

# Is there a problem of Evil?

This essay contends that there is no 'problem of Evil' for two reasons. First, moral "Evil"<sup>1</sup> is the necessary privation of good allowed by God to facilitate the authentic exercise of free will, and thus a mechanism for spiritual growth towards *theosis*. Second, I dispute the existence of 'natural Evil', as nature is un-volitional, therefore indescribable in moral terms.

The problem of Evil has long been cited to refute God's existence; firstly, by Epicurus<sup>2</sup>, who was followed by Hume<sup>3</sup>, Mackie<sup>4</sup> and Dawkins<sup>5</sup>, and understandably so. "Evil" initially appears incompatible with the traditional Judeo-Christian God, who is characterised as omnibenevolent and omnipotent. However, when theodicy's parameters are redefined, and the very notion of "Evil" reconsidered, I believe the "problem" of Evil can not only coexist with God, but serve an integral role in the divine plan for humanity's moral development.

I adopt Mackie's definition of the problem as an apparent 'contradiction'<sup>6</sup> between Evil and God's endorsed qualities. I have adopted Mackie's framework because, as a principal critic of theodicy, his formulation represents a rigorous articulation of the problem; if it can be successfully undermined, the credibility of my position is thereby reinforced. It is worth highlighting the attributes of the Christian God: namely that God is the optimal realisation of omnipotence, omnibenevolence and omniscience.

Since the Christian God is believed to be infinitely good and beyond human understanding, theologians can never fully comprehend him, despite the 'truth'<sup>7</sup> (John 14 :6) revealed to humanity through Jesus. However, we can deduce that the creation of anything with the specific purpose of causing harm is incompatible with the notion of God's nature as the ultimate source of goodness<sup>8</sup>, as such an action would directly contradict his omnibenevolent essence. The concept of "the greatest good"<sup>9</sup> creating a damaging substance is unconvincing. Therefore, no apparent "Evil" in the world exists for the purpose of harm alone; rather, it facilitates a divinely ordained purpose; namely, fostering humanity's moral and spiritual development, as will be further expanded upon.

Moreover, we can extrapolate that God did not create "Evil" as a substance, but rather allowed individuals not to fulfil their full potential of goodness, so that humanity might

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<sup>1</sup> Frequently throughout the essay, I use scare quotes surrounding the term "evil", purely because, whilst I will sometimes use the term, my position is that Evil is merely a privation of Good, and therefore the term Evil, if interpreted literally rather as a privation, could undermine the validity of my essay if I use it to form arguments.

<sup>2</sup> Epicurean Paradox – formulation that was developed by Lactantius' *De Ira Deorum* and Hume. Whilst no direct citation of the paradox directly comes from Epicurus, the logic behind the Epicurean paradox is widely accepted to have originated from Epicurus, although critics have argued that it more likely was conceived by Carneades.

<sup>3</sup> Hume, David. 1993. *Principal Writings on Religion Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Natural History of Religion*. Oxford University Press, USA.

<sup>4</sup> Mackie, J. L. 1955. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* 64 (254): 200–212. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2251467?seq=1>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Problem of Evil." 2003. Discovery Institute. December 9, 2003. <https://www.discovery.org/a/1673/>.

<sup>6</sup> Speaks, Jeff. 2006. "Mackie on the Problem of Evil." *Www3.Nd.edu*. February 23, 2006. <https://www3.nd.edu/~jspeaks/courses/mcgill/201/mackie-evil.html>.

<sup>7</sup> John 14:6 NIV

<sup>8</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. 1760. *Essais de Theodicée Sur La Bonté de Dieu, La Liberté de l'Homme, & l'Origine Du Mal*.

<sup>9</sup> Links to ideas presented in Romans 8:28 NIV

develop morally through free will. While defining Evil as the absence of good avoids attributing its creation to God, critics may argue this does little to comfort victims of suffering<sup>10</sup>. However, such framing is not meant to dismiss the experience of pain but to explain its purposive origin.

Naturally, in a perfect universe, humanity would be passively immersed in an environment where goodness and choosing the “moral” action would be automatic, as the option to deviate from the delineated path would not exist. Although this scenario would leave no margin for human error, morality would not be based on free will but on necessity. Thus, this privation of good is fundamental for humanity to exercise genuine values such as courage and charity; if goodness were unavoidable, human actions would be the result of a predetermined state of being, rather than of genuine moral deliberation. Ultimately, this limitation serves as a significant test for humanity; by experiencing and overcoming the imperfections that arise from a privation of good, we choose to grow in virtue and move towards our ultimate *telos* – *theosis* with God. Therefore, I argue that “Evil” is not an objective force, but rather a metaphor for the necessary privation of goodness, which enables humans to exercise autonomy in attaining moral and spiritual development.

Furthermore, true moral goodness only arises when actions are freely chosen by the volition of individuals, as divine compulsion would remove the cooperative effort between humanity and divine grace. Saint Augustine stated that ‘I say it is not sin, if it be not committed by one’s own will; hence also there is reward, because of our own will we do right’<sup>11</sup>. Critically, Augustinian theology underscores the notion that, while God is the supreme good<sup>12</sup>, we must cultivate our own moral character. He argued that God bestowed humanity with an intrinsic orientation towards goodness (before the fall), but also conferred free will, thereby necessitating an autonomous moral agent, capable of self-determining actions. Therefore by extension, morality must be exercised through our own choice to be a truly moral action; the moral worth of an action is not determined by its outcome, but the volitional autonomy and intention underlying it. An analogy to demonstrate this is that an individual who donates money to charity under duress, such as a fear of public humiliation, acts without genuine moral agency. Another individual, who gives a similar amount autonomously (without expectation of reward), exemplifies the authentic moral action that Jesus and the Gospels emphasise: ‘love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back’<sup>13</sup> (Luke 6:35).

In this sense, the morality of an action stems from the agent’s freedom to choose it, rather than from its material consequence. True moral goodness can only arise when an action is willed rather than necessitated. I believe that this volitional autonomy is fundamental because true virtue must be chosen rather than divinely necessitated. We can only be judged for our actions if we can be held responsible for their moral value

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<sup>10</sup> Ekstrom, Laura W. 2024. “Theodicies (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).” Stanford.edu. 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/theodicies/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Logos Virtual Library: Saint Augustine: Disputation against Fortunatus, 21.” 2025. Logoslibrary.org. 2025. <https://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/fortunatus/21.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Saint, Augustine, Roy Joseph Deferrari, John J Gavigan, Thomas P Halton, and Ludwig Schopp. 1985. *Christian Instruction. Admonition and Grace. The Christian Combat. Faith, Hope and Charity*.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 6:35 NIV

‘each person was judged according to what he had done<sup>14</sup>’ (Revelation 20:13). Unfortunately, the very capacity for autonomous moral deliberation creates the potential for moral privation, which occurs when moral agents deviate from their capacity for goodness. However, it is crucial to highlight that while moral failure is an inevitable product of the *liberum arbitrium*<sup>15</sup> conferred to humanity by God, any movement that occurs towards the good is a synergistic cooperation between human agency and God’s grace, not just an act of divine causality.

Nevertheless, despite his recognition of the importance of free will, Augustine fails to reconcile the apparent fallacy between divine benevolence and his endorsed existence of moral fallibility. Logically, as omnipotent and omnibenevolent, God desires the realisation of “the good”. So, why then does he permit a situation in which moral agents can deviate from their ultimate *telos* of union with Him? This question is partially addressed by the *Felix Culpa*<sup>16</sup> paradigm, which is the notion that the fall had positive outcomes, especially the redemption of mankind. However, whilst Augustine strongly supported the concept of *Felix Culpa*, he still fails to adequately address why God would wish the continuation of *Privatio Boni*<sup>17</sup>, or why he would allow humans to fail in their attempts to achieve union with him. Augustine’s theodicy cannot convincingly explain why God would deem it necessary to sacrifice his son within a situation that could have been constructed to preclude such suffering.

However, this moral struggle and the privation of good serve a greater eschatological purpose by allowing for *theosis* through personal growth and the redemptive journey towards God. Free judgement is integral to genuine moral actions, because a permanent and divinely predetermined innate goodness would preclude humanity from authentic virtue. Therefore moral conflict and privation are not defects but rather the necessary conditions through which humanity actualises its highest potential, allowing for movement towards ‘divine beatitude<sup>18</sup>’. This acts as the final piece of the Augustinian theodicy jigsaw.

Whilst Augustine argues that moral privation is caused by free will and the negative consequences of the fall, some argue that the Fall is incompatible with an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God. God’s introduction of the Fall seems incompatible with divine benevolence, as a loving God would not permit such harm for the sake of future redemption. My viewpoint concerning human nature and the purpose of moral Evil aligns more with an Irenaean/Hickian idea of a vale of soul making<sup>19</sup>, in which God has allowed moral privation to occur due to its ‘soul making<sup>20</sup>’ consequences. This holds merit, because it aligns more closely with God’s

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<sup>14</sup> Revelation 20:13 NIV

<sup>15</sup> Bishop, Augustine. 1947. *De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis*.

<sup>16</sup> Merriam Webster translation to ‘Happy fault’ – used especially, although not exclusively, concerning original sin, which is redeemed by the coming of Christ: “Merriam-Webster Dictionary.” 2025. Merriam-Webster.com. 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/felix%20culpa>.

<sup>17</sup> 2025. Georgetown.edu. 2025. <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/latinconf/3.html> - caput 7

<sup>18</sup> “Authors/Thomas Aquinas/Summa Theologiae/Part I/Q26 - the Logic Museum.” 2025. Logicismuseum.com. 2025. [https://www.logicismuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Thomas\\_Aquinas/Summa\\_Theologiae/Part\\_I/Q26](https://www.logicismuseum.com/wiki/Authors/Thomas_Aquinas/Summa_Theologiae/Part_I/Q26).

<sup>19</sup> Idea explored in: Hick, John. (1966) 2010. *Evil and the God of Love*. Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>20</sup> Livingstone, Joe. 2022. “The Problem of Evil.” A Level Philosophy & Religious Studies. February 8, 2022. <https://alevelphilosophyandreligion.com/the-problem-of-evil/>.

omniscience. Therefore, we must assume that God allows moral privation with the knowledge that it is a necessity rather than a byproduct of mistakes as Augustine argues. I emphasise the Augustinian idea that imperfection is rooted in privation, rather than the introduction of “Evil” that Hick and Irenaeus argue God introduced to foster spiritual development.

Natural “Evil” presents a more difficult issue to resolve and many current theodicies appear unconvincing - either relying on abstract theories such as Backward Causation, or having fictitious elements, such as Archon abandonment in some Subsumption theodicy interpretations<sup>21</sup>. Mackie, Rowe and Draper have presented strong criticisms of theodicies that attempt to justify this natural “Evil”, such as the evidential<sup>22</sup> and gratuitous<sup>23</sup> problems that fail to be adequately addressed.

However, although difficult to reconcile with God’s endorsed characteristics, issues that arise with Natural “Evil” are not actually problems of “Evil” but rather problems of “existence”. Nature is neither evil nor good. Nature simply is. Nature has no moral faculties, and good or “Evil” are moral terms. Whilst natural disasters evidently lack volition and thus cannot be assessed in moral terms, some observers are tempted to interpret certain animal behaviours through a moral lens. For instance, the act of a tiger killing a human might be construed as retribution or vengeance. However, such interpretations stem from anthropomorphic projection rather than factual behavioural science. As zoologist Vladimir Dinets notes<sup>24</sup>, even when animals appear to retaliate, such as when a wounded predator ambushes its attacker<sup>25</sup>, these behaviours are not the product of malice or deliberate moral calculation<sup>26</sup>, but rather instinctual responses to threat, stress or injury<sup>27</sup>. These actions, though superficially resembling moral agency, are devoid of the reflective deliberation and volitional autonomy necessary to qualify as truly moral. Therefore, while such behaviours may evoke the semblance of moral intention, they are rather expressions of reactive biological impulses, grounded in evolutionary necessity, not moral deliberation. Accordingly, to attribute “evil” to such actions is a category error; it is to mistakenly ascribe moral valence to that which is inherently amoral. Nature, in this sense, remains morally neutral – neither good nor evil - but simply existent.

Humanity’s ability to exercise moral judgement is a characteristic that separates us from other observable beings. According to Francisco Ayala<sup>28</sup> humans ‘have a moral sense because our biological makeup determines the presence of three necessary conditions for ethical behaviour’ - the ability to anticipate consequences, the ability to

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<sup>21</sup> The Omission theodicy (Winning essay of the Sanders Prize in Philosophy of Religion 2025 cycle) – Brian Cutter and Philip Swenson. Archon abandonment idea (relating to omission theodicy specifically) and the abstract nature of backward causation all sourced from this essay.

<sup>22</sup> Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 1996. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*.

<sup>23</sup> Rowe, See. n.d. “William Rowe on the Evidential Problem of Evil.”

[https://www.gla.ac.uk/0t4/humanities/files/mindmapping/Evil\\_files/docs/Rowe.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.gla.ac.uk/0t4/humanities/files/mindmapping/Evil_files/docs/Rowe.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>24</sup> Kolitz, Daniel. 2024. “Do Animals practise revenge?” Gizmodo. <https://gizmodo.com/do-animals-take-revenge-1843750410/>

<sup>25</sup> Analogy inspired by - Vaillant, John. 2010. *The Tiger : A True Story of Vengeance and Survival*. New York: Knopf Canada.

<sup>26</sup> O’Leary, Denyse. 2024. “Do Animals Really ‘Take Revenge’?” Evolution News and Science Today. Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture. October 20, 2024. <https://evolutionnews.org/2024/10/do-animals-really-take-revenge/>.

<sup>27</sup> Malini Suchak’s contribution in the article: O’Leary, Denyse. 2024. “Do Animals Really ‘Take Revenge’?” Evolution News and Science Today. Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture. October 20, 2024. <http://evolutionnews.org/2024/10/do-animals-really-take-revenge/>.

<sup>28</sup> Avise, John C, and Francisco J Ayala. 2010. “The Difference of Being Human: Morality.” Nih.gov. National Academies Press (US). 2010. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK210003/>.

choose alternative courses of action and the ability to reach situational judgements. Our moral judgment is rooted in unique human cognitive functions and therefore the moral terms “Evil” and “good” can only apply to a being who can act with knowledge of morality - namely humans. Whilst natural “existence” presents a counter to the existence of good, the problem is not one of Evil, and therefore no problem of natural “Evil” is presented.

Ultimately, the “problem of Evil” (rather the privation of good) stems not from biological composition but from the conferring of ineluctable freedom. While inescapable societal scars of this privation create compelling arguments against God’s existence, I believe its challenge dissolves when we reconsider Evil’s nature. Firstly, moral Evil is a necessary condition for spiritual growth and authentic moral agency and its ability to exist is essential for true moral deliberation and accordingly true morality to occur.

Whilst not wholly justifiable through my moral theodicy, distressing natural events fall outside the scope of moral evaluation, and given the morally-charged nature of the terms ‘good’ and ‘Evil’, morally neutral natural “Evil” is not a problem of Evil but rather a problem of “existence”. Rather than disproving the existence of God, the problem of “Evil” reflects the conditions necessary for human moral responsibility, freedom and ultimately *theosis*. Finally, nature cannot be ‘profoundly immoral and wicked’, because nature contains no moral faculties. Thus, there is not a “problem of Evil” that can disprove God’s existence - rather, moral Evil can be justified, and natural “Evil”, due to its lack of morality, is not a problem of Evil but rather a problem of existence, making it invalid in the context of the question.