

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The proper basicity of belief in God and the evil-god challenge

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Abstract

The evil-god challenge is a challenge for theists to show that belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god. In this article, I show that whether or not evil-god exists, belief in evil-god is unjustified. But this isn't the case for belief in God: belief in God is probably justified if theism is true. And hence belief in God is (significantly) more reasonable than belief in evil-god, and the evil-god challenge has been answered.

Keywords: Alvin Plantinga; divine hiddenness; evil-god challenge; justification; religious epistemology

Introduction

Say that God, if he exists, is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being, and call those who believe that God exists *theists*. And say that evil-god, if he exists, is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly evil being, and call those who believe that evil-god exists (if there are any) *maltheists*. The evil-god challenge (Law, 2010) is a challenge directed to theists. There are (at least) two ways of interpreting the challenge. Below, I will briefly outline both interpretations.

The evil-god challenge: interpretation I

First, one may interpret the evil-god challenge as a challenge to show that belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god. Defenders of this version of the evil-god challenge claim that most arguments for the existence of God (e.g. cosmological arguments) equally support the existence of evil-god, meaning that God and evil-god are on a par with respect to evidence. They argue further that the strength of the problem of evil – the evidential problem evil poses to theism – is on a par with the strength of the problem of good – the evidential problem good poses to maltheism. Or, in other words, the strength of evil as evidence against theism is (at least roughly) equal to the strength of good as evidence against maltheism. This is because the most common theodicies given in defence of *theism* in response to the problem of evil can be reversed and used to defend *maltheism* in response to the problem of good. For example, the theist might claim that free will is

necessary for there to be morally good actions – if we aren't free, then our actions aren't morally good. But this freedom brings with it the possibility that some will abuse their freedom and perform morally evil acts. And hence we have an explanation for why God permits certain kinds of evil. But the maltheist can reverse this theodicy: the maltheist can claim that free will is necessary for there to be morally evil actions – if we aren't free, then our actions aren't morally evil. But this freedom brings with it the possibility that some will use their freedom to perform morally good acts. And hence we have an explanation for why evil-god permits certain kinds of good. For the sake of argument, let's grant the proponent of the evil-god challenge both that the evidence for theism is on a par with the evidence for maltheism and that the strength of the problem of evil as evidence against theism is on a par with the strength of the problem of good as evidence against maltheism. This means that unless there is some other factor we've not yet considered, belief in evil-god is as reasonable as belief in God. However, theists want to say that belief in evil-god is *unreasonable*, and this means that – since belief in evil-god and belief in God are on an evidential par – belief in God is also unreasonable. And this is a problem for theists. The challenge for theists, then, is to show *why* belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god.¹

The evil-god challenge: interpretation 2

On a second interpretation of the evil-god challenge, the problem is this: since (we have supposed for the sake of argument) theism is on a par with maltheism in terms of evidence *and* the strength of the problem of evil against theism is on a par with the strength of the problem of good against maltheism, it follows that *if* the problem of good renders belief in evil-god unreasonable, *then* the problem of evil renders belief in God unreasonable. However, the challenger claims, the problem of good *in fact* renders belief in evil-god unreasonable. Therefore, the problem of evil must render belief in God unreasonable.² On this interpretation of the evil-god challenge, the challenge is to show where the above reasoning goes wrong. To address this challenge the theist needs to either (i) show that the problem of good is more powerful evidence against maltheism than the problem of evil is against theism or (ii) show that the problem of good isn't strong evidence against maltheism.³

Identifying the target

So, there are (at least) two different interpretations of the evil-god challenge. My purpose in this article is to address the first interpretation: I will (try to) show that belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god. Ultimately, I will argue that belief in evil-god is probably unjustified even if evil-god exists, and this means that belief in evil-god is unreasonable. However, belief in God is probably justified if theism is true. Therefore, belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god, and we have answered the evil-god challenge.

The evil-God challenge answered

Before answering the evil-god challenge, we must first take a brief detour into epistemology. After briefly surveying some epistemological distinctions, I will present two arguments for thinking that belief in God is probably justified if theism is true. After that, I will argue that belief in evil-god probably isn't justified *even if* maltheism is true, and therefore that belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god, and the evil-god challenge has been answered. Finally, I conclude by suggesting some possible responses the proponent of the evil-god challenge could develop that would address the issues I raise.

A brief epistemological detour

With respect to justification, we can divide epistemologists into two camps: internalists and externalists.⁴ Internalists hold that *S* is justified in her belief *B* if and only if *S* is, by reflection alone, (at least) potentially aware of that which contributes to *B* being justified. Externalists, conversely, deny this. Externalists hold that *S* may be justified in her belief *B* in cases in which she isn't aware of that which contributes to *B* being justified. For example, an externalist about justification will hold that *B* will be justified for *S* if it was produced in the right way (e.g. reliably or by way of proper function), and *S* need not be (even potentially) aware that *B* was produced in the right way for her to be justified in holding it. In what follows, I'm going to assume externalism, and in particular proper functionalism. According to proper functionalism – an externalist theory of justification – *S*'s belief *B* is justified if and only if (i) *B* was produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties that have been successfully aimed at truth, (ii) *B* was produced in an appropriate epistemic environment, and (iii) *S* has no believed defeaters for *B*.⁵ While I focus on proper functionalism, this is only for the sake of convenience – my argument below can be run in terms of other externalist views (e.g. reliabilism), and it arguably can be run in an internalist-friendly way (see endnote 10). The reason that I single out proper functionalism – as opposed to staying at a general level – is because it's easier to illustrate my point by using a concrete theory of justification. If the reader is attracted to a different theory of justification, she can easily switch out my uses of 'proper function' for whatever her preferred theory of justification dictates.⁶

Next, let's say that a belief is basic if and only if it isn't based on another belief. For example, I believe that I'm sitting in a chair, and this isn't based on any other beliefs; it's basic. Non-basic beliefs are, unsurprisingly, beliefs held on the basis of other beliefs. For example, suppose my friend tells me that she'll attend the department party only if she gets off work early, and that I believe her. And suppose later that I see her at the party and form the belief that she got off work early. This belief is non-basic since it's based on my other belief that she will show up to the party *only if* she gets off work early. We may say that a belief is *properly basic* if and only if it is basic *and* justified.⁷ Reformed epistemologists hold that belief in God can be properly basic – it can be justified in the absence of argument.⁸ And, more generally, they think that the following proposition is true:

(J) If God exists, then belief in God is probably justified.

Why think this? That is, why should we think that belief in God is probably justified if theism is true? Below, I will provide two arguments for (J). My purpose isn't to provide a full-fledged defence of these arguments – that has been done elsewhere. Instead, my purpose is to show that there are plausible and (apparently) widely accepted arguments for (J).

Plantinga's argument

So, why should we endorse (J)? Alvin Plantinga provides the following argument:

[I]f theistic belief is *true*, then it seems likely that it *does* have [justification].⁹ If it is true, then there is, indeed, such a person as God, a person who has created us in his image (so that we resemble him, among other things, in having the capacity for knowledge), who loves us, who desires that we know and love him, and who is such that it is our end and good to know and love him. But if these things are so, then he would of course intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and to know something about him. And if that is so, the natural thing to think is that he created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that

there is such a person as God, that he is our creator, that we owe him obedience and worship, that he is worthy of worship, that he loves us, and so on. And if *that* is so, then the natural thing to think is that the cognitive processes that *do* produce belief in God are aimed by their designer at producing that belief. But then the belief in question will be produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth: it will therefore [be justified]. (Plantinga (2000), 189–190)

Basically, Plantinga argues that God – if he exists – would intend to produce creatures that know him and can have a relationship with him, and that this would involve producing creatures with cognitive faculties that form true beliefs about him. In essence, Plantinga argues that the following proposition is true:

(P) If God exists, then theistic belief is probably formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties.

Clearly – since we’re assuming proper functionalism – (P) entails (J).¹⁰ And therefore, Plantinga’s argument gives us reason to affirm (J).

The argument from divine hiddenness

In Hendricks (2021), I showed that the argument from divine hiddenness (explained below) gives us reason to endorse (P) and therefore reason to endorse (J). This is because, according to the argument from divine hiddenness, God – due to his perfect love – would (at least) probably be open to being in a conscious, reciprocal, and positively meaningful relationship with any (capable) creature who is not resistant to being in such a relationship with him¹¹ – being in such a relationship, after all, is these creatures’ greatest good. However, believing God exists – so the argument goes – is a prerequisite for being in such a relationship. And this means that God would (at least) probably ensure that this prerequisite is satisfied – God would probably ensure that his (non-resistant) creatures believe he exists, since that is necessary for them to achieve their greatest good. However, there are some non-resistant creatures that don’t believe he exists, and this counts as evidence against theism.

In other words, the proponent of this argument claims that God would (at least) probably ensure that there are no non-resistant non-believers: since God is perfectly loving, he is open to a relationship with his (capable) creatures. And this means that he would (at least) probably remove any barriers that would prevent this relationship from obtaining, and this means that he would (at least) probably ensure that those who are non-resistant to a relationship with him believe that he exists. However – so the argument goes – there are at least some persons who aren’t resistant to being in such a relationship with God who nevertheless don’t believe God exists. And this means that we have at least some evidence against theism: since God’s existence makes non-resistant non-believers unlikely *and* we know that there are non-resistant non-believers, we have some evidence against theism.¹² However, this line of reasoning commits the proponent of the argument from divine hiddenness to the following proposition:¹³

(H) If God exists, he probably would provide the non-resistant with an ability to form beliefs about him.¹⁴

To see why those who endorse the argument from divine hiddenness are committed to (H), suppose (H) were false. If that were the case, then the argument from divine hiddenness couldn’t get off the ground: if it’s false that God would probably provide

the non-resistant with an ability to form beliefs about him, then non-resistant non-belief isn't surprising at all given theism. Indeed, it's expected: if (H) is false, then the non-resistant *can't* form beliefs about God, since they lack an ability to do so. And hence, proponents of the argument from divine hiddenness must assume (H). However, (H) entails (P): the background assumptions at work in the argument from divine hiddenness entail that belief in God is produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties. This is because

a conscious, reciprocal and positively meaningful relationship with God requires one's beliefs to be reliably formed: [to have such a relationship,] I must be able to recognize certain things about God, respond appropriately and so on . . . (Hendricks (2021), 31)

And this means that, if (H) holds, God probably has provided us with a cognitive faculty aimed at producing true beliefs about him. So, basically, if God provides us with an ability to form beliefs about him that serves as the basis for a relationship with him, this ability will be designed to produce true beliefs about him and will be properly functioning when doing so – if beliefs about God are produced by way of malfunction, they won't be able to sustain having a (conscious, reciprocal, and positively meaningful) relationship with God. And so if (H) holds, our beliefs about God will be produced by a properly functioning cognitive faculty aimed at truth, and this means that those who endorse the argument from divine hiddenness are committed to (P) and therefore they are committed to (J). And hence the argument from divine hiddenness provides us with reason to endorse (J).

The evil-god challenge answered

In the prior two sections, it was shown that there are (at least) two avenues of support for (P) and therefore (at least) two avenues of support for (J). That is, both Plantinga's argument and the argument from divine hiddenness give us reason to think that if theism is true, belief in God is probably justified.¹⁵ The upshot of this is significant: (J) makes theism (significantly) more reasonable than maltheism. This is because maltheists *can't* mirror (J). Indeed, maltheists must *reject* the following proposition:

(J*) If evil-god exists, belief in evil-god is probably justified.

Why must maltheists reject (J*)? Because we have good reason to think (J*) is false. That is, we have good reason to think that it's unlikely that evil-god would ensure that his creatures' beliefs about him are produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties. This is because it's *worse* to hold unjustified beliefs than it is to hold justified beliefs, and this means that evil-god has reason to ensure that his creatures' beliefs about him *aren't* formed by way of proper function. In other words, since evil-god is concerned with increasing the badness in the world and unjustified beliefs are worse than justified beliefs, he has reason to ensure that his creatures' beliefs about him aren't justified. Therefore, we have an(other) answer to the evil-god challenge: theism is (significantly) more reasonable than maltheism because theistic belief is probably justified if true whereas maltheism probably isn't justified *even if* true.¹⁶ Put differently, whether or not evil-god exists, belief in evil-god is probably unjustified. But this isn't the case for theism, and this means theistic belief is more reasonable than maltheistic belief.

Avenues forward for the evil-god challenge

There are (at least) two responses that proponents of the evil-god challenge could make to my argument in the previous section. First, they could argue both that Plantinga's

argument fails and that the argument from divine hiddenness either doesn't support (J) or fails. And this means that theists can't – or need different reasons to – affirm (J), which means theism doesn't have a leg-up on maltheism. And second, they could argue that evil-god has reason to ensure that his creatures' beliefs about him are produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties, that is, they could argue in favour of (J*) or a proposition that entails (J*). And this means that theism no longer has an advantage over maltheism – if (J*) and (J) are true, then theists are no better off than maltheists with respect to justification.¹⁷

Neither response strikes me as particularly promising. However, it seems to me that the latter route has more promise than the former. Importantly, if this second avenue is pursued by the proponent of the evil-god challenge, she needs to show more than the mere *possibility* that evil-god would ensure his creatures' beliefs about him were produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties: she must provide a *plausible* argument for thinking evil-god *probably* would do so – to establish (J*), one has to show that evil-god would *probably* ensure our beliefs about him are justified, not merely that he would *possibly* do so.

For ease of reading, let's call the proposition that evil-god would ensure our beliefs about him are justified (EJ). To show that the probability of (EJ) is high is to show that (J*) is true.¹⁸ One way for the maltheist to show that the probability of (EJ) is high – and therefore (J*) is true – is to mirror Plantinga's argument above. That is, the maltheist could hold that evil-god would create us in his image.¹⁹ And since evil-god is omniscient, this would mean that – since his creatures are made in his image – his creatures would have (at least some) knowledge, and therefore (at least some) of his creatures' beliefs would be justified.²⁰ Is this – being made in evil-god's image – sufficient to show that the probability of (EJ) is high? In brief, No. To show that the probability of (EJ) is high, it would need to be shown that evil-god would *intend* for us to have justified beliefs *about him*. And that doesn't follow from evil-god creating us in his image – perhaps evil-god would ensure that we have some justified beliefs (for whatever reason), but it doesn't follow from that that our beliefs *about evil-god* would be justified. What needs to be shown, therefore, is that evil-god has good reason to ensure that his creatures' beliefs *about him* are justified – good reason that *overrides* his reason for ensuring his creatures' beliefs about him are unjustified, mentioned above. One way to do this would be to show that there are certain evils that evil-god would intend to bring about that would require him (evil-god) to make it such that our beliefs about him are justified. In other words, one could show that some evils that evil-god would intend to bring about *require* his creatures to have justified beliefs about him. If this could be shown it would, of course, mean that the probability of (EJ) is high and therefore that (J*) is true. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear that such evils are forthcoming; I know of no evils that are plausible candidates for rendering (EJ) high. And so this avenue shows little promise.

Now, perhaps the maltheist would argue that the fact that we know of no evils that render (EJ) high doesn't entail that there are none – after all, we've learned from sceptical theism that our grasp of goods, evils, and their entailment relations is quite poor (e.g. Michael Bergmann 2001; Perry Hendricks 2020). And *this* – the maltheist says – means that the probability that there is such an evil is inscrutable, not low. This move, however, won't be of use to the maltheist. This is because it's equivalent to holding that the probability of (EJ) is inscrutable – if the probability that there's an evil that overrides evil-god's reason to ensure his creatures beliefs about him *aren't* justified is inscrutable, then the probability of (EJ) is inscrutable. However, this provides maltheists with an undercutting defeater for their beliefs about evil-god. This is because if the probability that evil-god would ensure his creatures beliefs about him are justified (i.e. (EJ)) is inscrutable, then we should withhold belief about whether maltheistic belief is justified.²¹ And if maltheists

should withhold belief about whether their belief in evil-god is justified, then they should withhold belief in evil-god. This follows from the more general fact that if one withholds belief about the status of one's belief p 's justification, that one has an undercutting defeater for p (Bergmann, 2005).²² And so objections that claim that the probability of there being an evil that entails (EJ) is inscrutable won't help the maltheist.

Due to the problems raised above, I don't see much promise for the maltheist to provide support for (J*) and revive the evil-god challenge. But perhaps a more developed 'maltheology' can answer this problem. I leave it to proponents of the evil-god challenge to develop this route of response more fully. Evil-god knows I can't.

Conclusion

I've argued that belief in God is more reasonable than belief in evil-god because if theism is true, then belief in God is probably justified, whereas whether or not maltheism is true, belief in evil-god is probably unjustified. And hence the evil-god challenge has been answered.

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Notes

1. For defences of this version of the evil-god challenge, see Collins (2019), Lancaster-Thomas (2018a), (2018b), and (2020), and Law (2010). For responses to this version of the challenge, see Lougheed (2020), Wilson (2021), Page and Baker-Hytch (2020).
2. In Law's words, the problem is this: theists typically dismiss the evil-god hypothesis out of hand because of the problem of good – there is surely too much good in the world for it to be the creation of such a being. But then why doesn't the problem of evil provide equally good grounds for dismissing belief in a good god? (Law (2010), 353, abstract).
3. For a defence of this interpretation, see Law (2010). (Law appears to defend both versions of the challenge.) For a response to this interpretation, see Hendricks (2018).
4. These positions aren't exhaustive – mentalism is also an option (Bergmann, 2006). I treat them as exhaustive for the sake of simplicity. Nothing significant hinges on this.
5. See e.g. Bergmann (2006) and McNabb (2018).
6. Below, for the sake of simplicity, I will simply speak of B being formed by way of proper function. The reader may assume that the other relevant conditions for justification obtain in those cases.
7. Beliefs can be properly basic with respect to different epistemic properties, such as warrant, rationality, and justification. I focus on justification here, but what I say applies to other epistemic properties.
8. See Moon (2016) for an overview of recent work in reformed epistemology, and see Plantinga (1984) and (2000) for classic defences of reformed epistemology.
9. Plantinga speaks of warrant here, but his argument will work equally for justification. As such, I've changed his uses of "warrant" to "justification" to keep continuity with my argument.
10. It's worth noting that while Plantinga couches his argument in terms of proper functionalism, others have developed alternative internalist-friendly models (e.g. Tucker (2011) and McAllister and Dougherty (2019)). While Plantinga's argument seems to have been widely accepted, see Fales (2003) for criticism of it, and Moon (2017) for an argument that sceptical theists must reject it. (Although, Moon, in the same article, proposes an alternative sceptical theist-friendly version of Plantinga's argument.)
11. Hereafter, I will use "relationship" as shorthand for "conscious, reciprocal, and positively meaningful relationship."
12. For this probabilistic (and eminently more plausible) version of the argument, see e.g. Rasmussen and Leon (2019) and Oppy (2013). For a logical version of the argument, see e.g. Schellenberg (2015).
13. And note that even theists can accept the argument from divine hiddenness: while a theist can't accept that non-resistant non-belief is *decisive* evidence against theism, she can nonetheless accept that it's *some* evidence against theism.

14. In Hendricks (2021) I included in (H) the option that God has directly caused the non-resistant to believe he exists. I omit this option here for the sake of brevity.
15. Again, my purpose is not to provide a defence of these arguments here. That has been done elsewhere. Indeed, as I suggest below, one way for the proponent of the evil-god challenge to respond is by rejecting both of these arguments.
16. More generally, we may say that if *A* and *B* are mutually exclusive positions and believing *A* is unjustified whether or not *A* is true, then – so long as the same doesn't hold for *B* – *B* is (significantly) more reasonable to hold than *A*. In this case, theism is *B* and maltheism is *A*.
17. Or, at least, my argument makes theists no better off than maltheists. Other responses to the evil-god challenge could (and, in my view, do) render theism more reasonable than maltheism. See the references in endnote 1.
18. And if (J*) is false, then, of course, the probability of (EJ) will be low.
19. This is an unobjectionable move for the maltheist to make, since Plantinga's argument makes this assumption and we are holding theism and maltheism to be parallels.
20. Here, I'm assuming that knowledge entails justification. This will not be the case on all accounts of justification. However, (i) for the account of justification we're working with, the entailment holds and (ii) if the entailment doesn't hold, then the maltheist's case is *worse off*.
21. Indeed, if we had reason to believe maltheistic belief is justified, then, obviously, the probability of (EJ) wouldn't be inscrutable.
22. Bergmann's point here is about the *source* of one's belief. Similar considerations will apply in this case.

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