

Edward Feser

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2010

Law's "evil-god challenge"



A couple of months ago, [in the combobox to a post on another subject](#), reader Eric asked for my opinion of philosopher Stephen Law's article "[The evil-god challenge](#)." I had not then read the article and did not have time to do so at that moment, but I commented briefly on the summary of Law's views that Eric provided. To my surprise, Law posted a response to my (somewhat dashed off) comments in

the same combobox a couple of weeks later. I did not bother to reply, because Law's remarks seemed themselves obviously dashed off and unserious - he misspelled my name four times and in two different ways, seemed uninterested in trying to understand or engage in any depth the views he was criticizing, and was apparently just blowing off steam. (I can understand if he was a bit testy, since my own comments in response to Eric were themselves a bit testy, though my testiness was directed not at Law specifically but more generally at atheists who do not understand the difference between classical theism and theistic personalism.) I have since learned that Law had also cited my remarks [over at his own blog](#), and directed his readers to his response. So, evidently he does regard that response as a serious one, to which I should be expected to reply. So, here's a reply - not only to his combobox remarks, but also to his article, which I've now had a chance to read.

First, let me summarize Law's position. Law claims in his article that "even if most of the popular arguments for the existence of God do provide grounds for supposing that there is some sort of supernatural intelligence behind the universe, they fail to provide much clue as to its moral character." In particular, Law says, even if a design argument could show that such an intelligence exists, it could no more show that the intelligence in question is supremely benevolent than that it is supremely malevolent. In fact, he suggests, the overall evidence such arguments appeal to should lead us *away* from belief in a supremely benevolent supernatural intelligence. Law allows that what is often labeled the "logical problem" of evil - which supposes that the existence of evil is *strictly incompatible* with the existence of a good

About Me



Edward Feser

I am a writer and philosopher living in Los Angeles. I teach philosophy at Pasadena City College. My primary academic research interests are in the philosophy of mind, moral and political philosophy, and philosophy of religion. I also write on politics, from a conservative point of view; and on religion, from a traditional Roman Catholic perspective.

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God – may not pose a serious challenge to theism. But he thinks the “evidential problem” of evil – which assumes only that the existence of evil is *strong evidence against* the existence of a good God – does pose a serious challenge, at least given that there are no strong arguments *for* the existence of such a God. And the standard theodicies – such as appeals to free will, to soul-making, or to the way in which certain goods presuppose evils – succeed in explaining at most only some of the evil that exists, not all of it, so that the overall evidential situation still fails to point in the direction of a *supremely* benevolent God.

So far all of that is just standard atheist argumentation, and Law's overall position takes it for granted. In particular, Law presupposes that there are no strong arguments for God's existence, that even if there were they wouldn't lead us to a supremely good God, and that the evidence we do have points away from the existence of such a God. Law's innovation is to suggest, first, that the hypothesis of an “evil god” – an omnipotent, omniscient, but supremely malevolent intelligence – is at least as well supported as the hypothesis of a supremely good God. And if a skeptic were to pose against such a hypothesis the challenge of an evidential “problem of good” – that is, if a skeptic were to ask why a supremely malevolent intelligence would allow the good that exists in the world – the defender of an “evil god” hypothesis could offer “reverse theodicies” which parallel the theodicies put forward by theists. He could say, for example, that free will makes possible certain evils that an evil god couldn't realize without it; that certain evils presuppose the existence of good; that the evil god intends the world to be a vale of soul-destruction, which requires that there be some good in it so that we can be tormented by its loss; and so forth.

Now, Law is happy to acknowledge that such defenses of the evil god hypothesis would not be very strong. But he thinks they are no *weaker* than the parallel attempts to defend the existence of a good God. There is, he says, a conceptual and evidential “symmetry” between the two views. But everyone, including theists, acknowledges that there is no good reason to believe in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely malevolent intelligence. So, shouldn't they also acknowledge that there is no good reason to believe in a supremely good God? Isn't the one view as unreasonable as the other? That is Law's “evil-god challenge.”

So, what should we think of all this? Well, having now read Law's paper, I must say that I find that my original comments, based on Eric's summary alone, were exactly on the mark. Law's argument may be an interesting challenge to a theistic personalist conception of God – I'll leave it to theistic personalists themselves to figure out how they might respond to it – but it is completely irrelevant to classical theism. And that is no small lacuna. It means that Law's argument is completely irrelevant to evaluating the truth of theism as it is understood by writers like Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Anselm, Maimonides, Avicenna, and Aquinas (to name just a few), and as it has been defined within Roman Catholic theology and traditional Christian theology more generally.

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The reasons why should be evident from [my recent post](#) on the differences between classical theism and theistic personalism (which readers who are unfamiliar with those differences might want to read before continuing on). Consider, first, that central to classical philosophy and to the classical theist tradition that it informed is the thesis that evil is a privation, the absence of a good that would otherwise obtain rather than a positive reality in its own right. Accordingly, for classical theism, there simply is no symmetry between good and evil of the sort that Law's argument requires. Astonishingly, though, Law's article does not even consider, much less respond to, this core element of the classical theist position, despite the fact that he evidently regards his argument as a challenge to all forms of theism, and not just to non-classical forms. To borrow an analogy from [another recent post](#), this is like evaluating *The Godfather Trilogy* without mentioning that the lead characters are Mafiosi, and focusing instead only on one of the romantic subplots in *The Godfather Part III*.

But Law did have something to say about the subject in [his combox remarks](#). Here are those remarks, quoted in full:

Fesser's [sic] "refutation" of my evil god argument is awful:

*(i) it depends on the privation view of evil, which is wrong. (Why not flip this and say good is a privation of evil?!) Actually, *some* evils, like blindness, are best seen as privations of goods. But many appear not merely to be merely privations. And in fact in some cases it is more natural to see the good as a privation of evil (look up "peace" in the dictionary). That evil is in every case nothing more than a privation of some good is a myth that even many theists reject (philosopher Tim Mawson, for example). Fester [sic] is one of those theists who, when asked to justify the privation view, waffle and refer us to Aquinas, Aristotle, etc. Ask him him [sic] to explain, clearly, *exactly* what the argument is.*

*(ii) in any case, the privation view is not obviously incompatible with the existence of an evil God (we are at least owed some explanation for why it is - this is particularly clear if we see good as an abstract Platonic Form, say. (Fesser [sic] at this point just seems to *define* God as good - well, that doesn't establish the impossibility of an evil God!))*

*(iii) even if the privation view were incompatible with an evil God, and it could thus be shown that an evil God was impossible, the evil God challenge can *still* be successfully run, as I point out in the paper. Perhaps Fesser [sic] should read it.*

Let me respond to these points in order. Regarding (i), I cannot resist noting first of all that it is rather silly of Law to complain that I "waffle and refer us to Aquinas, Aristotle, etc." rather than "explain[ing], clearly, *exactly* what the argument is," when what he is replying to is something I said in a brief combox response to a reader's off-topic

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question, not a formal argument presented in a book, a paper, or even a blog post. This sort of thing is depressingly common on the Internet: "You didn't prove the truth of [Thomistic metaphysics, Darwinian evolution, quantum mechanics, etc.] to my satisfaction in your latest combox remark; therefore you're an idiot!" One would hope a professional philosopher like Law would be above it (and perhaps he is - as I have acknowledged, he was probably just blowing off steam, which we all do from time to time). Suffice it to say that I have in fact addressed these issues at length elsewhere, such as in my book *Aquinas*. To paraphrase someone, perhaps Law should read it.

Second, since Law is the one claiming that his "evil-god challenge" is a threat to theism generally, including classical theism, the burden of proof is on him to show that the "evil as privation" view is false, not on the classical theist to show that it is true. It would be perverse for a critic of *The Godfather Trilogy* of the sort alluded to above to insist that those who disagree with him have the burden of showing that the organized crime theme really is, contrary to his analysis, a significant part of the story. It is similarly perverse for Law to insinuate - and in a dashed off combox afterthought at that, rather than in his original article! - that classical theists are the ones who need to show that the privation analysis that is central to their position is something he needs to trouble himself with.

Third, that means that Law has a lot of homework to do before he can pretend to have shown that his "evil-god challenge" really threatens theism generally, because it is evident from his remarks that he doesn't understand the privation view, much less the classical theist tradition of which it is a part. To understand that view, one must first understand classical essentialism, whether of the Platonic or Aristotelian variety. That is a big topic - again, see *Aquinas* for the details - but it is clear enough how a privation view follows from the thesis that things have essences. For example, if it is of the essence of the visual apparatus - eyes, optic nerves, relevant areas of the brain, and so forth - that it serves the function of enabling an organism to see, then obviously blindness is a defect and it would be silly to suggest that perhaps it is sight that is the defect insofar as it involves the absence of blindness. Law himself acknowledges that the privation view is the most plausible way to understand blindness. He nevertheless insists that such an analysis wouldn't work in all cases, yet he doesn't offer any examples, and if some form of classical essentialism is true, the privation analysis *would* apply across the board.

The only purported counterexample to the privation view Law does suggest is, not a case of an evil which is not a privation, but rather an example of a good - peace - which, appealing to the dictionary, he evidently would define (quite plausibly) as the absence of war. Now, the privation view is certainly not the sort of thing one could refute by appealing to dictionaries, because it is not a theory about how we use *words* like "good" and "evil," but rather a theory about the metaphysical status of good and evil themselves. But that is beside the point in the present case, because the privation view doesn't entail that

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there are *no* goods that can be defined in terms of the absence of evil. It holds only that *not all* goods are so definable, while *all evils* must ultimately be understood in terms of the absence of some good. That is to say, the bottom level of the analysis of good and evil will include only goods, even if there will also be some goods appearing at higher levels of the analysis. In the case of war, the analysis will involve an appeal to the idea that moral goods are to be understood in terms of the ends set for us by nature. Since among those ends is giving to others what is due to them, war can be analyzed as a certain kind of failure to give others their due, namely by using force to take from them what they have a right to (their lives, property, security of their borders, etc.). Even if peace is the absence of war, then, war itself is the absence of a certain kind of good, a good which cannot in turn be analyzed in terms of the absence of some evil.

Regarding Law's point (ii), for Law to claim that I "just seem to *define* God as good" - as if what is in question here is some eccentric ad hoc stipulation on my part - and to assert that "the privation view is not obviously incompatible with the existence of an evil God," is just to manifest his unfamiliarity with, or at least to ignore, the central arguments of the classical theistic tradition and the metaphysical ideas underlying it. For when one takes account of those ideas - the act/potency, essence/existence, and simple/composite distinctions; the doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendentals; the principle of proportionate causality; the doctrine of privation; and so on - there is no mystery at all as to why the classical theist regards a demonstration of God's existence as ipso facto a demonstration of that which is necessarily devoid of evil. *Given the underlying metaphysics*, to assert that God cannot possibly be evil is no more a matter of arbitrary stipulation than saying that the Pythagorean Theorem must hold of right triangles is a matter of arbitrary stipulation.

Consider that the classical (Platonic, Aristotelian, and Thomistic) arguments for God's existence are arguments to the effect that the existence of compounds of act and potency necessarily presupposes the existence of that which is Pure Actuality; that the existence of compounds of essence and existence necessarily presupposes the existence of that which is Being Itself; that the existence of that which is in any way metaphysically composite presupposes that which is absolutely simple; and so forth. Given the doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendentals, on which being is convertible with goodness, that which is Pure Actuality or Being Itself must ipso facto be Goodness Itself. Given the conception of evil as a privation - that is, as a failure to realize some potentiality - that which is Pure Actuality and therefore in no way potential cannot intelligibly be said to be in any way evil. Given the principle of proportionate causality, whatever good is in the world in a limited way must be in its cause in an eminent way, shorn of any of the imperfections that follow upon being a composite of act and potency. Since God is Pure Actuality, he cannot intelligibly be said either to have or to lack moral virtues or vices of the sort we exhibit when we succeed or fail to realize our various potentials. And so on. All of this is claimed to be a matter of metaphysical demonstration rather

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than probabilistic empirical theorizing, and the underlying metaphysical ideas form a complex interlocking network that is (as anyone familiar with Platonism or Aristotelianism realizes) motivated independently of the problem of evil or the question of God's existence. That is to say, the concepts are not introduced in an ad hoc way so as to get around objections of the sort Law raises. They are already there in the underlying metaphysics, and rule out from the get-go objections of the sort Law raises, at least insofar as they are directed at classical theism.

Law's point (iii) – which he develops on p. 20 of his paper – is equally misdirected, because it too simply assumes that good and evil are on a metaphysical par. Law suggests (if I understand him correctly) that any reasons a theist could have for denying that an "evil god" is in principle possible could be mirrored by reasons suggesting that a good God is in principle impossible. But that just begs the question against the classical theist, who holds that evil is metaphysically parasitic on good, and thus (given the convertibility of the transcendentals) on being, in such a way that whatever is Being Itself would have to be Goodness Itself and therefore in no way evil. Hence, since God is Being Itself, the claim "If God exists, then He is good" is metaphysically necessary, while the claim "If God exists, He might be evil" is necessarily false. In any event, since Law is the one raising the "evil-god challenge," the burden is on *him* to show that the idea of an "evil God" is even intelligible given the metaphysical presuppositions that classical theism rests on, and not on the classical theist to show that it is not intelligible.

Now, I am not here attempting to convince the uninitiated or hostile reader that this complex metaphysical picture I have been describing is correct or even plausible. That would take at least a book, and since [*Aquinas*](#) is just such a book, I direct the interested reader to that. I am also not saying that no reasonable person who familiarizes himself with it could disagree with that picture. I am merely saying that before one disagrees with it, one ought at least to try to understand it. And the things Law says seem to me to show that he does *not* understand it. An atheist could intelligibly say "I don't believe that the God of classical theism exists." He could intelligibly reject the whole metaphysical picture – the privation view, the convertibility of the transcendentals, God as Pure Actuality, the whole ball of wax. What he *cannot* intelligibly say is "The God of classical theism might in principle have been evil." Again, the metaphysical system underlying classical theism simply rules out the very idea of an "evil God" on entirely principled and independently motivated grounds – not as a matter of mere ad hoc stipulation – and thus rules out Law's "evil-god challenge" on entirely principled grounds. Hence, if you want to reject classical theism and not just theistic personalism, you had better look for grounds other than Law's "evil-god challenge." To insist on pressing that challenge against it is just to demonstrate one's fundamental misunderstanding of the position one is criticizing, like the creationist who rejects Darwinism on the grounds that he just can't see how a monkey could have given birth to a human infant.

The reason *theistic personalism* doesn't rule Law's challenge out from the get-go is that theistic personalism typically rests on a very different sort of metaphysics, and conceives of God in far more anthropomorphic terms. In particular, the theistic personalist tends not to think of God as Pure Actuality, Being Itself, Goodness Itself, or the like, but rather as "a person without a body," like us but without our limitations, who might intelligibly be said to be morally virtuous and to have duties he lives up to. (Again, see the earlier post of mine linked to above.)

Theistic personalism is also often associated with a conception of God's relationship to the world on which it is at least in principle possible that the world might have existed apart from God, so that the question of whether God is the cause of the world becomes an "evidential" or "probabilistic" matter, rather than a matter of strict metaphysical demonstrations of the sort classical theists typically attempt to provide. Hence it becomes a real question for the theistic personalist whether the balance of probabilities really supports belief in a supremely powerful disembodied person who lives up to all his moral obligations, etc. – a way of framing the issue that is, from a classical theistic point of view, totally wrongheaded from the start. In any event, as all of this indicates, the way Law sets up his challenge to the theist clearly presupposes an essentially theistic personalist construal of theism. He does not seem to be aware that there is any difference between this construal and that of classical theism, or that it is the latter view that has, historically, characterized mainstream Christian theology and philosophical theism.

For those who are interested in exploring in greater depth the classical theist approach to the problem of evil, I recommend, as I have before, Brian Davies' *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*. There is also the late Herbert McCabe's *God and Evil in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, which was recently published and which I have only just started to read, but which promises to be a useful exposition of the Thomistic approach to the subject.

Posted by Edward Feser at [12:33 AM](#)

76 comments:



[Vincent Torley](#) said...

Hi Professor Feser,

Thank you for a very well-argued post. Just a quick question. You criticize the view that there exists a God "who might intelligibly be said to be morally virtuous and to have duties he lives up to." Here's my question: in your view, does God have any moral duties to His creatures?

For example, is He obliged not to lie to us? Is He obliged not to annihilate us? (And if so, why?)

[October 19, 2010 3:12 AM](#)

George R. said...

Great post, Fester.

October 19, 2010 4:26 AM

Untenured said...

This is a nice series of responses, Ed. It calls to mind an idea for another post that needs writing if and when you can get around to it. I was reading through an intro to philosophy of religion anthology, and someone was pushing the standard, tired "why would a good God punish someone in hell forever for a finite number of wrong deeds?" Good question. Of course, once you drop the classical theistic metaphysics of heaven, hell, sin and the soul, you are bound to be mystified by this question. If, however, you never dropped this view of the soul and the afterlife to begin with, the question is going to look every bit as confused as the question "why can't God be evil?" Since the "how come people end up in hell forever?" question gets a lot play in impious circles, it might make a nice sequel at some point down the line. No pressure though, I realize you are a busy man.

October 19, 2010 5:05 AM

Untenured said...

Goodness what a badly edited post! I really should have taken a "preview" on that bad boy!

October 19, 2010 5:08 AM

Anonymous said...

Good post. Do let us know how you get on with McCabe.

October 19, 2010 7:08 AM

aletheist said...

I find the whole notion of an evil God unintelligible. Evil according to whom? Whatever God's nature is, that is what is (objectively) good.

October 19, 2010 7:57 AM

Codgigator (Cadgertator) said...

I would like to point out that the problem of evil for advancing atheism (PEA) rests on a privation theory of evil. This is because the PEA recognizes gross deficits in what *should be* the good work of an All-Good God. Here is how the PEA might run formally:

1. An all-good God acts in accord with goodness.
2. Creation is the act of an all-good God.

3. Creation contains evils.

4. Therefore the act of divine creation fails to concord with goodness.

5. Hence, either creation is not the work of an all-good God or no such God exists.

The problem is that the atheist has no way of establishing just *how good* God's creation should be. In this way, it's basically a Spinozan or Plotinian plea against theism. For if any of God's acts must wholly express his omnibenevolence, then creation qua divine act must express unbounded goodness. For the atheist, creation can't be evil and be the act of an all-good God. As God's act, it should display goods we don't see in it: a privation objection.

If the actual world had fewer evils in it than we witness, would it be a satisfactorily good world to refute the PEA? Unlikely. For then that world would still have deficits relative to some imaginably less-evil (i.e. better world) which cannot be accounted for without recourse either to the standard theistic response that an all-good God can and shall bring even greater good out of evil or to atheism. At bottom, the atheist wants to know why God hasn't created the best of all possible worlds. Unfortunately, that is an incoherent concept and God is not obliged to create such a fiction in the first place. Creation adds nothing to the goodness of Being as it subsists wholly in God and hence creation cannot detract from it.

(Funny: my word verification is "priest".)

October 19, 2010 8:44 AM

BenYachov said...

>Is He obliged not to lie to us? Is He obliged not to annihilate us?
(And if so, why?)

I reply: Dude! First, God by nature **can't lie**. So it's a question on the level of "Can God make a Rock so heavy Blah! Blah...."

Second Prof Feser seems to hold Brian Davies view that **God is not a Moral Agent**". Your question presupposes God is a Moral Agent.

Your real question should be "How can God be Good yet not a Moral Agent"?

I'll let Prof Feser give the professional answer.

October 19, 2010 9:37 AM

[Ismael](#) said...

" Since the "how come people end up in hell forever?" question gets a lot play in impious circles, it might make a nice sequel at some point down the line. "

Hell's first and foremost punishment is called the 'poena damni', which is defined by the Father and theologians as the "privation of God", i.e. the complete separation of a being from God.

Evil is a privation that results from the choice of free will to 'refuse good'.

Hell is the utter and complete refusal of good, hence the refusal of God itself.

Hell is eternal because a person who goes to hell (at least according to Catholic theology) *chooses absolutely* to refuse God.

Such absolute refusal is not temporary but eternal, ie what is called the "Impenitence of the damned".

October 19, 2010 10:12 AM

[BenYachov](#) said...

I might add to Codgitator (Cadgertator) fine remarks that I seem to recall that Aquinas rejected the concept of this being "the best of all possible worlds.". Aquinas believed no world is so good that God is bound to create it, no so bad that, so long as it has some share of being, he is prevented from creating it.

October 19, 2010 10:59 AM

[Ilíon](#) said...

"The problem of evil" is an *emotional*, rather than a rational problem. That is, the "problem" has been *rationaly* solved for thousands of years; but in every new generation, a significant proportion of persons *emotionally* reject the rational solution.

October 19, 2010 11:17 AM

[Ilíon](#) said...

Codgitator: " *The problem is that the atheist has no way of establishing just *how good* God's creation should be.*"

The *reason* that there is natural evil/privation in the creation of a Good God is that it cannot logically be otherwise -- when God created/creates the Creation, he necessarily (and definitionally) creates not-God; that is, he creates That-Which-Lacks.

"Before" (logical, not temporal, antecedence) the Creation, there is only God; there is only That-Which-Lacks-Not. In the very act of Creation, God created/creates something which is not himself. But, anything which is not-God, is *definitionally* That-Which-Lacks.

Only had God created nothing at all could there be no privation of good. But, then we'd not be here anyway to trouble ourselves about good and evil, in both the moral and non-moral senses of the two words.

October 19, 2010 11:36 AM

Ilíon said...

So, really, is not the 'atheist' simply bitching because he is not God?

October 19, 2010 11:38 AM

BenYachov said...

Or to put what Ilíon said in another way. God cannot create Absolute Perfection (like creating another God since part of His perfection is being uncreated). He can only create Relative Perfection.

October 19, 2010 11:39 AM

Sam Norton said...

Just subscribing to comments

October 19, 2010 11:52 AM

Anonymous said...

So will evil be around forever, then, since instances of "not-God" (namely, us) will be around forever?

If so, then this implies a truly bizarre eschatology.

October 19, 2010 11:56 AM

BenYachov said...

>So will evil be around forever, then, since instances of "not-God" (namely, us) will be around forever?

I reply: Rather things which are relatively perfect will be around potentially forever. Evil being a privation of a potential perfection and not itself being actual.

October 19, 2010 12:27 PM

Anonymous said...

edit: Evil being a privation of a actual perfection that could

potentially exist and not itself being actual.

October 19, 2010 12:31 PM

Anonymous said...

Just a historical note of addendum: much of the metaphysics deployed by Augustine (on the Neoplatonic side) and Aquinas (on the Aristotelian side) in support of classical theism were developed specifically in response to the idea of an evil creator as found in versions of Manicheism (via the Cathars in Aquinas' case). Aquinas argues in more than one place that the being who created the world could not have been evil (Sentences II.1.1, for instance). Law's argument, I take it, is that there aren't two creators, just one evil one, but as far as I can see, all of Aquinas' arguments are true whether you have one evil creator or one good/one bad. In fact, as Dr. Feser points out, the idea of an evil creator is completely unintelligible from a Thomistic point of view. So it's not just bad philosophy, but bad history of philosophy too.

October 19, 2010 2:10 PM

Brandon said...

So will evil be around forever, then, since instances of "not-God" (namely, us) will be around forever?

To give a different sort of answer to this than the one given by BenYachov (but not inconsistent with that answer, either), privations and negations are not the same. You have negation whenever you have things that are different from each other. You only have privation when you have a lack or deficiency of something, i.e., when something is missing or has failed. (Hence Codgigator's point that the problem of evil, taken as an atheistic argument, requires taking evils as privations, because in the face of any evil that the problem considers, it always requires saying that there should be goods in the world that aren't there, i.e., that the evil is a lack or deficiency.)

On the post itself: More and more I have begun to think that the convertibility of good and being is one of the most important philosophical theses to insist upon; a truly immense number of problematic claims can be traced back to the denial of it.

October 19, 2010 2:43 PM

Mr Veale said...

Mark C Bradley has a more robust presentation of a Law type argument in "Religious Studies". He argues that a "morally indifferent" or "Epicurean" God is just as simple a hypothesis as Swinburne's "good" God.

"Hume's chief objection to natural theology" Religious Studies 43

Swinburne gives a fairly robust reply in the same journal

"A simple theism for a mixed world: response to Bradley"

October 19, 2010 3:13 PM

Mr Veale said...

That is to say, one Theistic Personalist has already responded to this issue in the academic literature...

and it doesn't seem to be much of a threat.

What Bradley does highlight is that Divine Goodness is absolutely essential to Swinburne's argument for God's existence. And Swinburne agrees.

Swinburne's response is worth reading.

October 19, 2010 3:19 PM

Anonymous said...

Brandon: What would be some examples of "problematic claims" that result from a rejection of the interchangeability of "good" and "being"? I'm not challenging you: I'm just curious.

Ed (or anyone, really): Isn't there an important sense in which the God of classical theism *is* morally good? After all, since love of God is the essence of moral goodness (ST II-II:23:8), and God loves Himself perfectly, wouldn't it follow that God is perfectly morally good? Please tell me if these thoughts are confused.

October 19, 2010 3:36 PM

Vincent Torley said...

Ben Yachov,

Thank you for your response. I too would hold that God by nature cannot lie. The question of whether He has an obligation not to lie is a different one, however.

You correctly point out that my question presupposes that God is a moral agent, and you suggest that I should have asked Professor Feser: how can God be good and not a moral agent? So I will. Professor?

I'd just like to close by pointing out that there are various meanings of "good" that might be imputed to God by religious believers:

- (i) whole and complete in every way - lacking in nothing proper to its nature;
- (ii) possessing / instantiating Being in all its fullness;
- (iii) being the cause of whatever goodness creatures possess;

- (iv) being disposed by nature to promote the well-being of creatures, except insofar as doing so clashes with some "higher" good;
- (v) fulfilling all of its obligations to other morally significant beings.

Pointing out that God is good in senses (i), (ii) and (iii) is likely to leave many atheists cold, and they will ask: why love such a Bing, if He is not a moral agent? Meanings (iv) and (v) are what the modern discussion is about. Or does Professor Feser hold that (iv) and (v) can be deduced from (i), (ii) and (iii)?

October 19, 2010 3:58 PM

Anonymous said...

@BY

@Bradley

11:56 Anon here

I'm afraid to say that I can't make sense of your posts, if they are intended to be defenses of what the poster Ilion said.

"(God) necessarily (and definitionally) creates not-God; that is, he creates That-Which-Lacks."

"But, anything which is not-God, is definitionally That-Which-Lacks."

Bradley, you said that privations and negations are not the same, and I agree that they are, at least *definitionally*, not the same. But in these quotes, Ilion says that *all* negations *of God* necessarily entail privations, insofar as something which "lacks" has come into being.

My worry is that these claims that God's decision to create finite things *necessitates* imperfection, in the sense that finite things lack pure actuality, seem to have very unsettling implications for eschatology, insofar as finite things (which are definitionally "not God", since they're not infinite) will presumably be around forever. Therefore, will "heaven" or "the marriage of heaven and Earth" also be a place in which evil, spiritual, physical, or otherwise, must invariably manifest itself? Even in the presence of God, will human beings perpetually wage war against each other simply *in virtue* of their finitude? Will the shifting of tectonic plates still be unleashing tsunamis that crush villages and sweep women and children out to sea? Will predatory animals still be tearing humans' and each others' insides out?

As a corollary, how do you square this with the Christian notion

that *all* cosmic evil is the result of abuses of free will (say, by Lucifer, his ilk, and human beings) and the cosmic fall that resulted from it? If God created all finite things, and if all finite things necessarily exhibit privations, and if all privations are instances of evil, this means that God literally created evil (and indeed had to if He wanted to create finite things).

October 19, 2010 4:17 PM

Anonymous said...

^^^Same anon here. Just rereading my post, I realized that I didn't make the following explicitly clear: I am operating under the assumption that ALL privations are instances of evil. Keep this in mind especially before reading the paragraph that begins with "My worry.."

October 19, 2010 4:47 PM

Ilíon said...

"Isn't there an important sense in which the God of classical theism is morally good? After all, since love of God is the essence of moral goodness (ST II-II:23:8), and God loves Himself perfectly, wouldn't it follow that God is perfectly morally good?"

It's not merely that God loves himself perfectly (and thus, that he fulfills the obligations of morality), but that God *is* love. But then, God *is* morality, too.

October 19, 2010 6:26 PM

Ilíon said...

BenYachov: *"Or to put what Ilíon said in another way. God cannot create Absolute Perfection (like creating another God since part of His perfection is being uncreated). He can only create Relative Perfection."*

Or, to put that in the form of a question, is it even meaningful to ask, 'Can God create that which is self-existent?' For, is it not the case that to say that something is *created* is to deny that it is self-existent?

October 19, 2010 6:31 PM

monk68 said...

Anon,

If the word privation is taken to mean that a thing does not have some quality simpliciter (such a rock not having eyes), then it would be false to say that ALL privation is "evil". This is why one must be very careful when discussing natural or physical "evil", in how one imagines evil in this context, for it often seems to mean little more than finitude.

If privation is taken to mean a lack of something in a thing that "ought" to obtain (like a man having eyes), then the notion of evil has a different connotation as defect.

From a Catholic eschatological POV, it is not maintained that each person's experience of the beatific vision is identical. In any case, creatures do not simply become God so as to lose their finite nature and identity. Yet, each person is utterly fulfilled in having become all that God intended him/her to become. That is, there will be no lack in each thing or person or nature that "ought" to have been there.

There is a mysterious passage in sacred scripture which says that all creation awaits the revealing of the children of God; as if to say that the fate of the created order is tied to, and hinged upon, the redemption and ontological completion of mankind (corporeal nature's crowning achievement). There is talk of new heavens and new earth. The point is that physical evil understood as defective lack is conceived as ending once all things ultimately becoming all that they were meant to be. That is all things participating in Being/Good to the full extent desired by God. No more lack of what "ought" to be.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly states that the created order was made in a "state-of-becoming". One reason St. Thomas gives for this situation of imperfection moving toward perfection, or what I call the "trajectory of created being"; is that it gives finite things the opportunity to be a cause (albeit secondary - but real) of goodness in other things. I get to be a causal agent in my own perfection, the perfection of my fellow man, and in the perfection of all creation. I could not know what it is to act as a cause of goodness in myself or others if all things were immediately created in a state of perfection. Hence, this is the only way that we would be able to participate in this aspect of God's goodness (since He is the principal cause of goodness in all things). At any rate, so says St. Thomas.

The point is that it seems possible to "lack" simpliciter (i.e. as not being God), without entailing privation or evil in the sense of defect. Catholic eschatology as I understand it, seems to affirm as much.

Pax et Bonum,

Ray

October 19, 2010 6:34 PM

Ilíon said...

Anon: "... If God created all finite things, and if all finite things necessarily exhibit privations, and if all privations are instances

of evil, this means that God literally created evil (and indeed had to if He wanted to create finite things)."

And this is a problem, how? (I mean, other than the equivocation built into most uses of the word 'evil') Especially considering that *he* does not shy from acknowledging his role in creating 'evil.'

=====

On whether God can lie -

God is Being Itself; God is Truth Itself (those are two ways of saying the same thing) - the Creation exists (initially and continuously) only because God says "*It is!*"

So, to ask "*Can God lie?*" is to ask "*Can Being/Truth contradict itself?*" Can you not see that the very question is utterly absurd?

But, let us suppose that we cannot see the absurdity of the question.

What would it *mean* were God to lie? What would it *mean* for Truth to be false? What would it *mean* for Being to be non-being?

Would it not mean that *nothing* exists? Including God, himself?

October 19, 2010 6:57 PM

BenYachov said...

(Dr? Mr? Your Dudeness)Torley,

You may want to get a copy of Brian Davies book (i.e. REALITY OF GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL) that Dr. Feser recommended in his post. I believe he's one of the individuals who shaped the Feser man's views on the subject. I've read a few of the relevant chapters. I used to think Plantinga's Free Will Defense was the best answer to the POE but now I believe it to be 2nd best.

Once you see denying God is a Moral Agent is not the same as saying "God is Immoral" and understand the nature of God's Divine Goodness then it's just a superior answer overall.

Get that book you won't be disappointed.

October 19, 2010 7:26 PM

BenYachov said...

In terms of God "lying" God can't By Nature tell you something is true that is in effect false. But God is not required to tell you anything or tell you everything or keep you from naturally coming to the wrong conclusion about things he is not required to inform you about. He can't keep you from misinterpreting Scripture but

he won't allow his One True Church to formally misinterpret Scripture when exercising the extraordinary magisterium and other engines of Infallibility he has promised the Church.

Our Protestant Brothers may have a different view but I know His Dudeness is Catholic.

October 19, 2010 7:33 PM

Anonymous said...

Ilion: Yes, "God is love," but He is also all of His attributes because of His perfect simplicity. So if moral goodness is an attribute of God, then God is moral goodness itself. I don't see what's wrong with that.

October 19, 2010 8:10 PM

Kristor said...

Ilion has touched upon something tremendously important. He writes, "So, really, is not the 'atheist' simply bitching because he is not God?"

Yes. It's the sin of Adam - and Prometheus, and Babylon, and Icarus. And, presumably, Satan. The conviction that the creature himself could do a better job than God is at the root also of the Gnostic heresy, and of all liberalism.

October 19, 2010 10:54 PM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

On the goodness of God, I would like to mention that the classical conception of goodness is that of an entity actualizing itself in accord with ('towards') its proper goals. A good beer is one that actualizes what beer drinking aims to achieve: satiety and pleasure. A good brewer is one that achieves good beer. This is why "a good beer" is just as often called "a real beer" and "a good man" is also referred to as "a real man" (or "a man in full")—parallels that once again point to the convertibility of ens and bonum, a convertibility I heartily second (following Brandon) must be reinstated as a key axiom in phil of religion and metaphysics. One related musing:

<http://veniaminov.blogspot.com/2010/05/some-things-never-change.html>

Again: A good bow and arrow is one that actually tends to result in accurate shots. A good doctor is one who actually achieves the goal of a doctor: a patient's health. A good lion is one that actually achieves the goals of its kind: maintaining its life by obtaining food and besting enemies, propagating its species by procreation, defending its offspring, etc. And so on.

So how is God good? Well, in so far as His entire act of

existence—his so to speak natural self-actualization—entirely coincides with His essence, He wholly achieves what His nature seeks, namely, His own existence. (Hence, even a rock can be called "a good rock" in so far as it persists as a rock: it 'strives' for the perfection of its rockiness, even though it constantly suffers erosion and eventual dissolution.) He is unique in this respect, since all other things not only fail to perfectly actualize their natural ends but also because all other things tend to God as their ultimate end.

Hence, I would not say that-which-is-created is inherently 'evil', only that it is not substantially good, as God is. This is a point Boethius deals with in the *Hebdomads* and Thomas deals with in his commentary on the same *Hebdomads*. A thing that is not God is only evil if it fails to "live up to" or "actualize" the goals proper to its nature. As such, evil per se is pure nihil, pure privatio of the one good proper to created entities, namely, an enduring participation in God's one act of being. In so far as no (other) thing is or could possibly be unified in essence and existence, no thing can be good like God. Even so, things are not "evil", as long as they perfectly actualize the ends proper to their nature. (Presumably, things can have their ends altered, miraculously, which may go towards explaining how predators in the Eschaton can be transformed into peaceful beasts without losing their properly bestial majesty.) In any case, I would say that regarding the created as such as evil because it is not God is a Calvinist notion—at least, it was a key irritant in Calvinist logic which drove me away from being a Calvinist.

October 19, 2010 10:56 PM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

I have come to see that Mr Chastek has written a response to this post which largely harmonizes with my most recent comment. This is reassuring—not because Chastek agrees with me but on the contrary because I managed to write in a basically authentically Thomistic way! ;)

<http://thomism.wordpress.com/2010/10/19/god-is-morally-good-because-of-his-divinity/>

October 19, 2010 10:59 PM

Kristor said...

Anon: that creatures necessarily lack God's perfections need not entail that they should sempiternally lack their own. The sin of Satan was to presume upon the office of God. To this same sin he tempted Eve. In Christ, as in Eden, we are able to be simply ourselves without strain or impediment, by virtue of a proper recollection of our station in the cosmos, and of our highest office: to worship. In the resurrection now possible to us, we and all those other creatures who may there join us shall enjoy all

such beauties as are possible to creatures such as ourselves. We shall realize the highest potential good proper to our own natures. What more is there to ask, in a properly ordered - that is to say, just - cosmos?

October 19, 2010 11:02 PM

Kristor said...

To clarify a bit further: Ilion is quite right that creatures necessarily lack the divine perfections. But they do not necessarily lack their own. Thus the Fall is distinct from Creation. In Creation, we are made Good, and suffer no defect of the perfections proper to our natures. When we Fall, we do so by trying to be something that we are not; by disagreeing with reality, and in particular with the ens realisissimum. Now the capacity thus freely to disagree with him is one of our perfections, that he gave us. But in our disagreement - i.e., our disobedience - we defect - not just from him, but from ourselves - and waste his gift and our patrimony.

October 19, 2010 11:16 PM

just thinking said...

Is cancer evil or praiseworthy?

October 20, 2010 1:32 AM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

JT:

Cancer is analogous to cellular gluttony, or greed, depending on your imaginative tastes, and is therefore a species of evil. I hope you are not being misled by visualizing privatio as a genuine divot while a tumor is a bulge.

Best,

October 20, 2010 7:42 AM

just thinking said...

Codge

That's a good answer - kinda process-like.

But what if an equally gluttonous cellular ant-cancer life form is found to eat all cancers?

October 20, 2010 8:09 AM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

JT:

I'm not exactly following your line of thought here, but I take your point to be that maybe even evils like tumors can display an intrinsic goodness of their own by seeking to flourish. Hence, even some evils are goods, on a privation theory of evil, which does not seem to be very good for the coherence of that theory. If this is the line you are taking, I have two problems with the scenario.

First, I don't know how much sense it makes to think of tumors in isolation from the organism in which they appear. Even cells seem only to function properly in connection with other cells of their kind, and with the larger surrounding tissue. DNA, increasingly, is seen to be in immensely complex dynamic connection with the whole state of the organism, rather than just being some "selfish" little chemical gremlin riding bodies to propagate itself. Hence, while you could, I suppose, see some goodness in the growth of a tumor as far as the vitality of its cells is concerned, I think that's missing the forest for the trees. Remove a tumor from the body and harvest it in a culture, fine. But then it's no longer a tumor: it's just a bunch of cells with their own functional tendencies. (E.g. A severed hand isn't really a hand anymore, since a hand is a tool of the body.) Further, the tumor cells are parasitic on the host, and therefore actually fails to actualize themselves like they could if they result in the host's death.

Second, using one evil (an ant-tumor) to remedy another evil (other tumorous tissue) is precisely what Christians mean by saying God can bring good out of evil. Just as human agency can see to it, based on human nature's proper ends, that "the evil of tumors" shall not prevail in the end, so too divine agency, based on the consummative glory of God, can and will see to it that "the evil of evil" (so to speak) shall not prevail in the end. The Cross might then be the ant-tumor God used to consume and conquer all evil. Once the ant-tumor is used FOR a higher good, it is no longer an evil: it is a surprising instrument of good. This is rather the inverse of what happens when a tumor is surgically removed from obstructing higher goods (the host's life) is no longer evil: it does not become good but does cease to be evil.

Best,

October 20, 2010 8:52 AM

Ilíon said...

"The Cross might then be the ant-tumor God used to consume and conquer all evil."

But, of course.

Christ *became* sin on the Cross. It's not that our sins were riding on his back, it's that he took them, and Sin itself, into his being.

And then he died ... taking Sin with him.

But *he* rose to Life, not Sin.

October 20, 2010 9:38 AM

just thinking said...

Codge

I just hate it when theology becomes biology, my worst subject!



I'm not exactly following your line of thought here, but I take your point to be that maybe even evils like tumors can display an intrinsic goodness of their own by seeking to flourish.

You're giving me too much credit. I seldom have a line of reasoning!

My thinking on my 1st post was simply that cancer is so terrible, yet it is also a corpuscle of life (and God created life). When you responded saying the evil of cancer was gluttony - this conjures an analogy of an immoral act done by a moral agent - I noted in post 2 that to fight it with anti-cancer requires the same evil of gluttony.

I did not mean to identify cancer cells with any good effects - I bet no creature would choose it willingly, so I am not thinking: *you could, I suppose, see some goodness in the growth of a tumor...* rather, I am assuming cancer is plain ole' evil. But can it be held responsible for its actions?

On your second point, *Once the ant-tumor is used FOR a higher good, it is no longer an evil: it is a surprising instrument of good*, I wholly agree. But it does seem like both cancer and anti-cancer are each performing the same activity without a conscience, so I am not sure that the gluttony idea works.

I say C is evil, but it really seems to be built-in to God's natural order, and thus could seen as praiseworthy by some...

October 20, 2010 9:42 AM

BenYachov said...

I remember reading in one popular book on Thomism that even Satan can be said to be "good" in so much that He has being and existence. That His evil is in what He lacks(which should be obvious).

October 20, 2010 9:46 AM

Ilíon said...

The word 'perfection' does not mean "maximal goodness," it means "completeness, wholeness, oneness, integrality."

Thus, those things which change, or can chance, are not *perfect*.

(If we understand what we're saying) We do not say that God is 'perfect' because he's maximally good; rather, we understand that to refer to his goodness is to refer to his perfection. God is "maximally good" because he is perfect (he is what he is: he does not change), not the other way around.

October 20, 2010 9:50 AM

Anonymous said...

What is God waiting for? Why doesn't he restore this broken world already? The world as it currently is - and let's be honest - is utterly disgusting on so many levels. Any modestly imaginative effort to comprehend present human suffering confirms this. In South Africa, for instance, a child is raped every 26 seconds. How can God, or Goodness Itself, tolerate this?

Perhaps I'm just emoting. Whatever. The fact of the matter is, such events, no matter how many good, sound theodicies I hear, never fail to immensely infuriate me at the deepest possible level of my being. To channel Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, I am not merely a "thinking frog with my innards removed." I desire for reality to appeal to both my heart and my soul, not just my speculative intelligence. After all, it is my soul with all its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not just my abstract mind.

I fear that I'm starting to despise God for allowing such a world to continue.

October 20, 2010 1:20 PM

George R. said...

Anon @ 1:20 pm:

If God were to eradicate all evil, do you think you would survive the purge?

October 20, 2010 1:59 PM

Anonymous said...

Anon,

But if there is no God then there is no good and evil. And so nothing for you to complain about.

October 20, 2010 2:58 PM

just thinking said...

Ed

They made a movie whose main character could have been you.

"Leaves of Grass", the most interesting movie I have seen in a long time. Very philosophical.

October 20, 2010 3:15 PM

Anonymous said...

BenYachov:

"A twofold will may be considered in the damned, namely the deliberate will and the natural will. Their natural will is theirs not of themselves but of the Author of nature, Who gave nature this inclination which we call the natural will. Wherefore since nature remains in them, it follows that the natural will in them can be good." (*Summa Theologica* Supp:98:1)

October 20, 2010 3:43 PM

Vincent Torley said...

Hi Ben Yachov and Codgitator,

Vince or Vincent is fine. I'm from Australia; we hardly ever use titles. We're a pretty informal bunch.

I've been having a look at an online Google version of Fr. Brian Davies' book, "The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil." It wasn't complete, but it contained enough for me to get the gist of Davies' argument. Fr. Davies argued that God could have made a world where everyone always made morally correct choices, but He wasn't obliged to. In that respect, He is not like the captain of a ship, whose job is to steer the ship and who could fairly be held to account if the ship foundered. God has no job, except to simply be Himself. As He is by nature a complete being, it's a job He cannot fail to perform.

I think what's wrong with all this is that Fr. Davies' implicit claim that (i) for God, to be good is simply to be Himself; hence (ii) God has duties to others that He is required by nature to perform. That doesn't follow. What if God's being Himself necessarily includes behaving in the appropriate way to whatever beings happen to exist? This would mean that if God chooses to create, He thereby binds Himself to behave in certain ways towards what He creates.

"In what ways?" you ask. Well, if I had to define God I'd say: God is a Being whose nature it is to know and love in the most perfect manner possible. "Know and love whom?" you ask. I answer: "That depends on whether He creates or not, and what (or whom) He

chooses to create."So if God chooses to create human persons, then God would be bound to love them as they should be loved - which means not annihilating them, as they have a natural desire for Him as their final end; and also not lying to them, as they have a natural desire for truth.

Your thoughts?

October 20, 2010 7:47 PM

Vincent Torley said...

Hi Ben Yachov and Codgitator,

I'm terribly sorry about the typos in my last post. I was dashing it off in a hurry. The opening of my third paragraph should have read:

"I think what's wrong with all this is Fr. Davies' implicit claim that (i) for God, to be good is simply to be Himself; hence (ii) God has NO duties to others that He is required by nature to perform. That doesn't follow."

October 20, 2010 8:46 PM

BenYachov said...

Vincient,

I think you need to get the whole book & read it more closely. I can no longer believe in an Anthropomorphic "god" who is nothing but an unlimited **human** mind who is a moral agent like us. That is not the God of the One True Church. That's just a slightly upgraded semi-Mormon "god" 2.0 .

God owes us nothing. Everything He gives He freely gives from His eternally willed beneficence. He can't annihilate us simply because He willed from all eternity to give us immortal souls. If we can be annihilated then He in fact didn't give us immortal souls and we would not truly have that nature He willed us to have.

October 20, 2010 9:03 PM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

JT:

This is humorous. I get the impression that you try to keep abreast of "the latest" in various fields, so I figured you had read an article about some kind of "ant-cancer" haha. Replace all my uses of "ant-cancer" with "anti-cancer."

October 20, 2010 9:10 PM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

JT:

It's a tricky question about how to parse God creating cancer. I mean, we believe He created the elements out of which cancer is formed. Natural evil only exists because of the Fall. because of a primordial defect in human nature which ramifies to displace all other levels and components of nature. I have a friend (on Facebook, so it's official!) who thinks slugs are amazing and beautiful. And I must concede that just by existing and thriving, they reflect the Creator's goodness. But if you were in a room that was suddenly filled with slugs (yes, I just vommed in my mouth), you'd die, and slugs would be a kind of evil. Likewise, dirt is good in a lowly sense, but when it forms a landslide and kills a town of people, it's a natural evil. Hence, while prolific tissue is good in its own way, its an evil in connection with the human organism. The problem of the Fall seems to be that all things are vulnerable to each in improper ways. Dr Magee has some good articles on natural evil in Thomism.

Best,

October 20, 2010 9:40 PM

Codgitator (Cadgertator) said...

Hi, Vincent:

I basically side with BenYachov's latest reply to you (9:03PM). A further reason I think it's incorrect to speak of God's duties to His creatures, is because He is the authority by which all defections from duty are judged, the power by which are duties are ordered, and the truth by which all duties are measured. Cf. Aquinas' De Veritate.

I suppose in some minds this raises Euthyphro's dilemma, but the immediate point is that there is no truth other than God Himself which God is obliged to tell us. What's true in and of itself--God's existence--can't be a lie and can't tell a lie. Therefore God, in Himself, can't be expected not to tell a lie anymore than He can be imagined suddenly to drop out of existence.

As an aside, the reason I am not terribly worried about Euthyphro's dilemma, is that I think it fails to consider a purely existence and wholly self-conceiving Deity, as Plato and Aristotle presented. In De Veritate, Thomas makes the point that there would be no truth if there were neither human nor the divine intellect. Since, however, there is at least always the divine intellect, then there is always truth: truth is eternal. The one truth that would abide even without created intellects would be that grasped by the divine intellect in knowing its own essence. This I take to be an analogue for how goodness is neither imposed upon God nor merely "invented" by Him. For the only subsistent goodness that abides is one with the only subsistent being that

abides: God's total actuality in and of Himself. Apologies if I'm sounding obscure again.

Best,

October 20, 2010 10:00 PM

awatkins69 said...

Thanks for the post Dr. Feser. Just a quick note: Don't watch "Leaves of Grass". Yes, it has a philosopher. However, it doesn't fulfill the formal telos of its nature. (It's evil.)

October 21, 2010 1:45 AM

just thinking said...

Ed

Don't listen to him...you know you wanna' see it...nobody will ever know...your secret can stay between the two of us...it can't hurt anyone :)

Seriously though, if you (and any of your readers) haven't already heard of it, I think you will appreciate how well written and surprisingly philosophically rich the story is.

October 21, 2010 5:55 AM

Anonymous said...

I wonder if Stephany Law can distinguish between substance and accident or get to grips with the concept of prime matter?

October 21, 2010 8:50 AM

Anonymous said...

Oops, I see I am as bad at writing people's names and surnames as Prof Law himself. I think she will understand.

October 21, 2010 8:53 AM

James Chastek said...

JT,

Cancer has a likeness to poison, and taken in this way Augustine's observation is helpful: "if poison were evil in itself, it would kill the snake first". The idea is that it is not the thing taken absolutely or in its nature that is evil (since in this case it would destroy itself first) but rather the disharmony or incompatibility of two things. In fact, the evil consists not in the cancer taken as cancer (for then it would be evil even if it were not in a man's body; and the tumor would consume itself first) but in the corruption of a man who has the tumor. But if its evil consists precisely in this corruption, then the being as such (of both the

corrupter and corrupted) is good, as Augustine proves in [Confessions Book VII chap. 12 \(scroll down\)](#)

There is nothing wrong in saying "cancer is evil", but it is not a statement about the nature of the thing, but about its incompatibility. God did in fact create things that were incompatible with each other, and it was good that he did so. Here at the bottom rung of existence, to be is to move and be immersed in becoming and temporality. The universe would not have been complete without something at the bottom, and this bottom rung of existence would not be possible without some things passing away to give rise to others. Human beings are only bothered by this to the extent that we do not exist wholly on this lowest level of existence.

[October 21, 2010 8:55 AM](#)

[James Chastek said...](#)

Vincent,

I think the difficulty in speaking of divine obligations traces back to our difficulty in unifying the various looks that we get of what is absolute and most perfect. On the one hand, what is Absolute is unchanging so far as all change relates to another, and consists in being other and other and other. In this sense the absolute is like a law of nature or an ethical imperative. On the other hand, what has intellect and will is more perfect than what does not, and so the absolute must be personal and with will. But we don't tend to see the will as being like an eternal law - in fact its hard to see how a will could be truly free and be like an unchanging law.

Aristotle's great contribution to human thought was his concept of act, which on the one hand is opposed to potency (the principle of change and motion) but on the other hand has its fullest existence in the interior operations of intellect and will (which are actions that do not consist in change). This is why as soon as Aristotle concludes to some unmoved mover, he can say it is living and blessed, for the notion of act contains both.

The idea that God would be under an obligation to us places both he and us under the absolute considered as unchangeable. There is something correct about this but it is a partial view, and of itself more distorts the truth than revealing it. To see God as pure act can preserve this sense of the absolute as unchangeable without subordinating the divine existence to it. If being is act, the most personal is the most like an unchanging law, and the most unchanging law is a person. It is not that God is obliged, as though his actions are measured against some measure distinct from himself; at the same time in making something with a will the absolute does not require that all goodness is sheerly arbitrary.

October 21, 2010 10:09 AM

just thinking said...

Evil.

Love.

I'll bet for everyone of us, there is a different definition each of these terms w/r people, let alone coming up with a commonly shared definition of the two terms w/r deity.

And as life's dynamics change our views, we will likely not agree with our own formerly held meanings.

October 21, 2010 11:30 AM

Vincent Torley said...

Hi Ben Yachov, Codgitator and James Chastek,

Thanks for your comments. Ben Yachov, you're right: I suppose I should read Davies' book *in toto* before pronouncing further on it.

Regarding God's inability to tell a lie: Codgitator has argued that a Being which is Truth Itself cannot (a) be a lie or (b) tell a lie. I think that (a) follows, but (b) doesn't. The idea of Truth telling a lie sounds very odd, but is not logically absurd. Ditto for Goodness. Another argument that someone might want to make is that telling a lie necessarily involves some sort of change - however, I see nothing inherently contradictory in a Being timelessly deciding to tell a lie at time t. However, there *is* something contradictory in loving someone perfectly and lying to them - as though falsity could possibly benefit them.

Both Codgitator and James Chastek appear to believe that God's having obligations to other agents would entail that God's actions are "measured against some measure distinct from himself." Heaven forbid! I completely agree that God, the Ultimate Standard, is the only yardstick against which His actions can be judged, and I would also agree with your solution to the Euthyphro dilemma, Codgitator. However, I can't see why an agent A's having a duty towards agent B logically entails the existence of a yardstick outside A, against which A's actions can be judged.

October 21, 2010 6:03 PM

Tony said...

Vincent, I believe that one of the ways that the Fathers talk about God is that his "obligation" to act a certain way is based on His logically prior utterly free choice: choice to love us, to create us, to make us capable of receiving good, and make us need His action on us. Given all those free choices, He has an kind of

obligation toward fulfilling that need in us. But that obligation still has its first roots in pure, unadulterated free gift, not in justice. So it is certainly an extended sense of obligation.

October 21, 2010 7:58 PM

Edward Feser said...

Hello everyone,

Sorry for the radio silence -- it's been a very busy week. I'll put up a separate post soon on the questions of whether God has obligations to us, and whether He can be said to be morally good.

October 22, 2010 1:22 PM

Dianelos Georgoudis said...

Anonymous said: *"The world as it currently is - and let's be honest - is utterly disgusting on so many levels."*

If God, while there was no creation, had brought you into existence, showed you the world S/He was about to create, and asked you whether to create that world or else not create anything - what would your answer be I wonder? Would you really say, "no, that world is so utterly disgusting on so many levels that it is best not to create anything; now let me slip back into non-existence"?

What my little thought experiment tries to demonstrate is that, obviously, the world just as it is now has a huge value despite the many evils in it, even from our point of view. I mean let's discuss the problem of evil with some sense of proportion.

October 22, 2010 3:13 PM

Jinzang said...

What my little thought experiment tries to demonstrate is that, obviously, the world just as it is now has a huge value despite the many evils in it, even from our point of view

Eduard von Hartmann took the other side of that argument.

October 22, 2010 4:24 PM

Ilíon said...

"What my little thought experiment tries to demonstrate is that, obviously, the world just as it is now has a huge value despite the many evils in it, even from our point of view."

And my earlier comments about God and not-God (and about the meaning of 'perfection') were intended to show the logic/reason behind or justifying that point of view -- that it is logically

impossible for God to simultaneously create a "perfect world" and a world in which his creatures grow ... and live.

October 22, 2010 5:38 PM

Johannes said...

Clearly the existence of moral evil poses no challenge to the absolute goodness of God since He is neither the direct nor the indirect author of moral evil, which is a possible consequence of the free will of creatures, which in turn is necessary in order for love to exist.

Therefore the only possible challenge to the absolute goodness of God is physical evil. I penned an essay about it some time ago, where I showed (at least to my satisfaction) that physical evil is tragic only when it is suffered by humans, and the remaining problem is solved by the Catholic doctrine that holds that exposure of humans to physical evil was not part of the original design in creation, as man was originally "shielded" from the physical evil that would have affected him otherwise as a result of its biological nature, but was a result of original sin.

<http://defeyrazon.blogspot.com/2010/04/reflections-on-physical-evil.html>

October 22, 2010 6:13 PM

shiva said...

I don't understand why some of you say that God cannot lie by God's nature, that makes God less able to do things that a 3 year old child can do. If God can create the universe then surely God can lie. I'm supposing there is some deeper philosophy which supports the idea of God being unable to lie, but it would have to be something different from God literally being unable to lie to you if you were having a conversation with him/her -- to wit:

You: Hey God, did you like my pasta sauce?

God: Well, sure it was great.

Me: Didn't you think it was too salty?

God: No.

Why couldn't God do that? Is there some God above God who can stop him/her? Is God less than us in ability?

You cannot prove whether God is good or evil through philosophy, you can only give reasons to have more or less faith in one or the other. The only way to prove whether God is good or evil is by experiencing it. If God is all good you will eventually experience the full result of that, if God is malevolent you will eventually

feel the full result of that. Until that time of either full apotheosis or soul death, being not God, we simply cannot prove it through speculative philosophy. It's like trying to prove what life is like on a planet in a different solar system far far from our ability to see what that planet is like.

The best philosophical argument against God being evil is the karma theology: suffering is caused by necessity to aid you in your evolution to spiritual perfection; i.e. God is able to understand what we need better than we are able to understand, like a month old baby is less able to understand what it needs to grow and become healthy than an adult. Karmic philosophy proposes that suffering creates subconscious alterations in the psyche, causing a positive disposition for empathy towards others, and a negative disposition to neglect of that. Upon attaining a perfected psyche, our spiritual evolution is complete and we attain apotheosis -- entrance into a divine perfected state of existence.

Of course that is impossible to prove, but on the philosophical level it always impossible to prove an unknown, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, and only there. We can prove a God exists because we experience a world and a mind that cannot exist as the product of blind unintelligent forces. We know from experience that we exist as intelligence beings in a world that is working in an intelligently arranged system. We know that from experience it takes intelligence to cause anything which shows interconnected design principles, therefore we can say with dead certainty that we have experience of and therefore can prove a God exists. The same experience is needed to prove God's true mental nature, we need to experience it for ourselves, it can never be proven %100 by philosophy.

October 22, 2010 11:24 PM

Anonymous said...

@shiva: God cannot lie because lying is an example of impotence, whereas God is of all things most potent. Cf. Anselm, *Proslogion* VII.

And, if we are so impotent to philosophically deduce the supreme Goodness of God, what say you to Aquinas' arguments at *ST* I:6?

October 23, 2010 12:29 AM

Dianelos Georgoudis said...

Shiva,

You write: " *I don't understand why some of you say that God cannot lie by God's nature, that makes God less able to do things that a 3 year old child can do. If God can create the universe then surely God can lie.*"

The way there are wrong answers, there are also wrong questions. For example suppose you asked a loving husband if he can torture his wife; that would be a wrong question. To ask whether God can do X is even worse, for it's like asking what the color of the number 7 is. The concept of "color" does not apply to numbers, and the concept of "can" does not apply to God.

The concept of "can" applies to us because in our condition there is a difference between the state of "wanting" and the state of "doing". In God there is no such difference. Thus the right way to describe omnipotence is to say that God does what God wants. Which is the same definition St Augustine gives in his City of God: "[God] is called omnipotent on account of His doing what He wills"

October 23, 2010 2:26 AM

[shiva](#) said...

@ Danelos Georgoudis

I was simply pointing out that to claim God literally cannot lie is mistaken. Whether God wants to lie or not is something else.

Omnipotence can mean different things. Semantics aside, God can only do what God is capable of doing. I know that is obvious, but to claim that God can do whatever God wants is simply speculation, e.g. does God want us to suffer? If not, then why is there suffering? In my understanding it is because God cannot avoid having us suffer even though God doesn't desire us to suffer, unless of course God is malevolent, wouldn't you agree?

October 23, 2010 9:30 AM

[Danelos Georgoudis](#) said...

Shiva,

You write: "*Semantics aside, God can only do what God is capable of doing*"

In our context semantics is important, because if one thinks that the concept of "can" applies to God, when in fact it doesn't, then one is apt to get confused.

Consider, for example, the question of whether God can create a stone so heavy that S/He can't lift. On the view that what matters is what God wants that question immediately reduces to incoherence. The question of whether God can create a square triangle reduces to "Does God ever want to create a square triangle?" and here, given that God is perfectly rational and would therefore never want to do absurd things, the answer is clearly No. The question of whether God can lie, reduces to

whether God ever wants to lie. I personally do not know of any state of affairs where God would want to lie. The state of affairs with the salty sauce you mention in a previous post is clearly unrealistic.

"to claim that God can do whatever God wants is simply speculation"

Not at all. First of all the claim is that God does whatever God wants. And this is a rather clear implication of St Anselm's definition of God. Surely you agree that a being who is perfectly good and moreover does whatever that being wants is greater than a being who is perfectly good but sometimes can't do what that being wants. (Incidentally, an interesting question to ponder is **how** we know such things about God.)

"e.g. does God want us to suffer?"

If there is good and necessary reason for that suffering then God, being perfectly good, will want us to suffer.

"In my understanding it is because God cannot avoid having us suffer even though God doesn't desire us to suffer"

You are saying the same using other words, but you are using the "can" concept in the context of God which is confusing - if not right now then certainly somewhere down the line. The same goes for the concept of "desire". When thinking about God I think it's a good idea to use the verbs "values" and of "wants/does". Verbs such as "can" and "desires" reflect an imperfect anthropomorphic condition.

I have observed that words have sometimes the power to lead our thoughts (instead of the other way around, as should always be the case). God is the most important concept one may think about, and good linguistic discipline is highly recommended. It is true that as far as we are concerned the personal attributes of God are the most relevant ones; on the other hand to think about God in anthropomorphizing terms is clearly a bad idea. (After all God is not only a personal being existing and acting in space and time, but also the impersonal ground of all existence, including the ground **of** space and time.) So thinking about God requires the appropriate God-language. Of course that's easier said than done. After all our language is such that terms refer to either personal or impersonal beings, and God is both a personal and an impersonal being. That's why at some stage either poetic or else on the surface self-contradictory language must be used (such as saying "God loves us" and "God is love").

Thinking about this issue, I find that intellectual theism suffers from a traditionally sloppy use of language. Even the phrase "God exists" is very misleading. Theism is not the idea that "God

exists", but rather that "existence is God based". Nobody, whether theist or non theist, should think that theism's claim is that alongside apples, and electrons, and numbers, and logical/physical laws, one more thing exists, namely God. Rather theism's radical claim is about what it means to say that apples, electrons, numbers, or logical/physical laws exist. Theism says that all reality is God-structured. I am not sure that Edward Feser's idea of moving theology back to the scholastics is a good one, but certainly some correction is needed.

October 24, 2010 3:16 AM

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