

God's Utilitarian Deism: An Analysis of the Logical Problem of Evil within Hindu Philosophy

Research Question: In the light of the problems of Plantinga's Free Will Defense, can a more universal solution to the Logical problem of Evil be found within Hindu Philosophy?

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
The Logical Problem of Evil.....	3
Plantinga's Free Will Defense & the Opposition	5
An Introduction to Indian Philosophy.....	9
The Relativity of Action and God's Omni-Benevolence.....	11
Natural "Evil"	13
Applications and Consequences	15
Conclusion	16
Bibliography	17

Introduction

Mythology and philosophy exist in all cultures around the world, often tackling similar questions of human and moral origin. For this reason, it is an interesting exercise to transplant a set of arguments into a completely foreign environment. The arguments in question are the Logical Problem of Evil and the Plantinga's Free Will Defense, and the environment in question is Hindu Philosophy and mythology. In this system of values, evil itself is redefined from its Western counterpart so as to create a new set of arguments to explain the Logical Problem of Evil.

The methodology of this paper is inherently dialectic, so that this essay will have the proper capacity to shift into an argument for new thought using an entirely different belief system. Methodically, one can find the flaws in Plantinga's argument, where he proposes that natural evil stems from moral evil, and the general exclusion of various peoples by using the stories of Genesis as a history. This essay will attempt to find a solution to the logical problem of evil by first identifying the pitfalls of Plantinga's argument and then looking outside the scope of Judeo-Christian belief to create a more universal argument that stems from a fundamental difference between Judeo-Christian belief systems and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, wherein evil is a concrete aspect of an object or idea. While God retains his Omni-characteristics, God still must adhere to the laws of this universe, because that is the most Omni-benevolent act for his creations.

The Logical Problem of Evil

The Epicurean Paradox can be explained most concisely by David Hume, who wrote in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”¹ Because evil can be observed in the natural world with surprising ease, one may have to contend that a divine entity cannot possess one of the Omni-qualities—or may not exist at all.

But firstly it is necessary to plainly state all the premises for the Logical Problem of Evil².

1. God is omnipotent (all powerful).
2. God is omniscient (all knowing).
3. God is perfectly good.
4. Evil exists.
5. A set of statements is logically inconsistent if a direct contradiction can be deduced from the set.
6. If God is omnipotent, he would be able to prevent all evil and suffering in the world.
7. If God is omniscient, he would know about all of the evil and suffering in the world and would know how to eliminate or prevent it.
8. If God is perfectly good, he would want to prevent all of the evil and suffering in the world.

¹ Hume, David, and Richard Henry Popkin. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.

² Beebe, James R. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed September 24, 2018.

9. If God knows about all of the evil and suffering in the world, knows how to eliminate or prevent it, is powerful enough to prevent it, and yet does not prevent it, he must not be perfectly good.
10. If God knows about all of the evil and suffering, knows how to eliminate or prevent it, wants to prevent it, and yet does not do so, he must not be all- powerful.
11. If God is powerful enough to prevent all of the evil and suffering, wants to do so, and yet does not, he must not know about all of the suffering or know how to eliminate or prevent it—that is, he must not be all-knowing.
12. If evil and suffering exist, then God is either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not perfectly good.

Eventually, this argument boils down to the fact that under these conditions, it is impossible for evil and God to co-exist. The existence of one automatically rules out the other.

However, most philosophers contend that there should be rationale for any choice, and the same should apply for any divine entity. This “morally sufficient reason” must modify statements 9 through 12, where it now has an addendum, “unless God has a morally sufficient reason. In addition to this, it is implied that it is not morally permissible for God to allow evil unless he has a morally sufficient reason.

Plantinga's Free Will Defense & the Opposition

Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense is one of the most famous responses to the morally sufficient reason for evil. He writes, "God's creation of persons with morally significant free will is something of tremendous value. God could not eliminate much of the evil and suffering in this world without thereby eliminating the greater good of having created persons with free will with whom he could have relationships and who are able to love one another and do good deeds."³ Essentially, because human life is the most valuable when humans have free will, God allows his creations to have free will for the greater good.

One problem with this immediately jumps out: if God is omnipotent, could it not be possible for a world where free will exists and evil does not? Plantinga writes that the two are mutually exclusive, where God cannot causally determine something without infringing upon a human's free will.

Many philosophers, most notably J. L. Mackie have argued that God should be able to create a world of free will and no evil. To put it concisely, Mackie writes,

"If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on one or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act

³ Plantinga, Alvin. "The Nature of Necessity." Oxford University Press, February 1, 1978.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/0198244142.001.0001>

freely but always go right. Clearly his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being omnipotent and wholly good.”⁴

It is important to note that Mackie used this argument to disprove the existence of an Omni-God, perhaps even a God altogether, as a method to justify the correctness of atheism. Michael J. Almeida, one of his contemporaries, supports Mackie’s argument by describing God as a “perfect predictor” and that God can actualize many different worlds, including one where free will exists and evil does not because he is omniscient, but for some reason he does not⁵.

However, Almeida and Mackie are essentially saying that there should be a world where humans freely choose the benevolent action every time. Firstly, this undercuts the very definition of free will itself, but it also undercuts the value of free will, as C.S. Lewis writes, “free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating.”⁶

A more glaring issue with Plantinga’s argument as it stands is that it does not account for natural evil. Human free will cannot account for natural disasters such as tsunamis that destroy entire countries and displace countless of God’s creation. Plantinga decides, “God allowed natural evil to enter the world as part of Adam and Eve’s punishment for their sin in the Garden of Eden.”⁷ This inherently implies that natural evil followed an act of moral evil done by a human.

⁴ Mackie, J. L. “IV.—Evil and Omnipotence.” *Mind* LXIV, no. 254 (1955): 200–212.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/lxiv.254.200>

⁵ Almeida, Michael J. “The Logical Problem of Evil Regained.” *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 36, no. 1 (September 2012): 163–76. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4975.2012.00240

⁶ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. London: Collins, 1955.

⁷ Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*

Personally, Almeida's argument of a perfect predictor can also support that God should have foreseen this, as well as the fact that an all-knowing divine being could have—and should have—removed the aspects of the environment that would have caused this. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, then the cost of the natural evil that would follow outweighs the act of moral evil, ensuring that the sin should not have occurred in the first place. While this is an infringement upon free will, the greater outcome of the total absence of natural evil is frankly more important and would also fall under the clause of a “morally sufficient reason”.

But there are other issues with Plantinga's argument. Most philosophers believe that Plantinga has committed an act of deception, effectively pulling a blanket over the eyes of philosophers, essentially a hat trick. There is an inherent issue of using the Bible as a historical source within a philosophical argument. Most scholars agree that The Old Testament is to be used as a symbolic source, not a historical one. Klein-Braslavy writes, “The stories about Adam are not anthropogony but a philosophical anthropology; they tell us about the structure of man, about his ultimate goal, how he should behave in order to reach it, and what will happen if he does not do so.”⁸ Essentially, these stories can tell us about the human condition, but the historical detail is not applicable. Furthermore, this argument would only work for those who believe in the story of Adam and Eve and the first sin, which is not a story found in all faith systems. The specific detail wherein natural evil was derived from and followed moral evil is quite unique, but the philosophical argument should be more universal, as the problem itself is universal. It is important to note that many of these arguments derive themselves from

⁸ Klein-Braslavy, Sara. “The Creation of the World and Maimonides' Interpretation of Gen. I-V.” In *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 65–78. Springer Netherlands, 1986. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-4486-2_6

Abrahamic religions, such as the aforementioned story of Adam and Eve, where terms such as evil and good are more absolute. Perhaps the solution lies in schools of thought that lie outside of this area—in the East, where good and evil are more relative and where philosophers are far more concerned with unlabeled actions and their impact.

An Introduction to Hindu Philosophy

Hinduism, known in the Vedas as Sanatana Dharma, and other Eastern religions, are far less rigid in general to their Abrahamic counterparts. As it pertains to this paper, the ideas of evil and good itself are far more relative⁹. A great expression of this is in the mythology itself; the *asuras*, or demons, are not specifically creatures of hell; their alliance is far more ambiguous. In fact, there are theories that *asuras* actually referred to the people of South India, as many of the historical locations of abodes of demons are found in Southern India, and many of the fabled heavenly abodes of gods are found in Northern India. Descriptions of *asuras* often included features common among those with South Indian blood—darker skin and hair. In Hindu mythology, many of these demons pray to the gods for boons and gifts, as well as conduct themselves with loyalty and great intelligence. On a spiritual level, asuras often represent the malicious qualities of humans, meaning that these asuras can manifest themselves in anyone at any time. In a similar manner, *devas* can also be an unruly and pompous lot of characters, somewhat similar to Gods and Titans in Greek mythology. These *devas* often represent elements of nature, which can be either beneficial or harmful given their context. This idea of ambiguity is an expression of the laxity of the defined terms of good and evil in Eastern religions and how relative human perception can be. It is important to note the symbolic (but not historic) significance of the human origin of the asuras. Unlike Plantinga's historical use of the Bible through the story of Adam and Eve, the symbolism of the asuras and their ambiguous nature is another precedent for the relativity of the terms "good" and "evil".

The aim of Hinduism, most simply put, is to achieve *moksha*, or spiritual liberation, where *Atman*, referring to the human soul, can join *Brahman*, the collective essence and soul of

⁹ Eliade, Mircea. The Encyclopedia of Religion. 1st ed. Vol. 5. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

the universe. This essence is in constant flux because of the karma, or action, which flows in and out. The human souls that are a part of the collective soul are constantly dying and being born. The only permanence in atman is the constant change. These ideas of relativity and constant change are important because they set the precedent that there are no absolutes.

Another important factor to discuss is the nature of God within Indian philosophy. Chapter XII of the Bhagavad Gita describes God an essence that is “imperishable, indefinable, unmanifest, omnipresent, unthinkable, unchangeable, immovable, and eternal” but says, “Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the unmanifest; for the goal, the unmanifest is very hard for the embodied to reach.”¹⁰ Lord Krishna, later on in the chapter says that worshipping the unmanifest and a manifested form of *Bhagavan* has the same level of devotion—essentially that the manifested form of the Lord is for devotees to visualize in their prayer. As a comparison to the more Western idea of the Omni-God, the qualities are essentially the same, but the Bhagavad Gita advises not to identify qualities to *Bhagavan*, but to a personal form of God for the individual devotee.¹¹ These freedoms of choice are important because they establish the individual path that each soul must take to achieve *moksha*. There are no perfect or right paths, only paths that fit the individual.

¹⁰ Chinmayananda, Swami. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita: English Transliteration*. 4th ed. Chinmaya Prakashan, 2005.

¹¹ Chinmayananda, Swami. *The Bhagawad Gita- Chapter XII & XIII*. Mumbai: Chinmaya Prakashan, 1985.

The Relativity of Action and God's Omni-Benevolence & Natural "Evil"

If the essence of the universe is in constant flux, then the environment and context in which an action or event occurs can change its classification of good or evil. Humans must contend that they do not know the full implications of their actions—only the Omni-God with his omniscience can know the full effects of an action. For this reason, just because God is omnipotent doesn't mean that God should do an action. A rather frivolous example is that God should not create a hurricane in the desert, because it would destroy the ecosystem of that desert. Another example is that God does not bring the dead back to life even if that person could do more good for the universe, because it would violate the truths that have been set into place and what humankind understood about the universe. Imagine the chaos should someone's loved one be brought back to life—it would either be seen as a miracle, with believers rushing to their place of worship to ask for the same for their loved ones, or the beginning of the apocalypse, with the undead walking amongst us once more. The ultimate act of benevolence that God has done is not violating the laws of this universe, as a means to not destroy the foundation of thought for humankind. Just because God can, does not mean that God should or will. God must be Omni-benevolent, because the world hasn't yet plunged into fire and brimstone. However, since no one has the knowledge to definitively claim that God's actions are not the most beneficial, this unfortunately creates a loop where an imperfect human mind must judge the actions of a perfect being, which is seemingly impossible. We must contend that God by these premises is optimizing the amount of beneficial outcomes, as how Gottfried Leibniz defined an optimal world in "God, Evil and the Best of All Possible Worlds"¹². However, Leibniz identifies an

¹²Murray, Michael J. and Greenberg, Sean, "Leibniz on the Problem of Evil", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/leibniz-evil/>

objective “best” of all possible worlds, but the inherent idea of “best” is subjective. If God is inherently using a utilitarian approach, then by what grounds is God picking the best possible action? Because these actions are subjective to each person, these actions must be interpreted into one’s personal God as necessary. In the end, this defers to another part of Leibniz’s argument—that an imperfect being cannot fathom the actions of a perfect being.

When redefining God’s Omni-benevolence to something of divine utilitarianism, it is important to analyze where human free will fits within the puzzle. Here, humans do have free will to commit or not commit moral evil, as agreed by most, but God is still omniscient, in that God does know what actions one will or will not do. As also aforementioned, it is under God’s omni-benevolence that he not tamper with human will or anything in the perceived universe because it would cause more harm than good. This means that under this divine utilitarianism, God is acting as a deist, in which a divine being has created this universe, but will no longer affect it. God can, however, affect universes outside of this one, such as an afterlife, where God can grant *moksha* to an individual.

This leads to an issue of natural evil—why create natural evil in the first place?

Natural “Evil”

It would seem that human free will cannot be tampered with by God because it would devalue human life on their journey to achieve *moksha*. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other. To tamper with human free will would tamper with the value of happiness in the universe, something that strikes against God’s Omni-benevolence. Next, as aforementioned, God cannot tamper with the various laws of this universe, such as the death of an embodied form, or the laws of physics, and so on, because they would cause more chaos, also at odds with God’s Omni-benevolence. In some sense of the word, God achieves balance of this universe without taking divine action within it. Most crudely put, God is a deist because he is a utilitarian. Therefore, the strict laws of universe must contend with human action—something that is always in constant flux—because God is not acting. Perhaps, it is interesting to presume that natural evils are just effects of established laws and actions, and that these established laws are the most benevolent they can be.

As an example, gravity holds planetary bodies together and allows for life to occur, but it can also be seen as the intrinsic cause for natural disasters. For example, tsunamis are at their root caused by the tides of the moon, which eventually boils down as an effect of gravity¹³. But gravity is more beneficial to life than it is harmful. Should one reframe evil and good actions as solely actions and effects that sustain the balance of this universe, where God is limited by the fact that tampering with human will and already established laws of the universe will always

¹³ US Department of Commerce, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "Tides and Water Levels." NOAA's National Ocean Service. December 19, 2004.
https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/tides/tides02_cause.html.

cause more harm than good, than the idea, then moral evils become morals, and natural evil is just nature.

Both Almeida and Mackie argue that humans should have the free will to always choose the “good” decision. As aforementioned, free will is worth nothing if one is always destined to choose the “right” decision. It also impossible for humans, as imperfect beings, to determine the “good” decision, as often time humanity finds itself choosing from two “evils” or two “goods”. There is an argument to be made in which evil must exist for the value of good to be recognized. But when the labels of evil and good fall away and everything becomes more relative, it often becomes imperative that humans judge through something of a cost-benefit system, similar to the judgement of gravity and the laws of the universe.

Applications and Consequences

If God is an Omni-God and a divine utilitarian (meaning a deist) then is there still value in the idea of prayer? Unless the one who is praying has any semblance of influence upon the situation, there is very little point in praying unless one is asking for the strength to act or to express gratitude, because in both cases, one is asking for something that the act of praying can achieve if one believes in prayer itself. It may also aid in realms beyond this universe, such as the afterlife, because a divine being does have power in realms outside of this one, but this cannot be proven. In the previously quoted passage of the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna further describes the Lord as a personal aid for those seeking moksha, which could be seen as one of the many goals of human life that make life worth living, as Lewis explains. For this reason, it would not be beneficial to God's creations if God were to interfere in this world; it would be beneficial if God interfered in an afterlife to reward or punish those who have passed on.

Many of these ideas are fundamentally taken from deism, where a divine power created the seeds for this universe, but does not act in it. However, unlike deism, this argument supplies that God cannot act because it is not benevolent for him to act, as it takes away from human experience and takes away from the balance of this universe. This does leave open the possibility that God can and does act in other realms beyond this one, such as in any sort of afterlife, as aforementioned. Beyond this, it is interesting to ponder the nature of God's Utilitarianism. Nuances such as this would be up to the devotee to decide; as previously mentioned, Lord Krishna describes the Personal God as one who aids the devotee on his or her journey, therefore the nature of one's God is entirely up to the devotee.

Conclusion

David Hume's phrasing of the Logical Problem of Evil was originally meant to be answered within the Christian domain, but it does not have to. In a similar vein, Plantinga's Free Will Defense can be applied to other systems of thought, but only partially. To place his argument into the confines of a different belief system, where the rules themselves have changed, allows for a new definition of moral evil to be established. When paired with modern scientific thought, a new definition of natural evil, an evil of necessity, is also established, and the "rules" by which God can act can become fixated. Because God is omni-benevolent, the most benevolent act that he can do is to not tamper with what he has created, wherein "best" can only be identified by the individual.

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