather than to believe that (iii) it was result of an evil god inflicting harm on them for sadistic purposes. Imagine that a child receives an unpleasant and severe punishment from a teacher but is not told the reason for her punishment. It would be more desirable for the child to imagine that (i) she is being punished for bad behaviour that she can prevent in the future or (ii) she will be rewarded for her suffering later in life, than to believe that her teacher is a sadist who will continue to inflict gratuitous suffering on her without good reason.

Confirmation bias is the propensity for individuals to interpret information in a manner that confirms their pre-established beliefs, particularly those that are deep-rooted (Nickerson 1998). This psychological phenomenon comes into play when Good-god hypothesisers (who vastly outnumber Evil-god hypothesisers) interpret their religious experiences to conform to their belief system. Wishful thinking combined with confirmation bias establishes that people tend to interpret experiences optimistically and in a way that conforms to their previously held beliefs: more likely than not, their belief in the Good-god hypothesis.

But, again, perhaps wishful thinking and confirmation bias do not offer a full and compelling reason to accept that Good-god experiences are not as prominent as they seem. My third response aims to establish that experiences of Good-god can be compatible with the existence of Evil-god. There are three explanations for this compatibility. First, as considered earlier, it could be supposed that when bringing about religious experiences Evil-god gives some people experiences of an imaginary benevolent god because it would enjoy instilling people with experiences based on

falsehood, particularly those that give false hope. Second, as earlier mentioned, Evil-god might enjoy unjustly dispersing experiences of Good-god to those who are undeserving. The third reason, presented by Law, claims that dispersing contradictory religious experiences to different locations would inevitably generate great suffering:

> This malignant being may not want us to know of his existence. In fact, it may help him maximize evil if he deceives us about his true character. An evil and omnipotent being will have no difficulty duping human beings into believing he is good. Taking on a “good” guise, he might appear in one corner of the world, revealing himself in religious experiences and performing miracles in response to prayers, and perhaps also giving instructions regarding what his followers should believe. He might then do the same in another part of the globe, with the exception that the instructions he leaves regarding what should be believed contradict what he has said elsewhere. Our evil being could then stand back and watch the inevitable conflict develop between communities to whom he has now misleadingly revealed himself, each utterly convinced by their own stock of miracles and religious experiences that the one true all-good god is on their side. Here we have a recipe for ceaseless conflict, violence and suffering. (Law 2010, pp. 362–363)

What makes less sense is why religious experiences of Evil-god would occur if Good-god exists. Why would an omnibenevolent god distribute BREs to good people or GREs to bad people? This suggests that the Evil-god hypothesis can offer a better explanation for the dispersion of religious experiences than the Good-god hypothesis can. If the Evil-god hypothesis can adequately explain why many people have religious experiences of Good-god, but the Good-god hypothesis cannot adequately explain why many people have religious experiences of Evil-god, this strengthens the former and weakens the latter and tips the reasonableness scale toward the Evil-god hypothesis.

## 12.6 An Analysis of the Parallel Argument from Religious Experience

We are now in a position to analyse the parallel argument in this chapter. Let's review the target and parallel arguments from religious experience.

*The Target Argument from Religious Experience*

1. Religious experiences should be believed by subjects who experience them (in absence of special considerations) (PoC).
2. Subjects who report religious experiences should be believed (in absence of special considerations) (PoT).
3. Subjects experience religious experiences.
4. Subjects report religious experiences.
5. Religious experiences exist.

Some proponents of the traditional argument from religious experience may want to add the following conclusion:

6. Good-god exists.

The parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god runs as follows:

*The Parallel Argument from Religious Experience*

1. Religious experiences should be believed by subjects who experience them (in absence of special considerations) (PoC).

2. Subjects who report religious experiences should be believed (in absence of special considerations) (PoT).
3. Subjects experience religious experiences.
4. Subjects report religious experiences.
5. Religious experiences exist.

Some proponents of the parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god may want to add the following conclusion:

6. Evil-god exists.

Again, we have retained the original premises of the target argument and only changed the conclusion, resulting in an effective parallel.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Argument from Religious Experience | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | ✗ |

Figure 5 An Analysis of the Parallel Argument from Religious Experience

## 12.7 Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that—if we grant Swinburne's contentions that religious experiences are be believed by those who experience them and that we should trust the testimony of those who have experienced them—religious experiences offer stronger evidence for the existence of an evil god than they do a

good god. I have agreed that there appear to be more experiences of Good-god than of Evil-god, but I have explained why this appearance is compatible with the existence of Evil-god. I have also proposed reasons for why some types of religious experience are more compatible with the existence of Evil-god than Good-god, which tips the balance of reasonableness toward the Evil-god hypothesis. Consequently, unless Good-god hypothesisers can meet the Evil-god challenge by demonstrating why religious experiences provide a significantly stronger case for Good-god than Evil-god, the argument from religious experience should not be considered a strong argument for the existence of Good-god.

# Chapter 13. The Parallel Ontological Argument

## 13.1 Introduction

Ontological arguments purport to establish that there is a priori proof that Good-god—or, more broadly speaking, the greatest conceivable being—exists. This chapter evaluates the claim that the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god is similar in strength to the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god. To do so, I distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic understandings of greatness and introduce a new underlying principle in an attempt to retain the symmetry between the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god and the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god. Ultimately, I claim that the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god and the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god are similarly reasonable.

Many forms of the ontological argument have been proposed. One traditional version of the argument moves from the premise that Good-god possesses perfect greatness to the proposition that Good-god must possess the property of existence (a great-making property). It concludes that Good-god must exist in reality, not merely in the mind.

Literature on the ontological argument is replete with parallel arguments, and many Evil-god hypothesisers (including Richman 1958; Haight and Haight 1970; Haight 1974; Millican 1989; Chambers 2000) have already proposed Evil-god parallels to this version of the ontological argument by attempting to construct

structurally parallel arguments for the existence of Evil-god in order to show that the two counterparts are similarly reasonable.

The traditional version of the ontological argument can be paralleled to make a case for Evil-god—or, more broadly speaking, the worst conceivable being—by maintaining that it is worse for such a being to exist in reality than in the mind alone (New 1993). If Evil-god is maximally evil, then Evil-god existing in reality (as well as in the mind) is worse than merely a conception of Evil-god that exists in the mind alone. David Haight and Marjorie Haight (1970) suggest that Anselmian ontological arguments for Good-god and the parallel ontological arguments for Evil-god are identical in logical structure and strength. If it is the case that every ontological argument can be successfully paralleled, then ontological arguments for Evil-god are just as convincing as ontological arguments for Good-god.

More recently, these attempts to mirror the ontological argument have been referred to by the term “parodies”. I prefer the term “parallels” to describe the approach because it avoids the insinuation that Evil-god hypothesisers are merely ridiculing the GGH or the arguments that are used in support of it. For a parallel argument to be successful, it must conform to certain conditions. Recall that—for Yujin Nagasawa (2017)—an effective argument from analogy must be relevantly and sufficiently similar to the original argument. Any Evil-god parallel argument, therefore, must effectively mirror the structure of its original counterpart in the manner described in Chapter 3.

The aim of this chapter is to defend the Evil-god challenge against objections that claim asymmetry between the ontological argument for the existence of Good-

god and the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god. I begin by providing an explanation of the ontological argument. Next, I establish a parallel ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god that successfully mirrors the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god based on an *intrinsic* (or non-relational) understanding of greatness. This parallel includes a claim intended to mirror one of the intuition-based belief-bricks that the ontological argument rests on. I call the claim, “The Principle of the Inferiority of Existence” (PIE), and it aims to mirror “The Principle of the Superiority of Existence” (PSE) that comprises most ontological arguments for Good-god. After this, I explain why proponents of the ontological argument might attempt to evade the Evil-god challenge by appealing to an *extrinsic* (or relational) understanding of greatness. In response, I construct an Evil-god challenge that mirrors ontological arguments that rely on an extrinsic understanding of greatness, by way of using David Benatar’s (2006) “axiological asymmetry argument”. The argument from axiological asymmetry, briefly, states that coming into existence is always a harm. Finally, I address some potential objections and implications for Good-god hypothesisers if the Evil-god challenge succeeds before concluding that the Evil-god challenge causes serious problems for Good-god hypothesisers who rely on the ontological argument to justify their belief in the GGH.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that several parallel ontological arguments have referred to proof of “the devil”. As explained by Oppy, “there is no good reason to identify ‘a being than which no worse can be conceived’ with the devil of traditional theology. The traditional conception of the devil is of a being with many positive attributes and an over-weaning *[sic]* pride” (1995, p. 183). The term

“Evil-god”, therefore, is a more appropriate counterpart to the postulated entity of the classic ontological argument (Good-god).

## 13.2 The Ontological Argument

The ontological argument is unique in that it is the only argument that “establishes, if it is successful, the existence of the very being that the perfect being thesis specifies” (Nagasawa 2017, p. 123). As we know, teleological and cosmological arguments do not attempt to directly establish the existence of Good-god. Instead, they only purport to establish the existence of a creator, designer, or first cause. There is no sole ontological argument for the existence of Good-god. Rather, there exists a cluster of ontological arguments that differ, whether slightly or significantly, in the approach they take in an attempt to prove the existence of Good-god. All ontological arguments, however, share the distinctive features of (i) attempting to prove the existence of Good-god without relying on empirical evidence (a priori) and (ii) attempting to prove the existence of Good-god deductively. Although I will initially focus on the “definitional ontological argument” (I will follow Oppy’s 1995 taxonomy and refer to the classic Anselmian version of the ontological argument as such)., it is understood that parallel ontological arguments for the existence of Evil-god must successfully mirror all types of ontological argument to be compelling.

The definitional ontological argument relies on the definition of Good-god to be *something than which nothing greater can be thought*. Through this definition, Good-god’s existence is established:

> There is, in the understanding at least, something than which nothing greater can be thought. If it is even in the understanding alone, it can be thought to be in reality also, which [would be] greater. There exists, therefore, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought. (Anselm, cited in Chambers 2000, p. 93)

Peter Millican formulates the argument in premises and a conclusion as follows:

> 1. The Fool understands the phrase: “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought”.
> 2. Hence something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists at least in the Fool’s mind.
> 3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone.
> 4. So if that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought existed only in the Fool’s mind, then it would be possible to think of something greater (that is, something existing in reality also).
> 5. But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of something greater than that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.
> 6. Therefore something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought must exist both in the Fool’s mind and in reality also. (Millican 2004, p. 441)

Note that the third premise illustrates a prominent aspect of many ontological arguments that actual existence in reality is greater than non-existence. This principle is known as “The Principle of the Superiority of Existence”, and is defined by Nagasawa as follows:

> The Principle of the Superiority of Existence (PSE): Any nature that is instantiated is greater than any nature that is not instantiated (or any nature that is conceived only in the mind). (2017, p. 136)

The word “any” indicates that the greatness of existence (or instantiated nature) is intrinsic. In other words, existence is a great-making property. Those advocating PSE believe that existence is great “in itself” or non-relationally. This means that even if existence brings about bad consequences, it is still great. Conversely, those advocating that existence is *extrinsically* (or relationally) great believe that existence is great only in relation to another element of the existence, for example if the

instantiation of an entity brings about good consequences. Most versions of the ontological argument assume that existence is intrinsically great, and PSE will become a key discussion point in the next section, as it is this principle that is contentious with regard to symmetry between the ontological argument for Good-god and the parallel ontological argument for Evil-god

## 13.3 The Parallel Ontological Argument

In this section, I will construct what I hope is an effective parallel to the ontological argument for Good-god. I will first detail the general approach Evil-god hypothesisers have taken to parallel the ontological argument. Next, I will outline why previous approaches have failed because they have contained “structural and dialectic flaws” (Nagasawa 2017, p. 152). Then I will outline an approach that attempts to overcome the identified flaws of previous versions by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic understandings of greatness and employing what I call “The Principle of the Inferiority of Existence” and Benatar’s “axiological asymmetry argument”.

*Previous Definitional Ontological Arguments for the Existence of Evil-god*

Recall Millican’s formulation of the definitional ontological argument from the previous section. Now consider the definitional ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god (Nagasawa refers to this as “the devil argument”):

1. The phrase “a-nature-than-which-no-*worse*-nature-can-be-thought” is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
2. Hence we can take the phrase “a-nature-than-which-no-*worse*-nature-can-be-thought” as successfully denoting some specific nature.

3. A nature which is instantiated in reality is *worse* than one which is not.
4. So if a-nature-than-which-no-*worse*-nature-can-be-thought were not instantiated in reality, then it would be possible to think of a nature that is *worse* (for example, any nature that is in fact instantiated in reality).
5. But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is *worse* than a-nature-than-which-no-*worse*-nature-can-be-thought.
6. Therefore a-nature-than-which-no-*worse*-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality. (Nagasawa 2017, pp. 165–166)

According to Nagasawa, this parallel ontological argument fails because it does not retain exact symmetry with the definitional ontological argument for the existence of Good-god. This is because it is incompatible with PSE. This leads Nagasawa to conclude that “none of the parody arguments succeeds because they are not relevantly or sufficiently similar to the classical ontological argument” (Nagasawa 2017, p. 176). Although Nagasawa is correct to say that the parallel argument does not adhere to PSE, the underlying PSE is the premise we need to focus on in order to determine it can be effectively mirrored and to consider what the premise rests on. I argue that it is another intuition.

*The Parallel Ontological Argument from Intrinsic Greatness*

As previously discussed, the ontological argument is based on the claim that existence is a great-making property—a claim that is echoed by the underlying PSE. As great-making properties are either intrinsically great or extrinsically great, proponents of the ontological argument must decide which type of great-making relationship they endorse with regards to existence. Most ontological arguments assume that greatness is intrinsically so but do not provide much explanation for this assumption. As a result, Evil-god hypothesisers can establish a parallel claim that

existence is intrinsically bad[54]. I intend to argue that existence itself is bad—worse than non-existence.

Some philosophers have alluded to the reasonableness of the premise that it is worse for an entity that has particular negative qualities to exist in reality than in the mind alone. Consider the following statement:

> It seems that it would be worse if a very bad being existed both in the understanding and in reality than if it merely existed in the understanding. Consequently, it seems that—if the Anselmian formula is understood as 'a being than which no better can be conceived'—then the Anselmian argument can be successfully parodied using this formula. (Oppy 1995, p. 181–182)

According to Oppy, a very bad being such as Evil-god would be worse if it existed than if it did not. Oppy is speaking here of non-existence as extrinsically greater than existence. It is better that entities like Evil-god do not exist in relation to the fact that they are bad. For a parallel to PSE to be effective, however, it must consider the greatness of non-existence intrinsically.

I propose a new principle to redress the imbalance and establish symmetry between the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god and the corresponding ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god: “The Principle of the Inferiority of Existence”. We can define this parallel principle as follows:

> The Principle of the Inferiority of Existence (PIE): Any nature that is instantiated is lesser than any nature that is not instantiated (or any nature that is conceived only in the mind).

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[54] Note that Evil-god hypothesisers do not need to provide a compelling argument for this claim, as it is just being used as a parallel for its counterpart argument that existence is intrinsically great.

Contrary to PSE, this principle holds that an entity is greater if it remains in the abstract (merely conceived), rather than in reality and the mind; it is worse to exist. PIE goes further than Oppy's earlier claim because it suggests that existence is intrinsically worse, not extrinsically worse, than non-existence. PIE maintains that *any entity*—whether good or bad—is greater if it is not instantiated and only conceived in the mind.

Of course, the immediate question that springs to mind is why we should accept PIE over PSE. Remember, for Evil-god challenges to be effective, they must only establish that the parallel argument they create is similarly reasonable to the original argument. Likewise, when it comes to PIE versus PSE, the Evil-god hypothesiser need not prove PIE, or even demonstrate that belief in PIE is justified: they need only demonstrate that PIE is similarly reasonable to PSE.

*The Parallel Ontological Argument from Extrinsic Greatness*

Although most ontological arguments endorse an intrinsic understanding of the greatness of existence, some proponents of the ontological argument might claim that existence is *extrinsically* great (in relation to some other condition). By doing this, they may attempt to bypass PIE. If they take this route, Evil-god hypothesisers can establish a parallel argument that utilises Benatar's argument from axiological asymmetry that claims that existence is extrinsically bad.

Axiological asymmetry is an integral part of Benatar's[55] (2006, 2015) anti-natalist stance, which maintains that procreation is wrong. Axiological asymmetry proposes that "there is a crucial difference between harms (such as pains) and benefits (such as pleasures) which entails that existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence" (2006, p. 30). In other words, it is worse to exist than to not exist. According to Benatar, axiological asymmetry involves the following premises:

1. the presence of pain is bad, and that
2. the presence of pleasure is good.

However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the absence of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that:

3. the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas
4. the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (Benatar 2006 p. 30)

If Benatar is correct, then it is worse for an evil entity such as Evil-god to exist than not exist because of the detrimental consequences[56]. Benatar's axiological asymmetry argument claims that existence is bad extrinsically, as can be illustrated in the following passage:

> When I say that coming into existence is always a harm, I do not mean that it is necessarily a harm. As will become apparent, my argument does not apply to those hypothetical cases in which a life contains only good and no bad. About such an existence I say that it is neither a harm nor a benefit and we should be indifferent between such an existence and never existing. But no lives are like this. All lives contain some bad. Coming into existence with such a life is always a harm. Many people

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[55] Although Benatar extensively discusses this argument in his 2006 book, *Better Never to Have Been*, he does not brand the argument "axiological asymmetry" until later works.

[56] Note that Benatar only applies axiological asymmetry to beings that have the ability to feel pleasure/pain. The question of whether it can be expanded to other entities will be discussed later.

> will find this deeply unsettling claim to be counter-intuitive and will wish to dismiss it. (Benatar 2006, pp. 28–29)

If, therefore, the Good-god hypothesiser attempts to sidestep the parallel ontological argument from intrinsic greatness of existence and turn to the extrinsic relationship, then Benatar's axiological asymmetry argument provides an effective parallel.

Overall, I have attempted to show that the symmetry between the ontological argument and its Evil-god parallel can be preserved if we explicitly mirror the underlying principles of the argument. If the remainder of the argument is agreed to be parallel, then we must focus our attention on the symmetry between PIE and PSE. If PSE is accepted, then the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god comes out on top, but if PIE is accepted, the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god emerges as the more reasonable argument. As it stands, there seems to be no way of definitively discerning whether PIE or PSE (or the alternative—perhaps instantiation has no bearing on the greatness of a conception) is more reasonable. The onus, however, surely falls on the Good-god hypothesiser to justify belief in PSE over PIE. After all, the Evil-god hypothesiser makes no claim that Evil-god actually exists.

## 13.4 Objections to the Parallel Ontological Argument

Many objections can be posed to ontological arguments in general, so Evil-god hypothesisers should only be concerned with those that apply to the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god and *not* also to the corresponding argument for the existence of Good-god. Objections that pose the same threat to both

counterparts do not undermine the Evil-god challenge. For example, the classical Kantian objection to the ontological argument that existence is not a predicate would apply to both counterparts, therefore the Good-god hypothesiser gains no ground as a result of this objection. Furthermore, a critic might wonder why, if PIE is true and non-existence is greater, Evil-god does not create far more existent entities, or if the axiological asymmetry argument stands, why Evil-god does not create many more sentient creatures to experience the worse state of existence. Likewise, the Evil-god hypothesiser might question why, if PSE is true and existence is greater, Good-god does not create far more existent entities. Clearly, this objection applies equally to each ontological argument. So, let's consider and address some potential objections to the parallel ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god.

*PIE and Axiological Asymmetry are Uncompelling.*

It could be argued that PIE and axiological asymmetry are dubious at best, and that the Evil-god hypothesiser has an obligation to prove the principle of PIE and axiological asymmetry unequivocally before the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god is as successful as its original counterpart. Nagasawa states, "for the parody argument to work, it has to be structured in such a way that proponents of the classical ontological argument cannot but accept its premises" (2017, p. 164). Nagasawa also maintains that the Evil-god parallel to the ontological argument fails because "it is not dialectically parallel to the classical ontological argument (typically because it makes assumptions to which proponents of the classical ontological argument are not committed or assumptions that are clearly false or inconsistent with premises of the classical ontological argument) (2017, p. 153). If Nagasawa's criticism is warranted (I argue that it is not), then the parallel

argument cannot succeed without Good-god hypothesisers accepting axiological asymmetry and PIE. I certainly doubt whether many ontological argument proponents would deem PIE or axiological asymmetry compelling. Consider Perry Mason's claim that the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god is more reasonable than the ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god because of the Principle of the Superiority of Existence:

> I know of no one who has defended the claim that existence in general is a defect. In any case, it is a fairly extreme philosophical claim, one which would require considerable ingenuity and effort to be made plausible. That it would, of course, does not entirely discredit the claim. But it does show that constructing an ontological argument for the existence of the Devil which depends upon it and showing that that argument is sound would be a very complicated undertaking at best. (Mason 1978, p. 9)

I have offered little justification for PIE in my parallel ontological argument, so why should anyone accept it? Objectors may reject PIE in favour of PSE, in which case the parallel ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god fails.

There are two responses to this objection. First, the Evil-god hypothesiser does not have to claim that PIE is true because he or she is merely using it as a tool to parallel PSE. Just as the Evil-god hypothesiser is not committed to an actual belief in Evil-god, one hypothesising axiological asymmetry or PIE is not dedicated to believing axiological asymmetry or PIE[57]. Second, although it would be difficult to prove PIE and axiological asymmetry, the onus is not on the Evil-god hypothesiser to do so. Ultimately, the Evil-god hypothesiser does not need to convince the Good-god hypothesiser of all the underlying principles. Evil-god hypothesisers may reject PSE

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[57] Ultimately, whether one accepts PSE or PIE may come down to whether they are an ontological optimist or ontological pessimist, which are, in themselves, intuitions.

and Good-god hypothesisers may reject PIE and the symmetry still holds. Unless the Good-god hypothesiser can demonstrate that PSE is more reasonable that PIE, the symmetry thesis remains intact. PIE only needs to be as strong as its mirror principle, PSE. Ontological argument proponents seem to offer little in the way of justification for PSE: it is another intuition-based belief-brick. If the Good-god hypothesiser can provide stronger justification for PSE than the Evil-god hypothesiser can for PIE, then the challenge fails. As of yet, though, I have not come across persuasive justification for PSE, merely intuition.

*Good-god is Exempt from the Axiological Asymmetry Argument.*

Even if axiological asymmetry is true and it is worse for some entity to exist in reality than just in the mind, Good-god hypothesisers may suggest that the same cannot be said for the unique concept that is Good-god. Good-god, as a possessor of all perfections is perhaps exempt from this rule by virtue of being Good-god. In other words, perhaps the extrinsic relationship of greatness cannot apply to Good-god, who has a painless existence.

There are two responses to this objection. First, the Evil-god hypothesiser might employ the traditional view of Good-god that the deity suffers alongside its creations, since the objection only stands if the entity in question (Good-god) does not suffer. Consider the following biblical passages describing Good-god's compassion:

> How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. (Hosea 11:8)

So, although impersonal gods may be able to bypass axiological asymmetry because they do not feel pain Good-god cannot be exempt from the rule by virtue of being a personal god. Good-god hypothesisers who subscribe to the theory of divine impassibility—the notion that Good-god exists outside the realm of suffering—may have more success here. If Good-god is outside the realm of suffering completely, then Good-god's existence might not be worse than Good-god's non-existence. Of course, this objection relies on the extrinsic understanding of greatness, so objectors must relinquish any concept of existence being intrinsically great.

There is another way to overcome this objection, however, and that is to simply parallel the objection to the original ontological argument. The Evil-god hypothesiser can argue that if Good-god is exempt from axiological asymmetry, then so if Evil-god is exempt from its mirror argument, conserving the symmetry between the arguments.

*A Being Than Which No Worse can be Conceived is Incoherent.*

Critics may argue that the concept of a being than which no worse can be conceived is an incoherent one (Devine 1975). This line of thought claims that although the concept of an entity that possesses maximal perfections or greatness (Good-god) is coherent, it is simply not possible to possess maximal imperfections.

Oppy offers a strong rebuttal to this objection by arguing that it is worrisome to take this route because it be argued that the concept of a being than which no greater can be conceived is also incoherent for similar reasons:

> Even if it is granted that the devil must possess some qualities that are intrinsically good—why should it be conceded that intelligence is intrinsically good? —this response seems dangerous. The obvious

> difficulty is that an opponent of ontological arguments will very likely doubt that the notion “a being than which no greater can be conceived” is coherent. Thus, this response draws attention to the likely dialectical ineffectiveness of the argument. (1995, p. 183)

Alternatively, Evil-god hypothesisers could take C. D. Broad’s (1939) approach and claim that the notion of a maximally great being is also incoherent. Broad suggests that the concept of the “greatest possible being” is nonsensical unless the essential or necessary qualities of Good-god have an *intrinsic maximum*, something which Broad denies. Arguing against the symmetry of the two concepts seems to be begging the question, and therefore fails to undermine the Evil-god challenge.

*PSE is Not an Integral Part of the Ontological Argument.*

An interesting debate exists between Millican (2007) and Nagasawa (2007) concerning whether PSE is an integral part of the ontological argument. Millican has argued that the classic ontological argument includes PSE, but Nagasawa has claimed that the ontological argument does not need this principle to be effective and that a principle such as the following may be sufficient for the ontological argument to work:

> <God> that is instantiated in reality is greater than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because existence is a great-making property. (Nagasawa 2007, p. 1035)

If PSE is not a necessary component of a successful ontological argument, then perhaps the parallel argument based in PIE is redundant.

The Evil-god hypothesiser, however, does not need to concern themselves with which interpretation of the ontological argument is correct, as long as they can parallel whichever principle is suggested by ontological argument advocates. For example, Nagasawa’s above principle can be paralleled as follows:

> <God> that is instantiated in reality is worse than <God> that is conceived only in the mind because non-existence is a great-making property.

As long as the Evil-god hypothesiser can construct parallel underlying principles to conserve symmetry, then the challenge remains forceful.

*The Success of the Parallel Undermines Itself.*

Nagasawa has claimed that the success of a parallel ontological argument can ultimately undermine itself. He claims that if the target argument is adapted into a parallel argument in such a way that it removes structural and dialectical flaws then it must necessarily be exactly the same as it was before:

> Once a parody argument is modified in this way, it is no longer a parody; it is the classical ontological argument itself. Of course, one cannot undermine the classical ontological argument by appealing to the classical ontological argument itself. (2017, p. 178)

Perhaps, then, it is the case that as a result of its strength, the ontological argument for Evil-god fails.

In response to this objection, I simply do not see how eliminating the flaws to parallel ontological arguments to demonstrate the existence of an alternate being to Good-god makes the argument exactly the same as the ontological argument itself. One can establish a successful parallel that has a different conclusion, and this is exactly what the parallel ontological argument for the existence of Evil-god attempts—and manages—to do (see Chapter 3 for a reminder of what successful parallels must do).

## 13.5 An Analysis of the Parallel Ontological Argument

Although I have indicated in the table below that the new premises are similarly reasonable, clearly not everyone will agree with this assertion, as this may be highly dependent on one's intuition of great-making properties. Hence the asterisk refers to a contentious premise. That the flipped premise is no doubt less appealing to the Good-god hypothesiser than the original premise entails that the parallel ontological argument is less compelling—at least to the Good-god hypothesiser—than the parallel teleological argument and argument from religious experience, both of which offer parallel premises based on evidence.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Ontological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓* | ✗ |

Figure 6 An Analysis of the Parallel Ontological Argument

## 13.6 Conclusion

Previous scholars have cast aside Evil-god ontological argument parallels because they are "ill-conceived, misguided and foolish" (Power 1992, p. 667). If I have succeeded in showing that parallel ontological arguments for the existence of Evil-god are broadly as reasonable as the ontological arguments for the existence of Good-god, then this has significant implications for Good-god hypothesisers—at

least, those who rely on the ontological argument to justify (or partially justify) their belief in Good-god.

Of course, ontological arguments for Evil-god are not intended actually to prove the existence of Evil-god by any of the philosophers who have constructed them (as far as I am aware). Consider Richman's statement below:

> Apparently I must add that I do not believe that I have demonstrated the existence of the Devil. Only, if the ontological proof of [Good-god] is valid, then so is the ontological proof of the Devil, since the latter is of the same logical form as the former. Adding this is like explaining the point of a joke. But this, too, is sometimes necessary. (Richman 1960, p. 80)

What the Evil-god challenge, using the parallel ontological argument, is intended to do is demonstrate that the Good-god hypothesiser cannot rely on the ontological argument to support the existence of Good-god. Thus, if the Evil-god challenge cannot be undermined in another way by the Good-god hypothesiser, the ontological argument is defunct.

Previous parallel ontological arguments have failed because they do not directly parallel definitional ontological arguments for the existence of Good-god closely enough. They have not been symmetrical. I have attempted to demonstrate that this failing can be rectified by employing either (i) PIE to establish that existence is intrinsically bad, or (ii) axiological asymmetry to establish that existence is extrinsically bad. If I have succeeded, the Evil-god challenge to the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god prevails, and the ontological argument for the existence of Good-god is rendered ineffective. If I have not, I hope that the supporter of the target ontological argument will at least have gained a good

understanding for why they believe it to be more reasonable than the Evil-god parallel.

# Chapter 14. The Parallel Moral Argument

## 14.1 Introduction

Many theists believe that although the moral argument does not provide definitive proof for Good-god's existence, it nonetheless adds to the cumulative case for Good-god's existence. There is a broad array of moral arguments that have been used to offer support for the Good-god hypothesis. In this chapter, I propose that all practical moral arguments for the existence of Good-god are undermined by the strong Evil-god challenge, since they fall into the same category all the well-being objections we responded to in Chapter 8. I also suggest that theoretical moral arguments for the existence of Good-god can be effectively paralleled because they all rest on metaphysical or moral intuitions. This will be a short chapter because I have already covered some relevant parallel arguments and intuitions that relate to the moral argument in previous chapters of this thesis.

## 14.2 Moral Arguments and Parallel Moral Arguments

Traditional moral arguments use the concepts of moral facts, moral duties, moral freedom, or moral responsibilities as a basis for attempting to prove or support the GGH. Although there are many versions of the moral argument, all purport to support the existence of an omnibenevolent god from a feature of morality in the world. We can also distinguish between practical and theoretical moral arguments (Evans 2010). Practical moral arguments claim that it is better for us to believe that Good-god exists, therefore we should believe that Good-god exists. Theoretical moral arguments argue that Good-god's existence is strongly implied, or even

necessitated, by objective moral laws, obligations, or facts. Moral arguments for Good-god's existence are often structured something like this:

1. Objective moral facts exist.
2. Good-god provides the best explanation for the existence of objective moral facts.
3. Therefore, Good-god exists.

Notice that the argument is inductive; it assumes that the best explanation for objective moral facts must be the true explanation for objective moral facts. We might call this the weak version of the moral argument. It is abductive, since it maintains only that Good-god is the best possible explanation for moral facts. Since most moral arguments are abductive, simply looking for the best explanation, the moral arguments for Evil-god really only need to show that the symmetry thesis pertains (that is it similarly reasonable to consider moral facts and issues in the world as compatible with the existence of Evil-god as it is to consider them compatible with the existence of Good-god).

Some theists, though, might try to provide a stronger version of the argument, which looks something like this:

1. Objective moral facts exist.
2. Good-god is the only possible explanation for the existence of objective moral facts.
3. Therefore, Good-god exists.

The strong version of the argument considers the relationship between objective moral facts and an omnibenevolent deity absolutely necessary. So let's examine some common moral arguments and decipher whether they can be paralleled with moral arguments for the existence of Evil-god.

Some philosophers use the relationship between morality and an afterlife to support Good-god's existence. This type of moral argument is practical; it purports to postulate Good-god's existence because it is practically better for us to do so:

> If it were ultimate, this life would be a tragedy, the most horrific of suffering would stand beyond redemption's reach, hope for a new day or even a revolution of the will would be futile. Evil would win, and a cosmos in ruins would be the inexorable climax of its narrative. All those countless anonymous persons who have suffered horribly would be consigned to oblivion. (Baggett and Walls 2016, p. 302)

This passage expresses the necessity of a pleasant, or at least fair, afterlife, which in turn implies the existence of Good-god. The Evil-god hypothesiser, when faced with this argument, might simply argue that this notion helps their cause. If there is no fair afterlife, then evil wins, which is in line with Evil-god's desires. So how can the theist avoid the moral argument being twisted to support the EGH more so than the GGH?

Perhaps the most famous endorser of this type of moral argument is Immanuel Kant, who uses the idea of the "summum bonum" to argue for Good-god's existence. According to Kant, belief in Good-god is a postulate of practical reason because moral entities must desire the highest good (the summum bonum), which is a world where moral entities are morally good, happy, and rewarded for their good behaviour. For this to be a rational desire, moral entities must admit that there must be an underlying plan that includes an afterlife such as this. Therefore, believing in

Good-god is rational for human beings. There must be a reward for moral entities being good, and that reward is the afterlife.

> For Kant, the *summum bonum* is the situation in which the happiness of moral agents is directly proportional to their moral goodness; and this is the state that ought to obtain—most of all. Hence, the moral argument proceeds, since this state ought to obtain, it must be possible for it to obtain, because it is false that the impossible ever ought, or ought not, to obtain. But this state is possible only in an afterlife where there exists a being with sufficient knowledge, power, and benevolence to make it so. Accordingly, for Kant, the belief that the *summum bonum* ought to obtain rationally justifies the postulation of the condition under which it is possible for it to obtain, namely, that [Good-god] exists. (Murphree 1997, p. 78)

Wallace Murphree mirrors Kant's summum bonum to construct a “summum malum” as part of his Evil-god challenge:

> The *summum malum* is the situation in which the happiness of moral agents is inversely proportional to their moral goodness; and this is a state that ought not to obtain most of all. Furthermore, since this state ought not to obtain, it must be possible for it to obtain, because it is false that the impossible ever ought, or ought not, to obtain. But this state is possible only in an afterlife, where there exists a being with sufficient knowledge, power, and malevolence to make it so. Accordingly, the belief that the *summum malum* ought not to obtain rationally justifies the postulation of the condition under which it is possible for it to obtain, namely, that [Evil-god] exists. (Murphree 1997, p. 79)

As we can see from the passages above, Murphree uses the notion of a negative afterlife to justify belief in Evil-god. John Collins offers further support for this notion:

> Suppose, as our hypothetical diabolist might, that [Evil-god] consigns some people permanently to heaven. Why would a maximally malevolent being do such a benevolent thing? There is no greater injustice than sending the wicked to eternal bliss after they die. But since systems of punishment and reward are made worse by arbitrariness, nobody can ensure that they avoid eternal torment in the afterlife by becoming, say, a serial killer. Although [Evil-god] would approve of such actions, it might just send such perpetrators to hell anyhow. (Collins 2019, p. 90)

As Collins says, then, the EGH is very much compatible with this notion of the afterlife. Additionally, the Evil-god hypothesiser can simply maintain that heaven does not exist and that Evil-god sends all people—good or evil—to eternal hell.

Kant's supposition is reliant on another assumption—that evil does not last forever, but that goodness does. To parallel this, we can simply suppose that good doesn't last forever and evil does. Kant's argument also relies on the claim that morality exists only because it is *better for our overall well-being for this to be the case*. As discussed in Chapter 8, well-being objections are only effective against the weak Evil-god challenge, so strong Evil-god challenges remain untarnished.

To demonstrate this point using another argument that Keith Ward (2015) poses to the Evil-god challenge. Ward's "argument from worship" argues that Good-god must exist because humans want and need god to be good (and clearly don't want and need Evil-god to exist!). People, he asserts, seek god as an object of perfection to offer their worship to and an icon to deliver forgiveness and grant opportunities for moral redemption. Ward states that this search "entails that their [god] must be powerful and knowledgeable enough to deliver from evil" (2015, p. 48). But, he continues, "there is no analogous search for an evil [god], who could only bring increased despair and oppression" (2015, p. 48).

I have two responses to the argument from worship. The first says that we cannot establish the existence of Good-god simply by observing the practices of people. Empirically, Ward is correct to say that people seek a supreme power for moral atonement and salvation, which leads them in turn to religious belief and worship. However, these observed practices establish nothing about the true nature

of god, only the true nature of people. The second response claims that the empirical fact that people worship Good-god is compatible with the existence of Evil-god. It is possible that Evil-god, given its nature, would want people to worship a non-existent benevolent deity futilely, because it would gain pleasure from seeing them dedicating their lives to its imaginary antithesis.

But what about theoretical moral arguments that claim Good-god is entailed by the existence of objective moral facts? As we have seen previously, the Evil-god hypothesiser can attempt to claim that if the moral argument is an argument for an objective moral law giver, it can also be construed as an argument for the existence of Evil-god, because morality involves both good and bad. Just like the cosmological argument, which only postulates a cause of order, purpose, and contingency, and the teleological argument, which only postulates a designer, this moral argument holds that if there is an objective moral lawgiver it is far from clear if such a being is good or bad.

Furthermore, as already discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, this type of claim relies on metaphysical intuitions such as axiarchism or a privation account of evil. Although I will not rehash the parallels I constructed previously, suffice it to say that theoretical moral arguments ultimately boil down to a difference in intuition between the Good-god hypothesiser and the Evil-god hypothesiser.

## 14.3 An Analysis of the Parallel Moral Argument

Clearly, then, the practical moral arguments collapse into well-being objections, which are only problematic for weak Evil-god challenges. Theoretical moral

arguments are dependent on metaphysical intuitions about the nature of good and evil, such as evil as a privation of goodness or the underlying intuitions outlined in Chapter 7. We have already demonstrated that these intuitions can be paralleled. As shown in the table below, the premises of the theoretical moral argument must be flipped in order for the parallel to function. Whether or not the new premises are similarly reasonable depends, once more, on intuition.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parallel Theoretical Moral Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓* | ✗ |

Figure 7 An Analysis of the Parallel Theoretical Moral Argument

## 14.4 Conclusion

We've already seen that well-being objections only undermine weak Evil-god challenges. Since the practical moral argument is a type of well-being objection, the same conclusion holds. It also seems that the Good-god hypothesiser can only escape the Evil-god challenge to the theoretical moral argument by advocating for evil as a privation of goodness. As I concluded in the previous chapter, this rests on intuitions that the Evil-god challenger can parallel too. Therefore, the Evil-god hypothesiser need not be too worried about moral arguments.

# Chapter 15. The Maximal Evil-god Thesis

## 15.1 Introduction

The “maximal God thesis” is a recent and radical stance that aims to defend perfect being theism against a varied slew of attacks. To do so, it claims that god’s perfections should be viewed as the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence[58]. In this chapter, I argue that the Evil-god challenge can effectively undermine[59] this version of perfect being theism. To do this, I establish a parallel thesis—the maximal Evil-god thesis—which claims that god’s perfections should be viewed as the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and malevolence. I offer two arguments to retain alethic symmetry between the two theses. First, I argue that benevolence and malevolence are similarly likely “great-making candidates”. Second, what I call the “threshold argument” proposes that the maximal Good-god thesis collapses into the maximal Evil-god thesis because the maximal Good-god theist cannot guarantee the level of benevolence needed to call god “good”. Finally, I contend that some objections to the maximal Good-god thesis are not applicable to the maximal Evil-god thesis.

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[58] For purposes of clarity, I will refer to Nagasawa’s maximal God thesis as the “maximal Good-god thesis”, distinguishing it from my “maximal Evil-god thesis” and in line with the terminology throughout this thesis.

[59] Perhaps “undermine” is a misleading word to use here. The maximal Good-god theist does not argue for an omnibenevolent god, so why make it a target for a parallel argument? Essentially, it is to develop the Evil-god challenge so it is more versatile and to pose a similar challenge to maximal Good-god theists: Why believe that a maximal god has the great-making property of benevolence at all?

Yujin Nagasawa has developed a compelling thesis to defend perfect being theism against a wealth of traditional attacks. Nagasawa proposes a thesis that claims that “[god] is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence” (2017, p. 90). This new approach is distinct from traditional versions of perfect being theism that rely on the “Omni-god thesis”, which states that god is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent.

If perfect being theists can abide the radical nature of the maximal Good-god thesis, they should find this novel approach extremely appealing. Prima facie, it seems to be a much more resilient strand of perfect being theism because it can overcome—or at least have more success responding to—many of the problematic objections usually thrown at perfect being theism by critics. If the maximal Good-god thesis is to succeed, however, it must be able to stand firm against the Evil-god challenge. The Evil-god challenge itself is a radically different approach to undermining perfect being theism. Interestingly, Evil-god challenges usually only aim to undercut types of perfect being theism that claim god’s omnibenevolence by constructing what we might call the omni Evil-god hypothesis. This means that if this Evil-god challenge is to be an effective against the maximal Good-god thesis, it will need to be adapted to suit this new purpose. Specifically, the Evil-god hypothesis must be amended to postulate the existence of a god that is evil (to a certain extent), powerful (to a certain extent) and knowledgeable (to a certain extent), just as the maximal Good-god thesis eradicates the omni qualities from the traditional Good-god hypothesis.

Clearly, some further exploration must be undertaken to determine whether the Evil-god challenge can effectively parallel (and therefore successfully undermine)

the maximal Good-god thesis. The amended Evil-god hypothesis (what I call the maximal Evil-god thesis) must be demonstrated to be as compelling as the amended Good-god hypothesis. For this to happen, the symmetry thesis—that the Good-god hypothesis and the Evil-god hypothesis are similarly reasonable—must pertain.

I start by providing some background to the key theses discussed: the maximal Good-god thesis and the Evil-god challenge. I then distinguish between three types of argument traditionally posed against the Good-god and Evil-god hypotheses. The next section lays out the maximal Evil-god thesis. I pre-empt a significant potential objection to my thesis—that benevolence is a much more justified candidate for great-making than malevolence is—prompting a discussion into the nature of great-making properties. Next, I propose what I call the “threshold argument”, which claims that if the benevolence level is too low, maximal Good-god collapses into maximal Evil-god: the two are indistinguishable.

## 15.2 The Maximal Good-god Thesis

Nagasawa establishes a novel and interesting way for perfect being theism to wiggle out of the philosophical stronghold in which it finds itself entrapped by various forceful objections. Nagasawa’s approach attempts to eliminate most, if not all, of the traditional objections to perfect being theism in one fell swoop. Nagasawa was not the first to postulate such a being. Thomas Morris states the following: “Suppose we somehow discovered that a less than Anselmian being, an individual who was very powerful but not strictly omnipotent, very knowledgeable but not literally omniscient, and very dependable but not altogether immutable, etc., had created our universe

and was responsible for the existence of intelligent life on earth" (1984, p. 182). In fact many types of theism postulate the existence of a deity or multiple deities that do not possess "great-making" properties to their intrinsic maxima.

According to Nagasawa, the maximal Good-god thesis "suggests that, while [god] is certainly very knowledgeable, very powerful, and very benevolent, He might or might not be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent" (2017, p. 93). The thesis implicitly avers that the Omni-god proposition is simply too restricting. Nagasawa questions why theists do not begin with a much humbler claim, a claim which does not necessarily and absolutely discount the Omni-god thesis. In fact, the maximal Good-god thesis remains neutral about the question of whether god is Omni-god.

*The "Case-by-case" Strategy*

Recall the difference between Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments (defined in Chapter 9) against perfect being theism. Defenders of the Evil-god challenge (such as Law 2010; Byron 2019, Collins 2019) have so far attempted to refute objections such as these on what Nagasawa calls a "case-by-case" basis, which involves refuting each objection thrown at it on an individual basis. This has also been the strategy in previous chapters of this thesis. Upon reflection, however, this may not be the most efficient strategy. As Nagasawa states, "the most obvious problem with the case-by-case approach is that, whether or not the individual responses to these arguments ultimately succeed, it is not very efficient as a defence of perfect being theism" (2017, p. 90). Nagasawa demonstrates that the overall logical structure for all these types of argument remains the same:

1. If perfect being theism is true, then the perfect being thesis is true.
2. If the perfect being thesis is true, then the [Omni-god] thesis is true.
3. If the [Omni-god] thesis is true, then [god] is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being.
4. There cannot be an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being.
5. Therefore, the [Omni-god] thesis is false.
6. Therefore, the perfect being thesis is false.
7. Therefore, perfect being theism is false. (Adapted from Nagasawa 2017, pp. 91–92)

We can mirror this structure for objections to the Evil-god hypothesis:

1. If perfect being theism is true, then the perfect being thesis is true.
2. If the perfect being thesis is true, then the omni Evil-God thesis is true.
3. If the omni Evil-god thesis is true, then Evil-god is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnimalevolent being.
4. There cannot be an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnimalevolent being.
5. Therefore, the omni Evil-god thesis is false.
6. Therefore, the perfect being thesis is false.
7. Therefore, perfect being theism is false.

Note that the Evil-god postulated here is a significant departure from Stephen Law's "traditional" Evil-god, which is defined as the *worst* possible being. This maximal Evil-god is the perfect being with the underlying assumption that malevolence is a great-making property.

Although Evil-god hypothesisers might agree with the conclusion of this argument—since they do not actually believe in Evil-god—they would want to avoid objections that damage the EGH but not the GGH (in order to retain the symmetry thesis and maintain an effective parallel). So, if the maximal Good-god thesis can be effectively paralleled, it adds weight to the Evil-god hypothesis and constructs a

defence against counterarguments in a single strategic move. This move involves lessening the strength of the properties Evil-god possesses and making instead the more modest claim that there exists a god that has the maximal consistent set of power, knowledge, and malevolence. In the next section, this is what I do.

## 15.3 The Maximal Evil-god Thesis

The Evil-god challenge is usually employed in an attempt to threaten the (omni) Good-god hypothesis, therefore, to effectively mirror (and therefore undermine) the maximal Good-god thesis, the (omni) Evil-god hypothesis must be adapted accordingly.

I will now construct a parallel thesis that mirrors the maximal Good-god approach's underlying strategy but that includes a significantly different postulate: maximal Evil-god. I should point out that the maximal Evil-god thesis is technically a type of perfect being theism, it just suggests that malevolence is a great-making property. As Nagasawa states, "the perfect being thesis is not, however, very informative; it says only that [god] is the being than which no greater is metaphysically possible. It does not specify exactly which individual great-making properties [god] has" (2017, p. 82).

The maximal Evil-god thesis, then, suggests that, while Evil-god is certainly very knowledgeable, very powerful, and very malevolent, it might not be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnimalevolent. We need not specify the precise level of each property; we need only say that Evil-god possesses the maximum consistent level of

each of the following properties: power, knowledge, and malevolence. As stated by Nagasawa, perfect being theists “commonly commit themselves to a claim that is unnecessarily specific: [god] is the being than which no greater is metaphysically possible and, *moreover*, [god] is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being” (2017, p. 93). Likewise, Evil-god hypothesisers commonly commit themselves to a similarly strong—and, arguably, unnecessarily strong—position. They commit to an omni Evil-god. We can define the maximal Evil-god thesis as follows:

> The maximal Evil-god thesis: while Evil-god is certainly very knowledgeable, very powerful, and very malevolent, Evil-god might or might not be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnimalevolent.

If the more modest claim of the maximal Evil-god thesis can be substituted for the traditional (if it can be so called!) omni Evil-god thesis, then this simultaneously strengthens the Evil-god challenge and retains the symmetry thesis. By making the Evil-god hypothesiser’s position more modest, the parallel thesis also strengthens the Evil-god challenge against a host of objections against it (just as the maximal Good-god thesis strengthens traditional perfect being theism against a host of objections against it). For example, it can overcome the problem of good because maximal Evil-god is not necessarily *all* evil and/or *all* powerful. Likewise, it can overcome the claim that an omnipotent god cannot be omnimalevolent, because the maximal Evil-God thesis makes no claims about Evil-god possessing the omni qualities.

If the maximal Evil-god thesis is to effectively parallel the maximal Good-god thesis, however, more work must be done. Specifically, we must explore whether malevolence and benevolence are similarly likely "great-making" candidates.

## 15.4 Benevolence and Malevolence as "Great-making" Properties

In this section, I explore what it means for a property to be deemed great-making and consider whether benevolence and malevolence should be defined thus. If I can demonstrate that benevolence and malevolence are similarly likely great-making candidates, then the maximal Good-god thesis and the maximal Evil-god thesis remain similarly reasonable. If malevolence holds up equally well as benevolence does as a great-making property, then ultimately we should reject both candidates. It would be absurd to consider both malevolence and benevolence to be great-making properties, since they are opposites (this point echoes the approach of the strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency, which notes that two mutually exclusive claims cannot both be true). So let's examine what great-making properties are and consider how we might determine which characteristics might be appropriate great-making candidates.

Essentially, a great-making property is a property, *x*, that makes a being greater if it possesses *x*, ceteris paribus. Great-making properties can come in different forms. William Mann distinguishes between "degreeless properties" and "degreed properties":

> Some properties have no degrees; they do not admit of more or less. For such a degreeless property, *F*, it makes no literal sense to say of two

> individuals, *x* and *y*, both of which are *F*, that *x* is more (less) *F* than *y*. Examples of degreeless properties are: being a human being, being an aardvark, being a parent, being on fire, being triangular, being pregnant, being less than or equal to *i*. Other properties do have degrees, however: for any one of them, *G*, it does make literal sense to say of *x* and *y*, both of which are *G*, that *x* is more (less) *G* than *y*. Let us call such properties degreed properties. Examples of degreed properties are: being old, being angry, being cloudy, being to the left of *z*, being sick, being squarelike (not: being quadrilateral), being close to delivery. (1975, pp. 151–152)

More recently, yet similarly, Daniel Hill has distinguished between “scaling” great-making properties and “non-scaling” great-making properties:

> Some great-making properties are *scaling*, others are not. A property, *F*, is scaling or *degreed* if and only if it is possible that each of two distinct entities should be *F* and yet one should have a greater degree or level of *F* than the other. Another way of looking at this is to say that with each scaling property, *F*, is associated a relation, which will be expressed by a locution of the form “*possesses more of F than*”. Thus the property of *being great* itself is scaling: associated with it is the relation of *being greater than*. (2004, p. 7)

It is clear that the three fundamental characteristics commonly ascribed to Good-god by perfect being theists—power, knowledge, and benevolence—are scaling/degreed properties. A being can be more or less powerful than another being, more or less knowledgeable than another being, and more or less benevolent than another being. By extension, it is also clear that *malevolence* is a scaling property. Let us evaluate, then, whether benevolence and malevolence should be considered great-making properties.

Nagasawa notices several problems that arise when considering the great-making properties of Good-god:

> When we try to focus on individual properties, we face a number of difficult questions: (i) Exactly which properties are great-making properties? (ii) How can we define each great-making property? (iii) Among the great-making properties, exactly which ones should be ascribed to [god], if not all of them? (iv) Can [god] have “neutral

> properties", which are neither great nor bad? (v) Can [god] have worse-making properties if, by doing so, He can have extra great-making properties that compensate for the worse-making properties? (2017, p. 32)

Many theists seem to take for granted that benevolence is a great-making property. Some theists even claim that benevolence is Good-god's most defining quality (see, for example, Oord 2010). Often, Good-god advocates seem to presume that moral goodness makes a being greater without much rigorous argument. Yet this claim should not simply be taken for granted. Let us examine several prominent reasons why a property might be considered to be a great-making candidate. Here I employ Nagasawa's helpful classification system, which identifies four ways that "great" can be defined.

> A. Great for oneself: For example, the property of being smart is great for a criminal to have because it benefits the criminal.
>
> B. Great for the world and others: For example, the property of being smart is great for a well-intentioned inventor to have (but not great for a criminal to have) because it is beneficial to the world and others.
>
> C. Great in one's character/capacity: For example, the property of being sharp is great for a knife to have qua knife.
>
> D. Great intrinsically: For example, the properties of being knowledgeable, powerful, benevolent, beautiful, and so on are great in themselves, regardless of their greatness in the above three senses. (2017, pp. 53–54)

The first three categories—A, B, and C—view greatness as an extrinsic quality. It seems that all three categories of extrinsic greatness can equally endorse benevolence and malevolence as a great-making property. The greatness defined by Category A, for example, can work for both benevolence and malevolence. In certain circumstances, it is beneficial for oneself for one be benevolent; in other circumstances, it is beneficial for oneself for one to be malevolent.

Really, Category D is the only one that the Good-god hypothesiser and the Evil-god hypothesiser can appeal to as a definition of great (in the context of great-making)[60]. Let us take the concept of great-making to entail making some thing greater intrinsically. This is the definition Mann adopts, saying that a great-making property is “a property it is intrinsically better to have than to lack” (1975, p. 178). Remember here that intrinsic greatness must be distinguished from intrinsic goodness. When we talk about a great-making property making something greater, it is not in a moral sense[61]. My strategy for demonstrating the equal reasonableness of benevolence and malevolence is simple. I claim that the burden of proof is on the Good-god hypothesiser to demonstrate that benevolence is a more likely candidate for great-making than malevolence. It seems to me that there is not a compelling argument for the intrinsic greatness of goodness (benevolence) that cannot be applied to argue for the intrinsic greatness of badness (malevolence). If the Good-god hypothesiser cannot provide a compelling argument why benevolence is a great-making property and malevolence is not, then we can consider the two similarly likely candidates. Note that I am not claiming here that malevolence actually is a great-making property. Overall, I am inclined to agree with Mann that “the property of omnibenevolence, which I have construed as being one of the attributes involved in God's perfect goodness, is not one of God's more impressive attributes” (2015, p. 19). In the spirit of a strong Evil-god challenge, though, I am attempting to show that neither benevolence nor malevolence should be considered great-making properties.

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[60] This is also the conclusion Nagasawa reaches.
[61] Indeed, often moral value and axiological value seem to be *misused* interchangeably.

## 15.5 Objections to Malevolence as a Great-making Property

*Benevolence is Entailed by Other Great-making Properties.*

Philosophers such as Richard Swinburne (1993), Charles Daniels (1997), and Christopher Weaver (2015) have argued that benevolence is entailed by the other properties that Good-god possesses. Swinburne, for examples, states that “it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good” (Swinburne 1993, p. 188). Swinburne’s argument goes something like this:

1. An omniscient being will know whether any action is the morally best action or not.
2. A perfectly free being will perform the morally best action they know of.
3. Any being that is omniscient and perfectly free will perform the morally best action available.
4. An omniscient, perfectly free being will be maximally benevolent.

Daniels and Weaver make similar contentions, arguing that moral agents always veer toward the good, and will therefore perform the best moral action they know of. As Good-god knows everything, Good-god will always perform the best moral action. To put arguments such as these more formally, we might say something like the following: If a being, *x*, possesses [one or more of the following: omnipotence, perfect freedom, omniscience], then it is logically necessary that *x* possesses benevolence.

Yet as Morris explains, “claims to display entailment relations between conceptually distinct divine attributes, such as R. G. Swinburne's recent attempts to deduce God's goodness from his omnipotent freedom and omniscience, are notoriously less than absolutely convincing” (1984, p. 184). Similarly, A. A. Howsepian (1991) has argued that Good-god is not necessarily (but rather accidentally) good. We do not need to evaluate the merits of arguments like Swinburne’s because, historically, arguments of this type are reliant on the great-making properties at their intrinsic maximum (omni properties). Even if Swinburne, Daniels, Weaver, and others are correct that benevolence is logically entailed by omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, or a combination of these properties, the maximal Good-god thesis does not specify that Good-god has the highest levels of these qualities. Swinburne’s argument, for example, relies on god knowing everything and having perfect freedom. His argument falls apart if the omni properties he specifies are replaced by maximal properties (which are not necessarily omni properties). As far as I am aware, there are no arguments to the effect that benevolence is logically entailed as a great-making property by the claim that a god is “somewhat powerful” or “somewhat knowledgeable”. Due to the modest nature of the maximal Good-god thesis (specifically, that it does not claim the omni qualities of God), the maximal Good-god theorist cannot selectively decide to use omni properties for their own benefit in this instance, while refraining from adopting them elsewhere.

*We Intuit that Benevolence—not Malevolence—is a Great-making Property.*

Perhaps benevolence should be considered a more suitable great-making property than malevolence because it is in accord with our intuitions. To put this another way,

one might say that if it is intuited that a quality, *y*, makes a being, *F*, greater, then a quality, *y*, is a great-making property.

It must certainly be admitted that the notion of malevolence as a great-making property is counterintuitive. The problem with the intuition account of great-making properties is two-fold. Firstly, relying solely on our intuitions is an inadequate basis for such a claim. As I argued in Chapters 8 and 12, it is intuitively appealing to believe that the being that created the world and has a large amount of power over its creation is benevolent rather than malevolent, so the intuition of some that benevolence is a great-making property could be explained away by wishful thinking and confirmation bias. Secondly, if Evil-god did exist, it seems likely that it would desire us to believe that it was benevolent in order to deceive humans, therefore perhaps Evil-god would want us to intuit that benevolence makes a being greater. The strong version of this claim might be expressed as follows: if Evil-god existed, then Evil-god would want us to believe that benevolence is a great-making property. A weaker version of this claim might simply assert that Evil-god's existence is compatible with the intuitive human belief that benevolence is a great-making property. Finally, it could be argued that some people might have the Machiavellian intuition that malevolence is greater than benevolence. It seems obvious, but should be pointed out nonetheless, that a great-making property is not a *good*-making property. By denying that benevolence is a great-making property one is not committed to moral anti-realism. In fact, I think the Evil-god and Good-god hypothesisers *are* committed to moral realism, otherwise the terms "good" and "evil" are meaningless with regard to value.

*Evil Is a Privation.*

One final response the critic might try is to evoke the view that evil is a privation. Although this view is no longer prominent within perfect being theism, perhaps theists might want to resurrect it to argue that malevolence is not actually a property at all: it is simply a lack of benevolence. In response, as I have already discussed, I would argue that good could be considered a privation of evil just as easily[62]. Overall, it seems that unless the maximal Good-god theist can demonstrate that benevolence is unequivocally a great-making property and malevolence is unequivocally not a great-making property, then the maximal Good-god thesis and the maximal Evil-god thesis remain similar in reasonableness.

## 15.6 The Threshold Argument

But perhaps this is not convincing enough. For the time being, let's say that the Good-god hypothesiser can successfully counter my claim in the previous section with a compelling argument that benevolence is a valid great-making property whereas malevolence is not. In this section, I aim to demonstrate that the maximal Good-god thesis cannot escape the Evil-god challenge *even if we grant that claim* because the maximal Good-god thesis ultimately collapses into the maximal Evil-god thesis.

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[62] See Chapter 7.

One of the main strengths of the maximal Good-god thesis is that it does not require specificity of great-making levels. Advocates do not have to pinpoint exactly how powerful or knowledgeable Good-god is. What I call the "threshold argument"[63] aims to exploit that strength by claiming that the maximal Good-god theist cannot guarantee that Good-god's benevolence level is above the threshold necessary for Good-god to be good in actuality. The threshold argument relies on the underlying claim that there is a threshold of benevolence under which maximal Good-god is no longer good.

Let's say the maximum number of units of a specific scaling great-making property that a being can possess is 10. For example, if power is a great-making property, then a being possessing 0 would have power to its intrinsic minimum and a being possessing 10 would have power to its intrinsic maximum. The threshold argument contends that there is a certain level of benevolence below which maximal Good-god collapses into maximal Evil-god. Let's say the scale of morality runs from 0 (maximal malevolence) to 10 (maximal benevolence). Further, let's say that the mid-point on the scale (5) entails that the being possessing that degree of morality is morally neutral (possesses neither benevolence nor malevolence). This scale can be seen in the figure below.

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[63] Jeremy Gwiazda (2011) proposes a similar idea in relation to worship-worthiness.

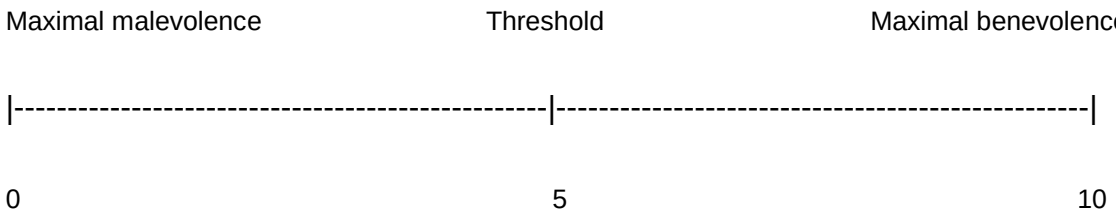



*Figure 8 The Scale of Maximal God's Moral Nature*

Under the maximal Good-god thesis, a level above 5 on the scale of morality cannot be taken for granted. In other words, there is no "morality gauge" to measure the level of benevolence Good-god has in the maximal Good-god thesis. As a result, the maximal Good-god theist can make no specific claims about this being's moral nature. The maximal Good-god theist is consigned to throw the baby out with the bathwater; by eradicating the omnis, they must also eradicate the comforting necessity of Good-god definitely being good. Ultimately, the maximal Good-god theist cannot dictate that Good-god's morality must fall above 5 on the scale (necessitating that the being is good) because they are beholden not to specify levels. This entails that the maximal Good-god approach cannot assure a good god at all since they cannot specify a specific minimum threshold of benevolence[64]. It is precisely because of the lack of omni conditions imposed on the maximal Good-god thesis, that the threshold objection is effective. Since benevolence (and, correspondingly, malevolence) is a scaling property, it must be admitted that when the benevolence levels fall below a certain level, the maximal Good-god thesis collapses into the maximal Evil-god thesis; the two are indistinguishable. To avoid

[64] Specifying a minimum threshold would of course undermine the principle of the maximal Good-god thesis, which is that the level of every great-making property is non-specific.

this problem, there must be a fixed lower limit under which maximal Good-god becomes more evil than good, but there seems to be no principled reason to include one under the maximal Good-god thesis; any attempt appears ad hoc. Naturally, the threshold argument is also applicable to the maximal Evil-god thesis. If the maximal Evil-god theist cannot specify a threshold of malevolence, the thesis collapses into the maximal Good-god thesis. As the Evil-god hypothesiser needs only to mirror the Good-god hypothesis, however, this is of no negative consequence to them.

At this point one might object that exemplifying the scale of benevolence in this way is problematic[65]. Why, one might ask, should the scale run from maximal malevolence at 0 through to maximal benevolence at 10 when this seems to be a different scale to scales of other (potential) great-making properties like knowledge and power (which run from simply a lack of power or lack of knowledge at 0 on the scale)? Surely, then, the lowest point of the scale of benevolence or malevolence should just be a complete lack of this attribute (being morally neutral).

My response to this concern is as follows. First, we might determine that benevolence *is* a different kind of (potential) great-making property than power and knowledge. It could be argued that (unlike power and knowledge) benevolence is an example of what Daniel Hill (2004) refers to as a “maxi-optimality” property, which can be defined as a property that i) has an intrinsic maximum and ii) when possessed to its intrinsic maximum by an entity, *x*, makes *x* greater (ceteris paribus) than any other being that does not possess that property. Accordingly, it makes

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[65] Thanks to Michael Rush for identifying this worry.

sense to view the start of the scale as a negative level of the attribute rather than a neutral one—the scale runs from the lowest possible level of morality to the highest possible level of morality[66]. When attempting to find the absolute graded opposite of maximal benevolence, it seems that maximal malevolence lies right at the other end of the scale. Yes, having no benevolence lies somewhere on the continuous spectrum of morality too, but continue along past that neutral moral state will take you into malevolent territory[67]. Let's say we have two people, one who is morally neutral and possesses no benevolence or malevolence, the other who is quite malevolent. If we were asked to compare the two people with regards to their benevolence, it seems that we would place the malevolent person below the morally neutral person, rather than regarding them benevolently-equal. Having a disposition for malevolence is *even less benevolent* than having a disposition towards neither benevolence nor malevolence.

So I think we can justifiably maintain that Figure 8 *is* treating the scale of benevolence in an appropriate manner. The scales for power and knowledge presumably begin at the point of maximal impotence and maximal ignorance

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[66] Although not directly pertinent to this response, another motivation for regarding benevolence as different from power and knowledge is that it is, arguably, an "absolute" great-making property as opposed to a "relative" great-making property (Nagasawa 2017). That is, if benevolence is taken to be a great-making property, then it makes *any* being greater, not only when combined with other great-making properties. Power and knowledge, on the other hand, are arguably only relative great-making properties. That is, they make an entity greater only when combined with other properties such as benevolence.

[67] An interesting consideration within this discussion is what the opposite(s) of each attribute are. Is the opposite of knowledge ignorance, for example? Or is it rather a combination of being ignorant *and* possessing false beliefs? Hill (2004) distinguishes between attributes for which their intrinsic maxima is also the optimal level of that attribute (in other words, the more of the quality the better) and attributes for which the optimal level of that attribute is not the intrinsic maximum (Hill uses the example of leniency, of which he claims one can have too much). Although not central to this discussion, it would nonetheless be fruitful to explore the different potential graded opposites of various scaling great-making properties.

respectively, both of which are commonly used as negative attributes. If one were to argue for knowledge as a great-making property, for example, we would expect them to employ a scale that runs from maximal ignorance (0) to maximal knowledge (10).

## 15.7 An Analysis of the Maximal Evil-god Thesis

The strategy of this chapter is not to construct a direct parallel in the form of a formal argument. But clearly the logical structure and domain are the same as the original maximal Good-god thesis. The main difference between the target thesis and the parallel Evil-god thesis is that I have postulated a different great-making candidate: malevolence. Furthermore, I have argued that this flipped premise is similarly reasonable to the original. As we can see in the table below, the new premises—whether it be that god is the *worst* possible being or the Principle of the Inferiority of Existence—are based on metaphysical intuition of great-making properties.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maximal Evil-god Thesis | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓* | ✗ |

Figure 9 An Analysis of the Maximal Evil-god Thesis

## 15.8 Conclusion

If I am correct that the maximal Good-god thesis can be effectively paralleled by the maximal Evil-god thesis, then the Evil-god challenge is not vanquished by perfect being theists who employ the maximal Good-god thesis in order to avoid the Evil-god challenge. I have suggested that it would be a mistake to accept benevolence as a great-making property while rejecting malevolence as a great-making property without further argument. The notion of benevolence as a great-making property sems to be another metaphysical intuition used by Good-god hypothesisers to construct their belief-wall. I have also contended that the threshold argument shows that the maximal Good-god thesis cannot avoid collapsing into the maximal Evil-god thesis, so the Evil-god challenge remains unaffected by the maximal Good-god approach.

If the maximal Evil-god thesis and the maximal Good-god thesis are similarly reasonable positions to hold, then it seems there is at least one type of objection that the maximal Good-god thesis cannot quash by making the more modest claim that the perfect being possesses the maximal consistent set of great-making properties. If the Good-god hypothesiser attempts to make the more modest claim that Good-god possesses the maximal set of power, knowledge, and benevolence, there seems to be no way of avoiding a collapse into the maximal Evil-god hypothesis because there is no way to “fix” benevolence levels above the threshold.

# Part IV. Findings and Conclusions

# Chapter 16. Findings: Intuitions, Faith, and Reason

## 16.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I turn to reasons outside philosophical argument that might cause people to believe in Good-god. By now it has become clear that belief-bricks on which the Good-god hypothesiser's belief-wall rests can be reduced to intuitions[68]. It is my intention here to discuss the relationship between intuitions, faith, and reason. It is important to point out that this chapter is not included in Part II of this thesis because I don't consider it an objection, as such, to the Evil-god challenge. Evil-god hypothesisers, when posing their challenge, are asking for rational justification for belief in Good-god. By nature, fideists deny that reason is necessary as a foundation of belief. With regard to intuition, it is not my intention to deny that beliefs formed on intuition can be rational, but beliefs of this type seem to be unique with regard to verifiability.

## 16.2 Faith-based Claims

What we might call "fideistic claims" against the Evil-god challenge suggest that other elements, such as emotion or faith, justify the formation of our belief systems (in other words, the view that philosophical arguments for beliefs are redundant). Those endorsing this viewpoint might maintain that despite the possibility of Evil-god and the broad similarity in reasonableness of the EGH and the GGH, there are other

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[68] At least those that are unable to be mirrored by the Evil-god challenge.

reasons to accept the latter over the former. This is a slightly different perspective from that of well-being objectors because well-being objectors still maintain that that their belief is rational, whereas those relying on faith are maintaining that rational argument is not a significant component of belief in Good-god.

Some Good-god hypothesisers have made the case that religious belief can be justified by faith alone—rather than apologetics—which entails that philosophical arguments need not be taken into consideration in discussions of faith—or at least should not dissuade individuals from holding a belief in Good-god. According to Peter Forrest, “even if the choice of [the GGH] over [the EGH] is based on positive emotional attitudes…that is no reason to say that [the EGH] is as reasonable as [the GGH]. Rather it illustrates that to be reasonable we must have faith, in the sense of having been guided by positive emotional attitudes” (1998, p. 159). If accurate, this means that religious truths can only truly be accessed through faith, so philosophical objections to the GGH are irrelevant.

Similarly, Good-god hypothesisers might argue alongside John King-Farlow (1978) and Graham Oppy (2004) that grounds for belief are not always based on rational arguments but rather might be grounded in considerations that cannot be justified or put into words. As stated by Oppy:

> The existence of these “parallel cases” does not provide the materials for a successful argument against the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods, even though those who do not accept that there is an orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god may be perfectly justified in maintaining that the cases are, indeed, entirely parallel. (2004, p. 2)

For Oppy, then, there are other reasons that Good-god hypothesisers could be justified in holding their belief in an omnibenevolent god—“reasons which they have

not yet, and perhaps that they shall never have, successfully articulated" (2004, p. 186). King-Farlow suggests that philosophical debate about Good-god versus Evil-god might be immaterial to those who have already established strong faith. He states:

> From the standpoint of actual people engaged in practical reasoning about commitment to a religious or ideological standpoint, claims about the equal consistency and equal probability of theist and demonist groups of possible beliefs are likely to turn out to be ludicrously irrelevant. (King-Farlow 1978, p. 59)

Perhaps, then, the Evil-god challenge can have no persuasive power over the beliefs of those who will have faith despite accepting the symmetry thesis and the possibility of Evil-god. If faith is the most important factor—which I think, at least for some Good-god hypothesisers, it is—then Evil-god challenges can serve only to identify to believers of this type that their belief rests on emotional attitudes or faith alone. By separating belief from rational argument, the believer must admit that their belief might be epistemically unfounded. Thus, the fideistic claim will only undermine weak Evil-god challenges that maintain the reasonableness of the EGH (unless, of course, the Evil-god hypothesiser actually has *faith* that Evil-god exists!). This is because only the weak Evil-god challenge is susceptible to the objection that there are non-alethic reasons to believe in the existence of Good-god.

## 16.3 Intuition-based Objections

In this section, I discuss the view that metaphysical intuitions are a justified basis for belief. Although I do not have the scope here to offer a thorough and conclusive examination of the epistemological role of intuition, it is prudent to dedicate at least

some space to it, since we have deciphered that metaphysical intuitions form the basis of (i) philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god that cannot be undermined by the Evil-god challenge and (ii) several objections that purport to undermine the Evil-god challenge.

I have argued that most, if not all, philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god can either (i) be effectively paralleled—and therefore undermined—by the Evil-god challenge or (ii) be demonstrated to rest on one or more intuition-based beliefs. Consequently, belief in Good-god can be reduced to rest only on intuition.

Although intuitions lie at the heart of the debate, they are strange phenomena. In the realm of science, intuition is not considered a compelling reason to accept a belief. But in the realm of religion it is less frowned upon as a basis for belief. Scientists must conduct empirical experiments to determine whether a proposition is true, while philosophers often rely on intuitions as a foundation for believing particular premises. We might define an intuition as some sort of mental state/event in which a claim/proposition seems to be true. But intuition is not the same as belief. One might have an intuition that *p*, but not believe that *p*. Similarly, one might develop a belief through other means that runs contrary to their intuition. We can say, therefore, that intuition and belief are mutually exclusive .

Intuition is often used to undermine normative ethical theories by constructing hypotheticals in which our intuition runs counter to the theory. Yet clearly there are difficulties in relying on intuition alone in the realm of philosophy. One person can have differing intuitions depending on the situation, or they may have two or more intuitions that conflict. Individuals frequently have differing intuitions, and often there

are no clear means to determine which intuition is most prominent (whether within a small group, large group, whole society, or indeed worldwide). To survey the intuitions of all sentient creatures, we would first need to determine whether sentient life exists outside this planet, and confirm which creatures have intuitions on this planet. This is an impossible task (at least currently). As we have seen, human beings also have biases that would drive them to accept certain propositions over others, which encourage them to hold beliefs that are better for their well-being.

Some intuitions also hold more evidential weight than others. Intuitions based on significant experience in a particular domain, for example, might trump intuitions of someone who is very new to a particular domain. We would probably trust the intuition of a seasoned professional baker over the intuition of a first-time baker when deciding to remove our buns from the oven. Clearly, though, many intuitions are unreliable, especially when we factor in cognitive biases to which humans fall prey.

Yet I do not advocate for the removal of intuitions in philosophy, which would be absurd (and, ironically, counterintuitive!). So should the use of intuition in philosophy be limited? Perhaps, instead, we need to gain more of an understanding about what intuitions are, where intuitions come from, and how we should evaluate our intuitions in relation to their justifiability. At least, our understanding of intuitions should be steered by an underlying understanding of psychology.

So although we can be certain that intuitions are not always trustworthy, we can’t disregard them entirely. Nonetheless, intuitions cannot be independently verified, therefore we ought to be cautious when relying only on them in the belief-forming process. What is important is for those who hold beliefs based purely on

intuition to recognise the nature and the role of intuition in their belief system. What we have seen in the previous chapters is that Good-god hypothesisers can only give one general answer in response to the Evil-god challenge (“Why believe in a good god over an evil one?”), and that is “Because of my intuition”. This is not so simple as an intuition that Good-god exists. More often, it is based on other metaphysical intuitions such as the nature of goodness and evil or which characteristics make a being intrinsically greater.

## 16.4 The Cost of Fideistic or Intuition-based Beliefs

In response to fideistic and intuition-based objections, it can be stressed that if Good-god hypothesisers accept that the GGH is not more reasonable than the EGH based on evidence and argument but have faith in it nonetheless, then it is not clear how they can rely on traditional philosophical arguments that say that belief in Good-god is reasonable. The appeal to faith from Good-god hypothesisers would look absurd if it is adopted in this way as a convenient filter to eliminate uncomfortable arguments for Good-god hypothesisers. The cost of adopting fideistic objections, therefore, is that Good-god hypothesisers must relinquish all philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god .

Similarly, Good-god hypothesisers who rely solely on intuition cannot do so while still maintaining that others ought not to rely on theirs. In our belief-wall analogy this would be equivalent to attacking another whose belief-wall has similar structural integrity. If one person’s metaphysical intuition is that the privation account of evil is false, and another’s metaphysical intuition is that the privation account of evil is true,

and it is agreed that there is conclusive no axiomatic or a posteriori evidence to strengthen either intuition, then the latter person can hardly claim that their belief-wall is more stable than the belief-wall belonging to the former person based solely on that claim.

Naturally, Good-god hypothesisers will not be inclined to discard the intuition they hold in favour of an opposite one that they do not hold, so we cannot expect the Evil-god challenge to have any persuasive capacity in these circumstances. Nevertheless, both camps can at least be somewhat satisfied with the verdict that the challenge has identified what the Good-god hypothesiser's belief in Good-god is grounded in.

## 16.5 Conclusion

This discussion, then, raises the epistemological subject of disagreement, not only when it comes to religion, but in any situation of conflicting beliefs that rest on intuition. I argued that all Good-god hypothesisers should respond to the Evil-god challenge ("Why believe in the existence of a good god over the existence of an evil god?") with the following: "Because of my intuition". Now this intuition is not so simple as an intuition that Good-god exists. Rather it is an intuition about some underlying metaphysical principle (or principles), for example a belief in the metaphysical nature of goodness and evil, or the classification of particular moral qualities as intrinsic great-making properties. This, in turn, should be the catalyst for inward reflection about the strength of that belief in the existence of Good-god.

Good-god believers should recognise that their belief is grounded only in intuition and accept that for what it is.

# Chapter 17. Overall Findings, Conclusions, and Further Research Suggestions

## 17.1 Introduction

The overarching aim of this thesis was to conduct an exploration of the Evil-god challenge. The “sub-aims” were to present a survey of the history of the Evil-god challenge; to consider different types of Evil-god challenge; to analyse the Evil-god parallel argument methodology; to classify, survey, and respond to prominent objections to the Evil-god challenge; and to present my own parallel arguments of philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god. As this thesis draws to a close, it will be worthwhile to recapitulate each part of the thesis, summarise my key findings, outline my main conclusions, and make suggestions for potential further research.

## 17.2 Summary of Key Findings

Part I of this thesis was dedicated to setting up the framework of the research and elucidating the Evil-god challenge and the concept of Evil-god. The first step, in Chapter 1, was to provide an introductory survey of the Evil-god challenge and provide helpful clarifications concerning different types of Evil-god challenge. I distinguished between the weak Evil-god challenge, the strong Evil-god challenge from incoherence, and the strong Evil-god challenge from inconsistency. Next, in Chapter 2, I explored the concept of Evil-god further, focusing on what we mean when we deem Evil-god “evil”. By doing so, I eliminated some of the confusion surrounding what *type* of god the Evil-god hypothesis postulates. Chapter 3, an

integral part of the thesis, was dedicated to analysing the methodology of parallel arguments like the Evil-god challenge. I illustrated just how contentious the question of the usefulness of parallel arguments is, and I established the conditions to which parallel arguments must adhere in order to be effective. This is something that has been somewhat neglected in the recent literature on the Evil-god challenge. I contended that it is acceptable to "flip" certain premises of target arguments if they are based only on intuition.

In Part II of this thesis, I offered clarification of the different types of objection that have been posed (thus far) to the Evil-god challenge, and I provided a survey of the most prominent critiques. During this process, I offered rebuttals to each objection and categorised the objections themselves to determine the *type* of premise(s) on which they were founded. In Chapter 4, I claimed that understanding the different types of *objection* to the Evil-god challenge is vital. I distinguished between three types of objection: asymmetry objections, well-being objections, and impossibility objections. I further distinguished between impossibility objections of Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I analysed asymmetry objections and came to the conclusion that some can be effectively countered to preserve the symmetry thesis. Some of the objections, however, demonstrate that perceived asymmetry between the EGH and the GGH boils down to different metaphysical intuitions. So, although some asymmetry objections fail to demonstrate the significant asymmetry they set out to, others serve to highlight specific intuitions that are incompatible with the EGH. In Chapter 8, I contended that well-being objections are only problematic for weak Evil-god challenges. Well-being objections rely on pragmatist theories like pragmatic encroachment and, as such, have no

bearing on the relative alethic statuses of the GGH and the EGH. In Chapter 9, I concluded that impossibility objections of Type-A fail, impossibility objections of Type-B—similarly to asymmetry objections—are reliant on metaphysical intuitions, and impossibility objections of Type-C are based on evidence from the world. I contended that evidence from the world provides just as much evidence for the EGH as it does for the GGH.

In Part III, I paralleled several prominent philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god: the argument from design, the argument from religious experience, the ontological argument, and the moral argument. As with my analysis of the objections to the Evil-god challenge in Part II, I identified the underlying premises on which these arguments rest and paralleled them too. Chapter 10 introduced my approach to mirroring traditional arguments for the existence of Good-god with Evil-god parallel arguments. I also used the example of the cosmological argument to demonstrate the retaining of symmetry between target and parallel arguments. Chapters 11 and 12 surveyed two traditional arguments for the existence of Good-god that are based on a posteriori evidence (specifically religious experience and evidence of design) and concluded that similarly reasonable parallels can be created to evidence the existence of Evil-god. In the case of religious experience, I suggested that evidence of apparent religious experiences provides *more* support for the EGH than the GGH. In Chapter 13, I showed that the ontological argument can be paralleled by creating similarly plausible intuition-based belief-bricks, specifically the Principle of the Inferiority of Existence and David Benatar's axiological asymmetry. In Chapter 14, I showed that *practical* moral arguments are essentially badly-disguised well-being arguments, and therefore are

only problematic for the weak Evil-god challenge. Furthermore, *theoretical* moral arguments can be reduced to metaphysical intuitions. In Chapter 15, I demonstrated that the maximal Good-god challenge offers potential for both the Evil-god hypothesiser and the Good-hypothesiser to evade all these objections in one move by removing the restriction of the omni qualities. I argued that the Good-god hypothesiser cannot gain ground by appealing to the maximal Good-god thesis because it cannot help them without also helping the Evil-god hypothesiser. I proposed that either (i) it can be paralleled to create the maximal Evil-god thesis or (ii) it collapses the Good-god hypothesis into the Evil-god hypothesis in such a way that the two theses are indistinguishable. In Chapter 16, I considered the relationship between faith, intuition, and rationality. I proposed that Good-god hypothesisers relying on faith must not also rely on philosophical arguments and that those relying solely on metaphysical intuitions must recognise that this might weaken their belief system accordingly.

From my research in all three parts of this thesis, I discovered significant discord regarding to what extent the target argument for the GGH can be revised to postulate the EGH while still being effective. I argued that it is permissible to “flip” essential premises with the caveats that (i) these essential premises are metaphysical intuitions that cannot be proven by the Good-god hypothesiser, and (ii) that the flipped parallel premise has similar evidential power to the original premise. I did recognise, however, that by flipping the intuition-based premises, the Evil-god challenger is unlikely to persuade the Good-god hypothesiser to accept their parallel; metaphysical intuitions are often firmly entrenched, especially when they ground a deep-seated religious belief. Finally, I proposed that—even in situations of “intuition

stalemate”—the Evil-god challenge still serves the important purpose of helping Good-god hypothesisers identity the specific metaphysical intuitions on which their faith rests.

## 17.3 Conclusion

Many Good-god theists build their case for the existence of Good-god cumulatively. This means that they do not rely on just *one* argument to prove (or attempt to prove) their case for the Good-god hypothesis. To return to the analogy I proposed in Chapter 3, we can imagine any belief system as a wall constructed from many bricks, with the wall representing the belief system and every row of bricks representing a philosophical argument. These rows are themselves comprised of smaller parts, individual bricks. These belief-bricks can be based on axioms, sensory evidence, or intuition. A well-justified belief could, arguably, be comprised of just one brick that is so strong it cannot be broken down (for example a self-evident axiom). Alternatively, it is possible that a well-justified belief is comprised of many bricks that are slightly less stable[69]. To utterly undermine a belief system, critics will need to shake the foundations of the wall by showing all of its components to be unstable.

As an example, many classical monotheists accept that the teleological argument cannot provide proof of the moral nature of the designer of the world, and those who endorse it tend to offer the caveat that the argument can only be successful when combined with other arguments for the existence of Good-god. With

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[69] How justified the belief system is depends on the necessary and sufficient conditions for justified beliefs, which itself is a contentious topic.

respect to evidence of design, the Evil-god and Good-god hypotheses seemingly result in a draw, but if classical monotheists can reasonably appeal to other independent evidence or philosophical arguments to tip the balance toward the GGH, then the Evil-god challenge is weakened. The phenomena of (perceived) religious experience and miracles, for example, could potentially add weight to the Good-god hypothesis.

In light of the methodological claims in Chapter 3, I have argued that the tactical flipping of premises is a strategy that is both necessary and justified, as long as the flipped premises remain as similarly reasonable as their original counterparts. Whether or not the flipped premises are similarly reasonable, however, relies on metaphysical intuitions in most cases, so it is clear that one who disagrees with the flipped premises being similarly reasonable will not find the Evil-god hypothesis *compelling*. In their opinion, the parallel argument is ineffective since their intuition trumps the newly flipped one. So it seems that an impasse is inevitable. I have argued that most, if not all, philosophical arguments for the existence of Good-god can either (i) be effectively paralleled—and therefore undermined—by the Evil-god challenge or (ii) be demonstrated to rest on one or more intuition-based beliefs. Consequently, belief in Good-god can be reduced to metaphysical intuition, not rational argument. Each argument for the existence of Good-god is reliant on the next row of belief-bricks, which itself might be founded on other belief-bricks. One thing is certain, and it is that those who build a cumulative belief-wall must examine the structural integrity of their wall and take it seriously when Evil-god challengers encourage them to do so.

I tested the stability of several rows (arguments) in the Good-god hypothesiser's belief-wall. If these rows can be used in a similar fashion to help construct the wall of belief in Evil-god, then it seems that the Good-god hypothesiser's wall is now a cumulative case for a belief in an entity that is starkly different from the entity originally postulated. As shown in the figure below, several of my parallel attempts relied on flipping the original premises of the target argument. The asterisks represent contention regarding the symmetry of the reasonableness between the target premise and the parallel premise—because each premise relies on opposing intuitions.

| | Logical Structure | Domain | Retains TA Premises | New Premises Similarly Reasonable? | Retains Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Good as Privation Account | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓* | × |
| Parallel Cosmological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | ✓ |
| Parallel Teleological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | ✓ |
| Parallel Argument from Religious Experience | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n/a | × |
| Parallel Theoretical Moral Argument | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓* | × |
| Parallel Ontological Argument | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓* | × |
| Maximal Evil-god Thesis | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓* | × |

Figure 10 An Analysis of the Evil-god Parallel Arguments

## 17.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the findings laid out in the previous section, I now suggest the potential directions in which the Evil-god challenge can move to continue fruitful exploration of this radical approach in the philosophy of religion.

So what's next for the Evil-god challenge? Do we survey everyone in the world to determine which intuitions are held by the majority of people? Do those in the philosophical community continue to write papers specifying whether or not every specific metaphysical intuition is compatible with the Evil-god hypothesis? This is perhaps quixotic. What would be more profitable is to do more work in the realms of metaphilosophy, epistemology, and psychology to discuss the efficacy of parallel arguments and to determine what we ought to do when we reach this inevitable impasse between opposing intuitions. On the basis of the foregoing, it seems that further research on the following issues would be especially beneficial.

First, neglecting to recognise the link between intuition and belief would be a mistake. In order to tackle the question of whether an entire belief system is well-founded, we first need to grapple with the intuitions on which they are based. I suggest that we need to study the *psychology* behind our intuitions in order to analyse the potential link between our psyche and our intuitions.

Second, further work should be done to analyse the force of parallel arguments in the philosophy of religion. There seems to be a need to construct a complete framework for rigorous analysis of parallel arguments, which is currently lacking.

Third, the epistemology of religious belief should be included in discussion of the Evil-god challenge, particularly with regard to peer disagreement *within* and *between* (ir)religious belief systems. By doing this, we may come closer to determining what should be done when people have conflicting metaphysical intuitions. Exploring the Evil-god challenge in depth has highlighted what an epistemological puzzle religious beliefs are.

The Evil-god challenge is a fruitful and worthwhile area of study in the philosophy of religion. There are several important areas of development for the Evil-god challenge, and I hope to have demonstrated that deconstructing and examining it in light of the methodology of parallel arguments in general is a promising way to keep the conversation going productively.

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