
MEETING THE EVIL GOD CHALLENGE

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Abstract: The evil God challenge is an argumentative strategy that has been pursued by a number of philosophers in recent years. It is apt to be understood as a parody argument: a wholly evil, omnipotent and omniscient God is absurd, as both theists and atheists will agree. But according to the challenge, belief in evil God is about as reasonable as belief in a wholly good, omnipotent and omniscient God; the two hypotheses are roughly epistemically symmetrical. Given this symmetry, thesis belief in an evil God and belief in a good God are taken to be similarly preposterous. In this paper, we argue that the challenge can be met, suggesting why the three symmetries that need to hold between evil God and good God – intrinsic, natural theology and theodicy symmetries – can all be broken. As such, we take it that the evil God challenge can be met.

The evil God challenge is an argumentative strategy that has been pursued by a number of philosophers in recent years (Madden & Hare, 1968; Haight & Haight, 1970; Cahn, 1977; Millican, 1989; New, 1993; Law, 2010; Lancaster-Thomas, 2018b; Collins, 2019).¹ The challenge has also gained considerable traction at the popular level.² It is apt to be understood as a parody argument: a wholly evil, omnipotent and omniscient God (henceforth ‘EG’) is absurd, as both theists and atheists will agree. But according to the EG challenge, belief in EG is about as reasonable as belief in a wholly good, omnipotent and omniscient God (henceforth ‘GG’);³ the two hypotheses are roughly epistemically symmetrical.⁴ Given this symmetry thesis, ‘belief in an evil god and belief in a good god are similarly preposterous’ (Lancaster-Thomas, forthcoming, p. 5).

The argument seems apt to be cast in probabilistic terms,⁵ and so where ‘ $\text{Pr}(H|e)$ ’ represents the probability of a hypothesis H conditional on some evidence e, and where ‘E’ represents the total evidence,⁶ we suggest that the EG challenge may be formulated as follows:

- (1) GG is approximately epistemically symmetrical to EG. [premise]

- (2) If a hypothesis $H1$ is approximately epistemically symmetrical to another hypothesis $H2$, then $\Pr(H1 | E) \approx \Pr(H2 | E)$. [premise]
- (3) Therefore, $\Pr(GG | E) \approx \Pr(EG | E)$. [from (1) and (2)]
- (4) $\Pr(EG | E)$ is very low. [premise]
- (5) Therefore, $\Pr(GG | E)$ is very low. [from (3) and (4)]

Naturally, all of the action in the philosophical literature concerning the EG challenge surrounds the question of whether the symmetry thesis, premise (1), really does hold. We think the symmetry thesis can be seen to comprise three sub-theses:

- (A) Intrinsic symmetry: the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all evil deity is about as intrinsically plausible and coherent as the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all good deity.
- (B) Natural theology symmetry: natural theological evidence (e.g. the apparent ‘fine-tuning’ of the universe; phenomenal consciousness; religious experience; and objective moral values and duties) lends roughly equal support to GG and EG alike.
- (C) Theodicy symmetry: most of the significant theodicies that try to explain why a GG might allow such a tremendous amount of evil can be ‘mirrored’ with about as much plausibility so as to yield reverse theodicies that try to explain why an EG might allow such a tremendous amount of goodness.

The EG challenger needs all three symmetries to hold in order for the challenge to succeed. All it would take to meet the challenge is to show that at least one of these symmetries breaks down. In this paper, we aim to undermine all three. EG challengers have devoted considerable effort to defending (B) and (C), whereas relatively little has been said in defence of (A). This is rather striking, particularly given that on longstanding and influential ways of thinking about the metaphysics of goodness and evil in the classical theistic tradition, a wholly evil, uncreated, ultimate being is incoherent. Indeed, some EG challengers have claimed that the EG challenge can be run intact even if (A) is false, that is, even if EG is shown to be impossible by arguments that don’t also apply to GG. We shall begin, then, by arguing that this is not the case. We will then outline several reasons for thinking that (A) is false. Following that, we go on to argue that (B) and (C) are also false.

1. Intrinsic coherence asymmetry

1.1. THE FAILURE OF THE ‘BRACKETING MOVE’

As we have said, there has been little defence of (A) by EG challengers, and what’s more, some EG challengers believe that the issue of intrinsic

symmetry can be avoided altogether by appealing to the alleged absurdity of the reverse theodicies, which, given (C), entails that the theodicies on behalf of GG are similarly absurd and hence that GG is very likely false:

[E]ven supposing an evil god is, for some reason X, an impossibility, we can still ask the hypothetical question: setting aside the fact that so-and-so establishes that an evil god is an impossibility, how reasonable would it otherwise be to suppose that such an evil being exists? If the answer is 'highly unreasonable', i.e. because of the problem of good, then the evil-god challenge can still be run. We can still ask theists to explain why, if they would otherwise reject the evil-god hypothesis as highly unreasonable, do they not take the same view regarding the good-god hypothesis? (Law, 2010, p. 372; Lancaster-Thomas, 2018b, p. 7)

Let's call this attempt to circumvent the issue of intrinsic coherence 'the bracketing move'. Not all EG challengers attempt this move; Collins (2019), for example, does not. The following section is directed only at those EG challengers who do attempt it.

The idea seems to be roughly this: the EG challenger might concede that the intrinsic coherence symmetry, (A), fails in virtue of some argument that shows EG to be impossible and that can't be mirrored for GG. Still, the EG challenger will point out that it's clear the theist would have rejected EG even if there had been no good arguments for the impossibility of EG, and this is because the theist recognizes that EG is powerfully disconfirmed by the sheer amount of goodness in the world, the various 'reverse theodicies' notwithstanding. But given that the problem of goodness for EG is a mirror image of the problem of evil for GG, and given that there is no natural theological evidence that favours GG over EG, then the theist should admit that GG is similarly blown out of the water by the sheer amount of evil in the world, the various theodicies notwithstanding. The bracketing move, then, is an attempt to run the EG challenge whilst bracketing the issue of whether (A) holds:

- (6) Whether or not symmetry (A) holds, symmetries (B) and (C) do hold. [premise]
- (7) $\Pr(\text{EG} \mid \text{goodness})$ is extremely low, and the various reverse theodicies do little or nothing to alter this situation. [premise]
- (8) Therefore, $\Pr(\text{GG} \mid \text{evil})$ is extremely low, and the various theodicies do little or nothing to alter this situation. [from (6) and (7)]

We shall now explain why the bracketing move fails. The support for (6) consists in the arguments offered by Law (2010), Collins (2019)⁷ and Lancaster-Thomas (2018a, 2018b). We shall come to those in due course, but for now, let's suppose that (6) is true. As for (7), the support appears to consist in its alleged intuitive obviousness:

When presented with the evil-god hypothesis, most of us immediately dismiss it as absurd, typically because we consider the problem of good decisive. (Law, 2010, p. 357)

How persuasive are our three reverse theodicies? Intuitively, not at all. Rather than being taken seriously, they usually provoke amusement among theists and non-theists alike. (Law, 2010, p. 259)

Lancaster-Thomas concurs:

[T]he problem of good is perhaps the biggest problem one could pose to the EGH. (2018b, p. 3)

Whilst we agree with Law and Lancaster-Thomas that most people judge EG to be absurd, we doubt their explanation as to why most people think this, that is, that most people have this judgment because of the sheer amount of goodness in the world.⁸ But let us simply grant that there is a widespread and powerful intuition that the amount of goodness in the world rules out EG. There is still a problem. The problem is that an *additional claim* is needed in order for the bracketing move to work. Consider the following two propositions:

P: There is too much goodness in the world for it to be the creation of an EG.
Q: There is far more goodness than evil in the world.

What is needed for the bracketing move to succeed is for P to be true and for Q to be false. Here is why. Q falsifies the all-important theodicy symmetry thesis, (C), because if it's true that there is far more goodness than evil in the world, then the problem of good is a much harder problem for EG than the problem of evil is for GG, and so the EG challenge runs into trouble.

Law himself seems aware that a number of theists will find Q intuitively obvious.⁹ Realizing that such an intuition, if accorded weight, spells trouble for the theodicy symmetry thesis, (C), Law tries to head it off in the following passage:

Some theists consider it just obvious that the world contains more good than evil, but then many (including some theists) are struck by the exact opposite thought. Appeals to subjective estimations can carry little weight. (Law 2010, p. 370)

This seems to be an attempt to have it both ways: the intuition on which the bracketing move relies – the intuition that P is obvious – is accorded great weight, and yet the intuition that threatens symmetry (C) – the intuition that Q is obvious – is accorded almost no weight. This inconsistency is particularly acute given that theists who find P intuitive will tend also to find Q intuitive. In short, insofar as the EG challenger wishes to appeal to an allegedly widespread intuition, she needs not just to show that many people find P intuitively obvious, but instead, to show that they find P obvious whilst *not* finding Q obvious.

The attempt to support (7) by appeal to its alleged intuitive obviousness is flawed. Can (7) be supported via a different route? It seems that there is another path that lies open to the EG challenger, namely, to add content to the EG hypothesis such that our observation of significant amounts of goodness in the world is straightforwardly inconsistent with the predictions of the EG hypothesis. As we have been considering it so far, the EG hypothesis states that there exists an all powerful, all knowing, wholly evil, intelligent being who created and sustains the world. But now let us modify the hypothesis by adding that this being has certain specific interests, namely, an overriding desire is to inflict maximal pain upon sentient creatures at all times. Let's call this hypothesis EG*. EG* overwhelmingly predicts that the world we observe should contain an enormous amount of pain and no pleasure. The various reverse theodicies discussed by EG challengers will be ineffective in showing that this sort of being might permit the degree of goodness that exists in our world. In short, EG* predicts what we might term 'torture world', a place of unmitigated torment for all. The world we actually observe is obviously not torture world and is a rather far cry from torture world. The amount of goodness in the world does indeed massively disconfirm EG*.

If the EG challenger is going to modify EG to EG*, then for the sake of consistency, she must modify GG in a symmetrical manner. As we have understood it, GG is the hypothesis that there exists an all powerful, all knowing, wholly good, intelligent being who created and sustains the world. GG can be modified in a symmetrical manner by adding that God's overriding interest is the bestowal of maximal pleasure on sentient creatures at all times, what we might call 'bliss world'. Let's call this modified hypothesis GG*. GG* is just as straightforwardly ruled out by the amount of evil and pain in the world as EG* is by the amount of goodness in the world.

The problem is, whilst this modified form of the EG challenge can successfully avail itself of the bracketing move and hence avoid having to defend symmetry (A), the price to be paid is that the challenge no longer applies to GG but only to GG*. In order for the challenge to apply to GG, the EG challenger would have to show that GG* is entailed by (or at least pretty probably given) GG. We see no reason to think that GG* is probable given GG, let alone entailed by it. (Indeed, we shall have more to say about GG's interests below.)

In short, the bracketing move relies on (7), the claim that the goodness in the world is alone sufficient to strongly disconfirm EG. We suggest that the EG challenger has two ways to try to secure (7). The first is to appeal to an allegedly shared intuition. But we have suggested above that there are serious difficulties with this approach. On the other hand, the EG challenger can modify the EG hypothesis in such a way that the hypothesis predicts a 'torture world', which is straightforwardly disconfirmed by the goodness in the world. The drawback is that the GG hypothesis must then be modified

in a symmetrical manner, so that the challenge no longer applies to GG (i.e. standard theism), but only to GG*.

1.2. INCOHERENCE AND EPISTEMIC PROBABILITY

Given the failure of the bracketing move, the EG challenger needs to defend the intrinsic coherence symmetry, (A). We now turn to consider some reasons for thinking that (A) is false. Before we proceed any further, however, we need briefly to make clear the way that we understand the epistemic significance of the reasons we are about to sketch. If it is indeed the case that an EG is incoherent, then it is metaphysically impossible that there be an EG. But crucially, a proposition that is impossible may nonetheless have an epistemic probability in between 0 and 1, given our evidence. For instance, given Mary Jane Watson's evidence, the epistemic probability is moderate that Peter Parker is numerically distinct from Spiderman (let's call this proposition 'D'), even though it is in fact a metaphysical impossibility that D be true. Suppose Mary Jane acquires some further evidence E, for instance, hearing Spiderman's voice and noticing its similarity to Peter Parker's. When E is taken into account, the epistemic probability of D on Mary Jane's evidence decreases, though still remains above zero. The epistemic probability of D on Mary Jane's evidence drops to zero if (and only if) she acquires evidence that renders it certain that Peter Parker is one and the same person as Spiderman.

This is much the same way as we will be assessing reasons for thinking that EG is incoherent. As we shall see below, several noteworthy theses concerning the metaphysics of goodness are incompatible with EG and yet compatible with GG. Unsurprisingly, these theses are propositions that are necessarily true if true and impossible if false. But again, propositions that are either metaphysically necessary or impossible can properly be assigned epistemic probabilities in between 0 and 1.¹⁰ Some theistic philosophers might hold that we can know for certain that EG is impossible, in virtue of knowing with certainty the truth of some metaphysical thesis about goodness that entails EG's falsity. We find this a stretch, and so here, we will defend only the more modest claim that certain metaphysical theses about goodness that are incompatible with EG are fairly plausible and hence have a moderately high epistemic probability.¹¹ To the extent that some such thesis T is epistemically probable, EG is improbable. That is, where T has an epistemic probability of n , the EG hypothesis has an epistemic probability of *at most* 1 minus n . Put another way, the epistemic probability of EG is 'squeezed' by T; any portion of the probability space that is occupied by T is a portion that cannot be occupied by EG. Hence, the more plausible T is, the more EG's epistemic probability is 'squeezed', in a way that is not paralleled for the epistemic probability of GG.

1.3. THE ONTOLOGICAL PRIMACY OF GOODNESS OVER EVIL

If evil is a privation of the good, such that goodness has ontological primacy over evil, then EG cannot exist. That is, a being who is purely and wholly evil doesn't make sense. Because evil is a lack of some good, on the privation account, EG is ruled out. It might, however, be asserted that the privation theory of evil (PTE) is out of favour nowadays. Popularity is a precarious indicator of truth in philosophy, but in any case, it is actually untrue that the PTE is as unpopular as is sometimes thought.¹² Whilst there are numerous philosophers who defend it explicitly (Oderberg, 2014; 2020, ch. 5-8; Anglin & Goetz, 1982; Davies, 2006, pp. 143–148; Lee, 2007; Alexander, 2012, ch. 5), it also seems to follow from a functional account of goodness,¹³ which has no shortage of adherents in contemporary philosophy.¹⁴ We will have more to say about this shortly, but due to space, we will be unable to spend long defending this claim. In any case, we will understand the privation view of evil as holding that,

evil (or badness in general) is the absence of a good that is supposed to be present (I take this to be equivalent to another way of putting the doctrine – evil is the privation of a due good). (Alexander, 2012, p. 96)

We think there are various ways to try to motivate PTE, with one common approach working through paradigm cases of evil or badness and trying to show in every case, that the evil under consideration is best understood as consisting in the absence or corruption of a good thing. The other way to argue for the PTE is to defend a general theory of goodness that entails the PTE, namely, the functional/attributive theory. This latter strikes us as by far the more promising approach. In short, the thought is that the term 'good' does not in fact pick out a first-order property, which is common to all the things to which we attach it. The same goes for the term 'bad'. Rather, the semantic content of 'good' and 'bad' varies depending on the nouns that these terms modify. There are good books, good husbands, good cakes, good looks, good assassins, good cars and so on, but there is no particular first-order property that all these things share in common. Likewise, there are bad holidays, bad sons, bad smells, bad people and bad hair days, but no particular first-order property they all possess. Lee writes that this suggests that 'good',

signifies, not directly a nature or property, but a way or extent of having other properties, different properties in different cases. Evidently, as these examples illustrate, it signifies 'fulfilling the standards appropriate for a specific type of thing'. (Lee, 2007, p. 487)

Correlatively, when the term 'bad' is involved, 'bad' signifies not any particular property but rather a failure to fulfil the standards appropriate for a given kind of thing. What it takes to fail varies widely depending on the kind

in question. According to this functional/attributive account, then, the meanings of the adjectives ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are underdetermined unless they are being used to modify a kind term (whether implicitly or explicitly). A given kind has a nature or function that is essential to it, and its nature or function determines what it is to be a flourishing, that is, ‘good’, instance of the kind or a deficient, that is, ‘bad’, instance of the kind.¹⁵ Badness is a privation, then, because something is only ever ‘bad’ in virtue of its failure to exhibit (or to exhibit to a sufficient degree) a property that a member of a given kind ought to have. Put another way, goodness consists in fulfilment of proper function; badness consists in deviation from proper function. There is far more that could be said in defence of this theory of goodness and badness, many subtleties to be worked out and objections or counterexamples to respond to, but this will have to suffice. We at least think this theory of evil will gain a significant portion of our epistemic probability space and therefore is relevant to the EG challenge because it rules EG out. To repeat, this is because if evil is ontologically dependent on goodness, then an ontologically ultimate wholly evil being is impossible.

This fact doesn’t seem to have gone unnoticed by all defenders of EG, because Collins (2019, pp. 87–88) claims that the PTE can be mirrored so to generate an equally plausible privation theory of goodness (PTG) that will cause no problems for EG. We think Collins is wrong about this, where one of our worries is that Collins’ suggestions involve taking what we view as some of the weaker arguments for the PTE and swapping one or more of their premises for an equally plausible ‘mirror’ version. This is not a recipe for generating an argument for a PTG that is just as plausible as the strongest argument for the PTE. So, for instance, Collins considers Augustine’s argument: that nothing is evil unless it is destroying or corrupting something; but something inherently evil would be able to exist apart from other things; therefore, nothing is inherently evil (i.e. evil is a privation). Collins mirrors the argument like so:

[N]othing is good unless it is promoting, benefiting, or rectifying something. But something inherently good could exist apart from other things, and benefiting nothing. Thus there cannot be anything inherently good. Thus good is just a privation. (2019, p. 89)

Even if we granted that Collins’ mirror version is as plausible as the original argument, that wouldn’t show that the PTG is as plausible as the PTE – not, at any rate, if there is a considerably stronger argument for the PTE to be found elsewhere, one that cannot be mirrored.

The attributive account of goodness and badness that we considered earlier entails the PTE, because on that account, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ signify the success of a thing at fulfilling the function proper to a given kind and the deficiency of a thing at performing the function proper to a given kind, respectively. The linguistic data lend strong support to the attributive account, and

there are decent responses available to the most prominent alleged counter-examples.¹⁶ It seems plausible that this is the strongest way to defend the PTE. We can see no way for this approach to be mirrored. Given that the support for the attributive account derives from ordinary usage of the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’, it simply isn’t open to the EG challenger to stipulate that bad signifies the fulfilment of the standards that are proper to a thing of a given kind and that ‘good’ signifies the failure to fulfil those standards. But couldn’t the EG challenger engage in a bit of verbal redescription of the theory and say that goodness consists in a thing’s lacking anything that would cause (or constitute) a deviation from proper function? The answer is, of course, yes. But this exercise in paraphrasing is hardly sufficient to show that the PTE can be genuinely mirrored. The fact that one can redescribe ‘writing left-handed’ as ‘writing with the end of a limb that is neither one’s right hand nor one’s feet’ hardly shows that the latter is an equally natural way to describe what is going on. We suggest that the simplest and most natural expression of the PTE is that goodness involves a thing’s doing what it is supposed to do and badness involves a thing’s not doing what it is supposed to do. As such, if PTE is correct, then an ontologically ultimate, wholly evil being is incoherent.

1.4. DIVINE ATTRIBUTES THAT ENTAIL PERFECT GOODNESS

It is worth mentioning that a number of philosophers have argued that certain non-moral divine attributes entail perfect goodness.¹⁷ Because we have nothing to add here, we shall simply mention this suggestion, noting that this is yet one more way in which the intrinsic probability of EG is squeezed. Various authors have pointed out that divine omniscience entails perfect goodness if moral motivation internalism is true.¹⁸ Moral motivation internalism is sometimes known as the ‘guise of the good’ thesis, which states that having an all-things-considered desire for X implies that one takes X to be a good thing. All that to say, if it is true that one cannot genuinely desire X without believing X to be a good thing, then a being who infallibly knows what is good and what is bad will never desire what is bad. Hence, if moral motivation internalism is true, then an omniscient, wholly evil being is impossible.¹⁹

1.5. GOD’S METAPHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE MORAL TRUTHS

A final consideration that bears upon the intrinsic coherence of EG is the issue of God’s metaphysical relationship to ethical truth. In short, it seems that the EG hypothesis is compatible only with a certain view on this matter, whereas the GG hypothesis is compatible with a wide range of views. This falls short of showing with certainty that EG is incoherent, but as with other incoherence challenges, at the very least it

shrinks the portion of the epistemic probability space that is occupied by the EG hypothesis and does so in a way that is not mirrored for the GG hypothesis.

Broadly speaking, there are at least four different ways of construing the metaphysical relationship between God and ethical truth. We can give convenient labels to these four views that bear the names of philosophical figures who are often associated with them, although we certainly don't mean to claim that a given view is a genuinely accurate interpretation of the thought of the figure with whom we associate it. Firstly, there is the Thomistic view, which claims that goodness and evil consist in a thing's fulfilling and deviating from, respectively, its proper function, and that the God-given natures of things determine what is proper for them. We have already argued that the functional account of goodness is incompatible with the EG hypothesis, because the functional account entails that goodness is more ontologically basic than evil, which makes the notion of an ontologically ultimate, wholly evil being incoherent. Secondly, there is what we will call the Ockhamist view. On this view, ethical truths are determined by God's will, and there is no deeper story to tell about why God wills what he wills, he just does. This view is incompatible with the EG hypothesis, because given that whatever God wills is good, then no matter how perverse (from our point of view) God's will is, the things God wills are always good – there is nothing in virtue of which God is evil.²⁰ Thirdly, there is the Augustinian view, as we shall call it, which holds that God's loving nature or character is the paradigm of goodness, the yardstick against which all created goods are measured and that God wills what he wills because of his loving nature or character. This view is also incompatible with the EG hypothesis, for similar sorts of reasons as the Ockhamist view. Given that goodness consists in resembling the character of God, nothing would make it true that God is evil, no matter how twisted and perverse his character is (as judged by what we take to be the actual ethical standards).

On the Platonist view, the ethical truths are what they are irrespective of God's nature, character or will. Only this view, then, is clearly compatible with the EG hypothesis. On this view, there is an ethical yardstick independent of God, in virtue of which it is true that an EG is wholly evil. It seems that the EG challenger needs this particular view to be true. This is a drawback because even if the Platonist view is plausible, the conjunction of the other three views surely occupies a non-negligible portion of the epistemic probability space, and so the EG hypothesis has its share of the probability space squeezed accordingly. But what's more, of all the four views we have considered, the Platonist view is the one that sits least comfortably with the sovereignty and ontological ultimacy of God given the way it accords equal ontological primacy to something other than God, and this seems to be a strike against its plausibility as a theory.

of the relationship between God and ethical truth.²¹ Given that we nonetheless consider the Platonist view to be epistemically possible, none of this shows with certainty that EG is incoherent, but it does further reduce the EG hypothesis' intrinsic probability.

Perhaps, though, we have been too quick. For we have only considered objectivist accounts of ethical truths and their compatibility with the EG hypothesis. How would things look if we were to consider subjectivist accounts of ethical truth? Surely they occupy a non-negligible portion of the epistemic probability space. According to a typical subjectivist account of ethical truth, 'torturing puppies for fun is wrong' is true in virtue of the consensus among reflective rational agents that torturing puppies for fun is wrong. One might think, then, that if some such account of ethical truth is correct, then there will be something in virtue of which EG is evil, namely, the widespread attitude among reflective rational agents that the kinds of things EG desires (murder, pillage, rape and torture) are wicked. Given a subjectivist account, a similar point would be true of GG. GG would be good in virtue of the fact that the things GG desires (love, beauty and self-sacrifice) are deemed good by the great majority of reflective rational agents. So one might think that EG and GG are roughly equally compatible with subjectivist views of ethical truth. But in fact, we suggest that EG faces a difficulty here that GG doesn't. Namely, that prior to creation, the only reflective rational agent in existence will be EG himself, and so it is his attitudes and preferences alone that will fix the content of moral goodness. That means that prior to creation, there will be nothing in virtue of which EG is evil. No such problem arises for GG. In the case of GG, prior to creation, the content of ethical goodness will be fixed by GG's attitudes and preferences alone, but this poses no problem, because GG exemplifies the very things that he desires and finds praiseworthy (love, beauty, etc.). Hence, even on a subjectivist account of ethical truth, there is something in virtue of which GG is wholly good. Now, the EG challenger might reply by suggesting that EG could have the same moral *beliefs* as GG would do (e.g. the belief that 'torturing puppies for fun is wrong') but that EG *desires* to do that which he believes to be wrong (e.g. to torture puppies for fun). We concede that on this view, EG's beliefs would fix the content of moral truth in a way that made it true that EG is evil. But the drawback of this view is that it depends upon the falsity of moral motivation internalism, according to which one cannot genuinely desire that which one takes to be bad. The portion of the probability space assigned to this view is accordingly squeezed; it can be no more probable than the falsity of moral motivation internalism.

In short, we have suggested that there are various metaphysical theses about goodness that are incompatible with EG and have at least some plausibility. The epistemic probability of EG is at most 1 minus *n*, where *n* is the

probability of the disjunction of metaphysical theses about goodness that are incompatible with EG. We have suggested that n is quite high. Hence, the intrinsic probability of EG is squeezed in a way that is not paralleled for GG. Of course, the EG challenger might try to run impossibility arguments against GG,²² but insofar as such arguments succeed, the EG challenge becomes entirely superfluous. Put another way, the EG challenge is uninteresting if it depends upon the success of some argument for the impossibility of GG.

2. *Natural theology asymmetry*

We now turn to consider symmetry (B), the natural theology symmetry. This holds that arguments from natural theology give roughly as much evidential support to EG as they do GG. We shall understand evidential support in terms of the likelihood ratio (also known as the Bayes factor). That is, the degree to which a piece of evidence e supports a hypothesis $H1$ over a rival hypothesis $H2$ is equivalent to the ratio $\text{Pr}(e|H1)/\text{Pr}(e|H2)$. Where N represents the total natural theological evidence, symmetry (B) claims that the ratio $\text{Pr}(N|GG)/\text{Pr}(N|EG)$ is close to being even; N lends approximately as much support to EG as to GG. Of course, even despite the parity with respect to evidential confirmation, insofar as they started out with very different prior probabilities, the two hypotheses will end up with accordingly different posterior probabilities.²³ But let's consider whether it really is the case that N lends roughly equal support to EG and GG alike. We shall suggest a few reasons for thinking it doesn't.

2.1. ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Here is one reason to think this. Take the ontological argument, or at least versions of it recently defended in the contemporary literature (Maydole, 2003, 2009; Nagasawa, 2017, ch. 6; Pruss & Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 166–169; Leftow, forthcoming; Bernstein, 2014). These – usually detailed – arguments conclude to a perfectly good necessary being, GG, not a perfectly evil necessary being, EG. What's more, because parodies of ontological arguments are often used to argue against such approaches, the authors above give specific arguments to suggest that the being must be perfectly good. For instance, Pruss and Rasmussen think this due to the nature of positive properties. Nagasawa takes it that parody arguments, such as the ontological EG argument, are neither structurally nor dialectically parallel to the ontological argument and that if one were to overcome these concerns, the argument would end up not being parallel. Finally, Maydole and Bernstein argue this way just in virtue of what perfections are. That is, these

contemporary arguments cannot be parodied to argue for a perfectly evil necessary being. If this is correct, then here we have an asymmetry between GG and EG.

Given this and because the ontological argument seems to us like an obvious place for a potential asymmetry, one would have thought that EG challengers would have much to say about this argument. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case. When the argument is mentioned, we are told that 'some ontological arguments are ... reversible' (Law, 2010, p. 371; Lancaster-Thomas, 2018a, p. 6; Collins, 2019, p. 87). By this, what seems to be meant is that a simplistic Anselmian ontological argument is reversible. This itself is questionable (Maydole, 2009, pp. 562–565), but leaving that aside, it is far from clear that those ontological arguments propounded in the contemporary literature are reversible, and these, after all, are the type of ontological arguments usually employed today. In addition to this, Law appears to think EG challengers don't need to worry much about ontological arguments because 'it is debatable, to say the least, whether any cogent ontological argument can be constructed', where the cogency of these arguments 'offered remains unrecognized not just by non-theists, but also by many theists – perhaps the majority of philosopher-theists' (2010, p. 370). To this, we repeat something we said earlier, namely, that ignoring or rejecting a view because it is not very popular or held by all is a mistake, particularly for those putting forward the EG challenge.²⁴ Maybe it will turn out that no ontological argument is in fact cogent, or that those that are can be parodied by an EG challenger, but this needs to be shown, not asserted. As for theists who don't adopt this argument, they are welcome not to, and therefore, they will be unable to appeal to this as an asymmetry with EG. Nevertheless, for those who do think it a cogent argument, this seems like a significant asymmetry and substantial enough to overcome the challenge, particularly because it would render an EG impossible.²⁵ As such it seems to us that EG challengers need to engage much more deeply with ontological arguments if they wish to show that symmetry (B) holds.²⁶

There are many other natural theology arguments, particularly those within the more classical tradition that also argue explicitly to a perfectly GG and have contemporary defenders (Feser, 2009, pp. 62–130; Feser, 2017). We don't attempt to defend these arguments here and are unsure about the cogency of some of them ourselves, yet if any are successful, then they also break (B)'s symmetry. Because EG challengers often try to make their point by appealing to symmetries pertaining to arguments that seem to us to be far from popular within the literature on GG,²⁷ it would seem strange if they think it acceptable to ignore these natural theological arguments that explicitly claim to defeat the symmetry on the grounds that they are not popular within the GG literature at present.²⁸ These arguments, therefore, also seem to deserve some attention by EG challengers. Nevertheless, we think there are other reasons to be sceptical of symmetry (B), which

appeal to arguments that at present are more popular within natural theology.

2.2. ARGUMENTS FROM FINE-TUNING AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Many natural theology arguments, for instance, fine-tuning arguments (Hawthorne & Isaacs, 2017, 2018), arguments from consciousness (Page, manuscript) and so forth, rely on a premise that given God's nature, he is likely to create a world with life, or consciousness, and so forth. That God will do these things doesn't have to have an epistemic probability of 1, but the existence of a life-permitting universe or consciousness needs to be more probable given theism than given atheism in order for the argument to run successfully (Hawthorne & Isaacs, 2018, pp. 150–154). Here is a parallel so as to make this thought clear. Imagine you find out that your dinner had been cooked for you and you know it has been made by one of two people, either Derek or Laura. At present you are 50:50 as to who cooked it, because they both quite like cooking. But then you find out that the dish has meat in it. What's more, you become aware that much work would have needed to be done in order to prepare this meat. This changes things, as you know Laura very much dislikes preparing meat and will try and get out of doing it whenever she gets the chance. As a result, given this additional evidence, you come to think it very unlikely that Laura made you dinner and that it is far more likely Derek did because he enjoys preparing and cooking meat. Our claim will be similar when it comes to GG and EG, namely, that given the things created in the world, such as the finely tuned universe and conscious beings, it turns out that it is a lot more likely that GG would have created this rather than EG. As such, these arguments will confirm a GG far more than an EG.²⁹

Why, then, would a GG create these things? The main reason we give comes from God being essentially good and the thesis that the good is necessarily diffusive (Kretzmann, 1988; O'Connor, 2008, pp. 111–129). If one holds to something like this, then God very likely will or perhaps must create.³⁰ Why then might God create conditions such that life and conscious beings can exist? We claim, as many others in the literature do, that God's essential goodness implies that he would only create worlds with a certain amount of goodness in them. It seems plausible to us that the majority of worlds that reach this required level of goodness will have life and consciousness in them. For instance, moral goods appear to require living beings who are consciously aware, and it seems highly likely that most good enough worlds will include goods like this.³¹ Thus, assuming we are right that most worlds that reach the standard of goodness required such that God might create them contain both life and consciousness, we have some reason based on God's goodness as to why he creates these things.

An additional bonus reason we provide is that God might create due to the nature of love. We think GG, in virtue of being perfectly good, will be loving, given that love is a good thing. We are also partial to an account of love given by Aquinas, defended and employed recently by Stump (2010, pp. 85–107) and Pruss (2013, pp. 8–48). On this account, ‘the nature of love, love requires two interconnected desires: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved, and (2) the desire for union with the beloved’ (Stump, 2010, p. 91).³² Given this definition of love, we think it is highly likely that God would create other beings so to express his love.³³ It also seems to us that something will need to be living and conscious in order for it to appreciate this love. That is, to have union with another being in the relevant sense is to have a meeting of minds, which requires consciousness on the part of the being who is the object of love.

One might worry on the love account just provided that God creates to fulfil a lack that he has, namely, the lack to fulfil his desire to love. We don’t think this is the case. God can have a perfectly loving nature without creatures, in that (1) and (2) will be desired although the desire not realized. Yet God is still loving in that he has both of these desires. Nevertheless, we think that these desires strongly suggest that God will wish to act on them and therefore create beings that are both living and conscious. One can either think this is the case because love is a good, and therefore, this reason that God creates is derivative to our previous reason, or that love is somewhat self-diffusive like the good, and therefore is similar to the previous reason in another way. Nevertheless, it may be the case that some still worry that God’s loving nature seems deficient in some way before the creation of other living-conscious beings. A way to solve this would be by adopting Christian theism and therefore the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, but because we are assuming a general bare theism, we ignore this approach.³⁴ Therefore, if one dislikes our reason based on love, we can fall back to our first reason, namely, the goodness of God providing reason for God to create.

Given what we have said we think we have provided two reasons why GG would likely create conditions for life and conscious beings, although we stress again we do not take these reasons to provide us with certainty of this, rather just a strong probability that GG would do so.³⁵ Nevertheless, we do claim that it is very likely that God creates conscious beings like us.

Turning now to EG, an account also needs to be provided as to why a purely evil being would be likely to create life, conscious beings and so forth. Further, in order for symmetry (B) to hold, it will also have to be the case that the likelihood that EG creates these things is nearly the same as the likelihood that GG would create them. The reason for this is that if it is much more likely that GG creates a finely tuned world, or a world with conscious beings, compared with EG, then these arguments will provide stronger evidence for GG than for EG.

So why would EG create both life and consciousness? EG challengers tend to assume that an EG would want to create in order to bring about agony and carnage, but thus far no one has offered a substantive account of EG's psychology in order to motivate this assumption. But once we try to think about what such a wholly evil being's psychology would be like, we are unsure that EG's creating would be very likely. This is not to say that we don't think it is wholly unlikely that EG would create a world with life and consciousness because he may wish to do that in order to harm people. Nevertheless, we don't think it is overwhelmingly likely. The reason for this comes down to thinking about what it would mean for a being to be wholly and completely evil. Would it mean, *inter alia*, that such a being was consumed by hatred? Plausibly, it would. If so, wouldn't this being hate even itself? It might very well do. And if that were so, wouldn't it want to destroy even itself? We think this is quite likely, namely, that a being consumed with hatred, including self-hatred, would wallow in isolation and self-torment rather than want to create anything at all.

As such, we think that it is less likely that EG would create a world with life and consciousness when compared with GG, because we take it that the probability space of EG not creating a world with these features is greater than the probability space we would give to GG not creating a world with them, as we think it overwhelmingly likely that GG would. Interestingly, our reasons for this partially come from the properties that GG and EG differ over, namely, being good and being evil. We have suggested why goodness lends itself far more strongly to God creating life and consciousness and why evilness gives us less reason to think God would do so. If EG defenders disagree, then they must show either that the psychology of EG makes it as likely that an EG would create a world containing life and consciousness when compared with GG or that GG is less likely to create these features so to mirror EG likelihoods. Until then, given what we have said, these two arguments from natural theology, the argument from fine-tuning and consciousness, confirm GG far more than they do EG. We therefore have multiple reasons to think that symmetry (B) is broken.

3. Theodicy symmetry

Turning now to the final supposed symmetry, (C), the theodicy symmetry, it will be no surprise that we wish to question this also. The idea behind this symmetry is that more or less any reason why GG might allow evil will be able to be mirrored as a reason why EG might allow goodness. Yet, and this seems to be the key, the reverse theodicies in defence of EG are supposed to be obviously ridiculous, with Law writing

How persuasive are our three reverse theodicies? Intuitively, not at all. Rather than being taken seriously, they usually provoke amusement among theists and non-theists alike. (2010, p. 359)

3.1. THEODICY AND ABSURDITY

The argumentative strategy for symmetry (C) contends that because the reverse theodicies for EG parallel those for GG, we should consider them equally absurd in defence of GG. Our response, which EG challengers may find surprising, is that we aren't persuaded that the mirror theodicies one can give in defence of EG should be dismissed as absurd or amusing. That is, 'we are not amused' when we hear them. This isn't to say we find them every bit as persuasive as we do those given for GG, but we will turn to that shortly. Further, having spoken to other theists about the reverse theodicies, it seems that many of them also don't find them absurd either.³⁶ We can understand why those who thought the original theodicies in defence of GG were totally unsuccessful would find the mirror versions used to defend EG amusing – after all, they didn't give any weight to the original ones. But for those who think that the original theodicies have some weight when thinking about GG, they will also tend to think they have some value when applied to EG. But if this is right, then it means that part of what the EG challenge was meant to achieve fails: namely, to show us that the theodicies for GG are clearly unsuccessful once we realize that they can be paralleled for EG and deemed absurd. For theists such as us, and those whose intuitions are similar to our own, this will simply be unpersuasive.

Defenders of the EG hypothesis might find this type of response incredible and think there is something clearly wrong with people with these kinds of intuitions. In this vein, we try to explain more fully why we think some theists, including ourselves, think this way. Suppose for a moment that you are a theist but not just any type of theist. Specifically, you are a theist who thinks there is good evidence for God's existence. What's more, you think this evidence is strong, and as a result, there is going to have to be some exceptionally strong evidence in order to persuade you that God doesn't exist. Nevertheless, you are unsure whether God is perfectly good or perfectly evil. The existence of evil provides you with some evidence against the thesis that there is a GG but not nearly enough to overcome the strong evidence that there is a God. At the same time, this evil provides some evidence for EG, but given the amount of goodness in the world, it by no means gives overwhelming evidence for this either. Paralleling this, the existence of goodness provides you with some evidence against the thesis that there is an EG but not nearly enough to overcome the strong evidence that there is a God. Yet this goodness also provides some evidence for GG, but given the amount of evil in the world, it by no means gives overwhelming evidence for this either. Assuming, as the EG argument seems to, that there is roughly the same amount of good as evil in the world (or at least, that we aren't in a

position to tell that there is more of one than the other), then it seems we are in a stalemate position. That is, we have more than enough evidence to think that there is a God, but we can't work out what type of being God is because the problem of evil lowers the probability of GG whilst raising the probability of EG, but the problem of good lowers the probability of EG whilst raising the probability of GG to the same extent. We are in an epistemic position where we're fairly certain that there is a God, but unsure of what type, and have anomalous data, good or evil, to deal with. Just as crime scene investigators and scientists do with anomalous data, we generate possible explanations as to why we have it so to make it less anomalous. If the explanations as to why GG and EG allow evil and good, respectively, are equally strong, as EG challengers seem to suggest, and yet the data of evil and good are not enough to counterbalance our evidence significantly such that we conclude there is no God at all, then we will think that God must have reasons either for allowing evil (if he is good) or for allowing good (if he is evil). The explanations why God allows either of these things might not be as strong as we would like, but that's often the case with anomalous data. Nonetheless, they have some plausibility. Perhaps we wouldn't find them plausible if we thought it very unlikely that there was a God to begin with, but this isn't the epistemic position we find ourselves in, and just as Law might find certain theodicies amusing given his epistemic backdrop,³⁷ we find certain things atheist philosophers say amusing too given our backdrop.

Nevertheless, despite this failure in convincing many of those to whom we take the EG challenge to be aimed, we don't think all the reverse theodicies are as plausible as the original ones in defence of GG. As such, even though it doesn't trouble us if symmetry (C) were to remain, we think it does in fact break down. We won't deal with all the theodicies that are supposedly reversible, but, taking our cue from EG challengers, we look at the theodicy that seems to us most popular among theists.

3.2. FREE WILL

Many GG theists think that God gives humans libertarian freedom. Many also think that a lot, if not all, moral evil is due to humans misusing their freedom, where how this freedom is used is not something God has causal control over. Why then does GG give humans this freedom, because by endowing humans with it, he allows the possibility of evil entering into the world, a possibility that we see has been realized? The answer given by Law is that by giving us this freedom, GG gives us moral responsibility that is a very great good (2010, p. 355). Whilst we don't think this incorrect, here is another reason why we think GG would give creatures freedom: so that love is possible. This is something we take to be a very great good indeed. It seems to us that causally determined beings, such as programmable robots, do not truly love anyone, even if they are programmed to act as if they

do. They are philosophical love zombies if you will. But GG wants to allow for real relationships and therefore gives us the freedom to engage in them with. Why this is relevant will become clear shortly.

The EG challenge claims that the free will defence can be mirrored for EG. Thus Law writes,

[E]vil god gives us freedom as it introduces the possibility of evil acts for which agents can be held morally responsible. An evil god could have created a universe populated with puppet beings that he ensured would always behave unpleasantly. But the behaviour of such puppet beings lacks the dimension of moral responsibility that transforms such acts into actions of the most depraved and despicable kind. To maximize evil, an evil god will want us to perform cruel and selfish acts of our own volition. (2010, p. 357)

The idea here again is that moral responsibility is the key reason why EG gives us free will; thus, the symmetry holds. But rather than morally good acts being the reason for which God wanted this freedom, morally evil acts are the goal instead. Without freedom, and in a world where we are compelled to maximize suffering, Law claims, 'no morally evil actions are performed. And moral evil is a particularly profound and important form of evil' (2010, p. 357), and therefore, an EG wouldn't omit this from an evil world.

We are less sure about this response than EG challengers are. The main reason for this is that it isn't clear to us that this is what EG would do, given what he appears to be seeking. EG, so it appears to us, is seeking a very evil world. Perhaps there is no such thing as the most evil world possible, but we suggest that EG will only create worlds that are above some threshold amount of evil, just as we might think GG will only create worlds where there is a significant amount of good. For GG, because one of the primary things we take him to be seeking to make possible is love, where this is perhaps the highest good, every world he creates will have to have creaturely free will so as to allow for this. That is, God cannot get what he wants out of a world without it. Yet EG wants a very evil world; can he get this without freedom? We suspect that whilst EG can get evil worlds that contain freedom, he cannot get worlds as evil as he would like with it.

To illustrate, consider two worlds. In the first world, there is free will, and as a result, people sometimes do good things and sometimes bad. In this world, there is also pain, by which we mean something we strongly desire to stop. Overall, however, in this world, things often go badly for people, but due to their free will, they can fight against this, and sometimes, things go well. This world, we might think, is pretty bad. Call this world *mixed world*. In the second world, people exist for the same length of time, but permanently in a torture chamber. There is no free will in this world, and as a result, there are no morally praiseworthy or blameworthy human actions. In this chamber, people are constantly subjected to a range of different types

of pain, such that they feel constant suffering. If this isn't bad enough, there is also a screen in front of each person such that people are psychologically tortured by watching others that they know to be members of their family undergoing the same torture.³⁸ The being doing these despicable acts is EG, and as such, he is the only being morally blameworthy for this state of affairs. Call this world *torture world*.

Question: which world would you rather be in? Because EG challengers seem interested in consensus data, we can tell you that everyone we have asked, philosopher or not, has said they would much rather be in mixed world than torture world. Why is that? Well, intuitively, it is because torture world seems the worse out of the two. What's more, of those we have asked, they have all thought it is significantly worse. Given this, which world seems more like the one EG would create, particularly as we are told by Law that EG wants to 'maximise evil' (2010, p. 357)? We think it's torture world. There is more evil and pain in it.³⁹ An excellent way for EG to maximize evil would be to place his conscious creatures in the world that they would least like to find themselves in and the one that they are least able to transform into a better place. Indeed, we would go further and suggest that if EG didn't place his creatures in the world, they would least like to find themselves in but instead placed them in a world such that creatures would prefer to find themselves in that world than some other possible world that he could have placed them in, then he wouldn't be unsurpassably evil.⁴⁰

It seems that worlds in which there is no freedom make it a lot easier to maximize evil than freedom-containing worlds do. After all, when God gives beings freedom even though there is a serious possibility that they commit moral evil, there is also the possibility that they don't and instead make the world a better place.

Imagine EG having to justify his decisions to a higher EG deity (HEG), in similar fashion to Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*.

HEG: So how did you create the world to be as evil as possible?

EG: Well, I created laws of nature that sometimes caused natural disasters, made pain a thing that was pretty regular, and I also gave people free will so that they could do truly terrible things to each other.

HEG: Free will! Why on earth did you give them that? Don't you know we can cause as much pain, if not more, without the need for free will? If anything, free will means there is very likely going to be less suffering than there could have been. You are a perfectly evil being, aren't you?

By contrast, no matter how much evil there is due to free will in GG's world, a senior benevolent deity would never be able to say parallel things to GG. This is because what GG is seeking *requires* free will, namely, the possibility of loving relationships. GG is not typically thought of as a

utilitarian maximizer of happiness but EG seems to be such a maximizer of evil. In which case, his giving free will to humans is a mistake. If defenders of EG respond by claiming that EG's primary goal is actually that there be a great deal of moral blameworthiness among free creatures, we question whether a being such as this is actually perfectly evil. If they respond by saying maybe he isn't perfectly evil but is close to that, then we would counter by noting that simplicity considerations speak against postulating a being such as this.⁴¹ The other option for the EG theorist is to show that GG doesn't desire that love be possible or that free will is not required for it. We think this will be difficult to achieve. As such, we take it that the free will defence therefore sits more comfortably with GG rather than EG.

Finally, we would add that if one is unpersuaded by this, there is another way to break symmetry (C). Consider the polar opposite of torture world, namely, bliss world. In bliss world, every sentient being experiences pure unalloyed bliss at every moment of its existence, involving an array of exquisitely pleasant sensory experiences in addition to an overwhelming sense of psychological well-being, wholeness and satisfaction. There is no free will in this world, and as a result, there are no morally praiseworthy or blame-worthy human actions. The being who is directly responsible for every blissful sensation is GG, and as such, he is the only being morally praiseworthy for this state of affairs. Given a choice between being a passive recipient of pleasant sensations for the rest of one's life and living out one's life in a bittersweet world that one gets to make a difference to through one's choices, many of us would choose the latter or, at the very least, would find it somewhat hard to choose between bliss world and mixed world. This suggests the following asymmetry between EG and GG: torture world is a much worse place for conscious creatures than mixed world is, and hence, EG has much more reason to create torture world than mixed world; but bliss world is not nearly as obviously a better place for conscious creatures than mixed world is, and hence, GG doesn't have much more reason to create bliss world than mixed world. Accordingly, the observation that our world is a mixed world is much stronger evidence against EG than it is against GG. Hence, symmetry (C) is broken.

The EG challenger might respond that a world with higher-order evils and some goods is worse than a world just with lower-order evils. Our thought experiment earlier is supposed to show that this isn't the case, and certainly, people we have asked would far prefer to live in a world where there were moderately frequent higher-order evils due to the misuse of freedom rather than a world of constant pain. Further, we might think psychological torture is a type of higher-order evil,⁴² and this can be achieved in worlds without free will. In any case, we think it will be difficult for an EG challenger to make it plausible that one should prefer a world of constant pain that lacks higher-order evils to a world with these types of higher-order evils due to free will.

4. Conclusion

We have argued that in order to defend their all-important symmetry thesis, proponents of the EG challenge need to defend all three sub-theses, namely, (A) intrinsic coherence symmetry, (B) natural theology symmetry, and (C) theodicy symmetry. Some proponents of the challenge have sought to ignore the first of these symmetries, claiming that even if it breaks down, the challenge can still be run intact. We have argued that this isn't the case. Accordingly, we went on to argue that there are several strong reasons for thinking that the intrinsic coherence symmetry does indeed break down. Whether or not any of these reasons suffice to show for certain that an EG is impossible, cumulatively, they drive down the intrinsic probability of an EG in a way that is not paralleled for GG. Turning to the natural theology and theodicy symmetries, we have argued that there are reasons to think neither symmetry holds. Again, we don't think our reasons here are exhaustive, but we do think they show that EG challengers have to do far more in order to show that there really is a challenge to defenders of GG. To us it seems like the EG challenge has not just been accepted but wholly met.

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NOTES

¹ For some history of the challenge, see Lancaster-Thomas (2018a, pp. 2–5).

² One can see this simply by searching 'evil god challenge' on Google – it has over 68,000,000 entries. Adding the search term 'blog' gives over 43,000,000 or 'podcast' over 14,000,000.

³ Sometimes in the paper, we will speak of 'theism', and by this, we just mean the belief in GG.

⁴ Different proponents of the EG challenge take slightly different stances on how close the symmetry is. For present purposes, we are content to grant that an approximate symmetry is all that is needed for the argument to succeed.

⁵ This is how Law (2010, p. 359) seems to think of it, when he suggests that we think in terms of ‘a pointer on a set of weighing scales … we find that many of the popular arguments loaded by some theists onto the left side of the good-god scale can just as effectively (or ineffectively) be loaded onto the left side of the evil-god scale’.

⁶ We intend the total evidence to include so-called tautological evidence, so that the probability of a hypothesis conditional on the total evidence will take into account such factors as the intrinsic coherence, simplicity and elegance of the hypothesis.

⁷ To be clear, Collins (2019) doesn’t, as far as we can tell, support the bracketing move, but he does argue for (6).

⁸ For what it’s worth, an informal survey we carried out on around 60 theist philosophers indicated that only a very small proportion of them (3, i.e. 5%) thought that the amount of goodness was the primary reason for rejecting EG. This is significant because the aforementioned EG challengers simply take it for granted that theists will find (7) intuitive, and presumably, the EG challenge is aimed at convincing theists – GG believers – that their position is no more reasonable than that of believers in EG. In fact, the assumption that most theists will find (7) intuitive appears unjustified. EG challengers might respond that theist philosophers are suppressing an intuition because they see where it would lead but that non-philosopher theists with chaste intuitions will tend to find (7) blatantly obvious. No evidence has been presented in support of this. But even if it were to be, what would follow? Most non-philosophers find the idea of an immaterial soul strongly intuitive (Chudek, et al., 2018), but naturalist philosophers take themselves to be entitled to ignore this.

⁹ For instance, theist Pruss explicitly claims ‘that there is much more good than evil in the human world’ (2009, p. 93).

¹⁰ That is, it may be the case that there are no metaphysically possible worlds where there is an EG, but there are epistemically possible worlds where there is an EG.

¹¹ Note that there are two ways in which the conclusion of an argument can be probabilistic. One way is for the argument to contain an explicitly probabilistic premise (e.g. if p , then probably q). The other way is for the argument to be deductive in nature and to contain no probabilistic premises but for at least one of its premises to be less than certain on our evidence. It is this latter sense in which the arguments we are about to consider render it more probable that EG is impossible. We take it that many (if not most) deductive arguments in philosophy are like this, but because such arguments are not explicitly formulated with probabilistic language, these arguments are not typically said to be ‘probabilistic’.

¹² Further, very little work has been performed on the ontology of evil in the literature apart from the privation view, so it is unclear what other accounts of evil one could endorse.

¹³ For an argument to this effect, see Alexander (2012, pp. 95–110).

¹⁴ Due to space, we don’t add references here, but those who are Aristotelian in moral philosophy, that is, virtue and natural law theorists, usually fall into this camp.

¹⁵ As for the proper function of created artefacts, it is natural to see these as arising from the intentions of the designer.

¹⁶ For some responses to some typical objections, see Lee (2007, pp. 473–476), Murphy (2002, p. 110), Oderberg (2020, ch. 5–8), and Alexander (2012, pp. 100–110).

¹⁷ Swinburne (2016, pp. 173–174) also argues that God’s goodness follows from his omnipotence. This might seem to provide us with another impossibility argument against EG. Miller (forthcoming) also discusses various ways in which the EG hypothesis is more complex than the GG hypothesis and hence has a lower prior probability than the latter.

¹⁸ For a recent articulation of this, see Weaver (2015).

¹⁹ This also places the EG challenger in a particularly awkward position, because we’ve argued that the EG challenger is committed to moral Platonism, and yet many would argue that this view is closely linked with moral motivation internalism.

²⁰ Could the EG challenger construct a mirror version of the Ockhamist view, according to which whatever God *hates* or *opposes* is good? The problem is that such a thesis concerning obligatoriness involves a fundamental mismatch: it claims that the property of an action’s being

obligatory – that is, the property of its being ethically demanded – is identical to the property of *going against* what the ontologically ultimate being has demanded. This mirror identity thesis concerning obligatoriness thus appears far less plausible than the original.

²¹ Leftow (2012, ch. 1) and Craig (2016) have made the case that God should be thought of as sovereign over all aspects of reality.

²² Lancaster-Thomas (2018b, p. 7), for instance, suggests that showing GG is impossible due to internal incoherence would restore the symmetry with GG.

²³ The key point that needs to be recognized here is that seemingly crazy hypotheses can receive just as much evidential confirmation as non-crazy hypotheses receive from one and the same piece of evidence, where this is just an implication of Bayesian confirmation theory (Hawthorne & Isaacs, 2018, pp. 146–147). This isn't problematic when we remember the other thing that plays a key part in this type of reasoning, namely, the prior probability we give each hypothesis.

²⁴ We say this because it has been acknowledged by EG defender Lancaster-Thomas (2018b, p. 2) that most of the literature is negative towards EG, and therefore, if we are to judge a view's worth based on the number of adherents, it has then the EG challenge comes out very poorly. We, however, think defenders of EG would like this conclusion to be resisted, and therefore, they should also resist ignoring ontological arguments just because not all theists think they are successful.

²⁵ For instance, many argue that you cannot have more than one necessary omni-being, and given the ontological argument concludes there is a necessary omni-GG, this rules out there also being a necessary omni-EG.

²⁶ Hendricks (2018, pp. 555–556) makes a similar point that we agree with.

²⁷ For instance, Law tries to mirror two theodicies that don't seem at all popular within the contemporary literature, one based on the fall of a literal Adam and Eve, which he says is based on Augustine (2010, p. 368), and one that is based on semantics (pp. 367–368). Collins tries to mirror a theodicy based on what he calls 'the test of faith' (2019, pp. 89–90) and another based on justice (2019, pp. 90–91). As we say, these are to our knowledge by no means popular in the contemporary literature on discussions of evil, which is also confirmed by the very few contemporary references given by either Law or Collins when discussing these theodicies.

²⁸ It should be noted that many of these arguments *were* at one point popular and still are among those philosophers of religion who work on the classical tradition (often among those who are Catholics or Eastern Orthodox). If EG challengers only investigate views that reach a certain threshold of popularity, then they will need to drop a number of their parallels with GG, because they likely will not meet the threshold either, but in the process, they will weaken the symmetry thesis.

²⁹ There may well also be other arguments from natural theology that confirm GG more than EG for the same reasons.

³⁰ There is a debate here as to whether this negates God's freedom, an attribute many theists are keen to endorse. One option is to bite the bullet and say that God isn't free not to create. Another is to claim that the answer to this question somewhat depends upon the view of freedom one is working with (O'Connor, 2008, p. 121).

³¹ We don't here try to suggest what counts as a good enough world, with these boundaries likely being vague, but because this thought of 'good enough worlds' seems to be presupposed in much philosophy of religion, undergirding many discussions of the problem of evil, we don't feel the need to justify it any further here.

³² Pruss thinks there are three aspects of love 'willing a good to the beloved, appreciating the beloved, and seeking union with the beloved' (2013, p. 23).

³³ We think there is something of an analogue to this when thinking about why some parents have children.

³⁴ We think that adopting different types of theism will allow for different responses to the EG problem. However, we stick with our assumption of bare theism because responses based on this type of theism can be adopted by most specific types of theism.

³⁵ It doesn't seem obvious to us that this is easily reversible. Suppose the EG theorist proposes that EG creates people in order to hate them. Hate could be plausibly analysed as the mirror image of love: A hates B if A desires that which is bad for B, and A desires distance from B. Given this, you might think that the best way to get distance from someone is to have them never come into existence in the first place.

³⁶ We suspect this feeling is probably more widespread than EG challengers might think.

³⁷ Because he and other EG challengers likely don't think there are any good reasons for thinking God exists, or on balance, the evidence against God is far stronger than the evidence for God.

³⁸ Perhaps EG makes it known that these people are members of their family just by implanting this knowledge into them. There is no need to think free will is involved here.

³⁹ Given that EG wants to maximize evil and pain, it seems strange that he would create a world such as this one where conscious agents are said to exhibit pain amnesia (Montero, manuscript). Surely, EG would want us to never be able to forget the phenomenal aspect of this, which he seeks to maximize.

⁴⁰ Given this we are happy to say that a world with free will might have more evil in it than torture world, assuming one can order worlds in terms of amount of evil. Yet we think EG is far more likely to prefer worlds in which we conscious creatures would least like to find ourselves in (i.e. torture world), rather than worlds we would prefer to find ourselves even when the total amount of evil in them is greater (i.e. a world with free will).

⁴¹ Miller (2016) has made a compelling case that it is simpler to possess an unlimited degree of a given property than it is to possess a large but finite degree of that same property.

⁴² At least some, for instance, Mill (1863, ch. 2) would characterize a higher-order evil in this kind of way.

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