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Article

The Incoherence of an Evil God

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Abstract: The evil god challenge is for theists to explain why a good god's existence should be considerably more reasonable than an evil god's existence. Challengers note that there is a symmetry between a good god and an evil god. Moreover, the classical arguments for a good god can prove the existence of an evil god just as well. Furthermore, theodicies can be mirrored by reverse theodicies. Consequently, the evil god challenge leads to two implications. One, if an evil god is deemed absurd, by logical symmetry, a good god must also be absurd. Two, if an evil god is not absurd, then no reason exists in favor of the existence of a good god. This paper offers two strategies to show that a good god's existence is plausible, but an evil god's is not. One is to argue that an evil god's motivations for creating the world are inconsistent with its alleged nature. The other is a close examination of theodicies and reverse theodicies, which shows that no symmetry exists between them and that theodicies are effective, but reverse theodicies are not.

Keywords: evil god challenge; god; symmetry

1. Introduction

A number of authors have proposed the argument that the existence of a good god is no more and no less plausible than the existence of an evil god—and that is not saying very much because, according to evil god challengers, the existence of an evil god is unreasonable (Madden and Hare 1968; Haight and Haight 1970; Cahn 1977; Millican 1989; New 1993; Law 2010; Lancaster-Thomas 2018a; Collins 2019). For some history of the challenge see: Lancaster-Thomas 2018b, pp. 2–5). One of the main proponents of this challenge is Stephen Law. The challenge, Law claims, is for the theist to 'explain why, if belief in an evil god is highly unreasonable, should we consider belief in a good god significantly more reasonable?' (Law 2010, p. 360) Note that according to the challenge, there is a broad symmetry between a good god and an evil god. An evil god would have the same qualities that theists ascribe to the God of classical theism, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, to name the most salient. The difference is that, while a good god is omnibenevolent, an evil god would be *omnimalevolent*. According to the challenge, as the existence of an evil god and the existence of a good god are equally implausible, it follows that the evidence does not support belief in an omnibenevolent god (Law 2010, p. 360). Although the evil god challengers admit that it is possible to find a number of asymmetries between the two hypotheses, they claim that such asymmetries are not significantly telling. It is worth noting that according to Law's formulation, the challenge is to show why *belief* in a good god is significantly more reasonable than *belief* in an evil god. However, this is quite a different question from one showing that the *existence* of a good god is significantly more plausible than the *existence* of an evil god. In what is to follow, I shall attempt to demonstrate that the concept of an evil god is self-contradictory.¹ To that end, this paper attempts to meet such a challenge by comparing a good god's nature and an evil god's nature side by side, indicating a number of asymmetries between the two, and showing that an evil god, unlike a good god, is not a coherent being—and thus not a god. Part I of this paper observes that an EG's actions are not exactly the actions of a god. Part II discusses various asymmetries between theodicies and reverse theodicies, showing that



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theodicies are effective, but reverse theodicies are not. Henceforth, G is for good god and EG for evil god.

2. Meeting the Evil God Challenge

While there is no unanimous agreement among theists on the nature of G, in Christianity and other monotheistic religions G is regarded as a morally perfect being who created the universe and is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, and endowed with freedom of will. By symmetry, EG would have to possess the same attributes as G except that, instead of being omnibenevolent, it would be *omnimalevolent*. In addition to such attributes, according to the symmetry thesis, any argument for or against G can also be used for or against EG. Even between the classical theodicies used to justify the existence of evil, as Law argues, there is a broad symmetry such that reverse theodicies can be used to justify the existence of good (Law 2010, pp. 356–57). Thus, the symmetry thesis is the claim that theism and maltheism (the concept of a wholly evil god) are broadly symmetrical in such a way that any argument for G can be reversed and used to argue for EG; similarly, any argument against EG can be reversed and used against G. Therefore, according to the challenge, EG and G are equally plausible. However, the challengers admit that EG is highly implausible—and therefore, by symmetry, G must also be implausible. In this paper, I attempt to show that the two hypotheses are not as symmetrical as EG challengers claim. On closer inspection of their natures and of the theodicies and reverse theodicies, it will become evident that G is a coherent being and thus its existence is plausible, but EG is incoherent and thus implausible. EG challengers anticipate such a move, admitting that there are several asymmetries but noting that such asymmetries fail to meet the challenge. The asymmetries presented here, however, are meant to show that EG is an incoherent being.

The first strategy employed in order to show that EG is an incoherent being, but G is a coherent being, is to question EG's motivation for creating the world. What exactly could EG's goal be? Is that goal consistent with a divinity's nature? Law suggests that '[EG] is maximally evil. Its depravity is without limit. Its cruelty knows no bounds.' (Law 2010, p. 356) Moreover, 'By giving us something wonderful for a moment, and then gradually pulling it away, an EG can make us suffer even more than if we had never had it in the first place.' (Law 2010, p. 358) It would seem to follow, as Law suggests, that tormenting humans in order to maximize evil is what 'he [EG] desires.' (Law 2010, p. 371) However, such a desire entails that EG would create the world to satisfy its personal desire for evil, which implies that EG *needs* the existence of humans, without whom EG could not accomplish its goal to maximize evil or create unfairness. However, what could be its motivation? As humans certainly do not wish to suffer, it must follow that EG's motivation is to gain some personal benefit from creation, and thus, EG creates the world to satisfy its personal need for evil—a need that it could not satisfy otherwise. However, such a need is inconsistent with an omnipotent, omniscient god.

In fact, G does not create humans for its personal benefit. As G is omnibenevolent, an important aspect of omnibenevolence is that G acts out of love but does not expect, nor does it need, anything from humans because expectation and need imply an imperfect character. Humans, for example, need and expect many things because they are not self-sufficient, and so, they need food, love, friendship, and so on. However, traditionally, a divinity is regarded as perfect in the sense of self-sufficiency or in the sense that nothing can further or improve in any way the divinity's nature or moral character. Consequently, G does not require or need or desire to receive anything in return for its loving acts (to be clear, the sort of love to which I am referring here is *agapē* and not erotic love). G knows that, in the afterlife, humans will benefit from a relationship in an eternal state of bliss with G. However, EG apparently hates humans. After all, EG is wholly evil, and it wants the detriment of humans. This is not a mere assumption. It is a logical conclusion given that EG is a wholly hateful being and that EG desires the detriment of humans. It would seem

odd to argue that a wholly hateful creature who desired our detriment would be interested in any friendly or loving relationship with us.

Unlike love, hate does not aim at giving to others without expecting something in return. In other words, hate does not have altruistic motives. Furthermore, it would seem implausible that an omnimalevolent being would bring into existence what it hated unless it desired to gain something in return for it. What could be the reason for such a behavior? EG challengers, therefore, need to clarify the reason(s) why EG creates the world and humans. This is an important point that has yet to be explained in the literature. This point can be regarded as a counter-challenge for EG challengers. Namely, EG challengers need to explain why the hypothesis that EG creates humans despite the fact that it hates them should be considered as plausible as the hypothesis that G creates humans, whom it loves.

EG challengers may reply that G, too, has desires—namely, G desires to share its goodness and love with other creatures, as many theists seem to think. However, assuming that G's act of creation stems from G's desire to share its goodness with humans, such a desire does not count as a need because it stems from an altruistic motive, for G's desire stems from its omnibenevolent, and thus 'other-regarding', nature. On the other hand, EG's desire, which stems from hate, cannot but be self-regarding. G desires to share its goodness with humans for the benefit of humans. Conversely, in the first place, EG hates humans, and in the second place, EG does not desire to share his evilness with humans. Rather, EG desires to inflict evil upon humans. Thus, EG's motivations for creating the world evince a self-regarding desire. However, a self-regarding desire is not a characteristic of a god. Put another way, G creates the world for our benefit. Conversely, EG creates the world for our detriment. G creates the world for our benefit because G knows that we will benefit from our existing as free agents in the world, from G's love and goodness, and from the possibility of an eternal state of bliss with G. However, why does EG create the world for our detriment? It is not as if it thinks that we will benefit from its hate and evilness. In fact, as Law suggests, EG must trick us into believing that EG is G and thus be worthy of worshipping. Therefore, EG's motivation for creating must be self-regarding, which shows that EG's character can be furthered or perfected or benefitted in some respect. Namely, EG is an imperfect being that needs to create the world to benefit from inflicting evil upon it. However, this seems to be the description of a human person who needs to satisfy certain desires without which he or she is not whole. It certainly does not evince the character of a god.

One may also argue that EG and G both create the world for their glory. However, such a proposition seems implausible. First, the notion of glory applies to finite creatures. People crave glory because they think that it would satisfy the ideal life or to be respected by others or just to show off. These are factors that should not matter to a divinity. Glory denotes the admiration, honor, and praise that one earns by doing something great. Here are some examples of the usage of the term: 'He basked in the glory of its victory.' 'After the war, the city wanted to restore the museum to its former glory.' 'He reveled in the glory of scoring three goals that made its team win the championship.' It is evident that in order for there to be glory there must be two parties, one that performs a great act and another that cares about and acknowledges such an act and, as a result, forms a great admiration for the actor. In the Bible, for example, God is praised by saying, "Be exalted oh God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth." (Psalm 108:5) It is plausible that those humans who will freely come to love G will worship it; and in the afterlife, humans will enjoy an eternal existence with G.

G may have something to be glorious about, the creation of the universe and humans who love, admire, and worship it and acknowledge its glory. However, in the case of EG, if humans knew that EG existed and was wholly evil, clearly, they would not admire it. Considering that it is omnipotent and omniscient, it is implausible that EG creates humans with the hope that they will glorify it. It must be the case then that EG creates for self-glory or *amour propre*. However, self-glory is certainly not a divine attribute. Furthermore, as G is omnipotent, creating the universe was not a difficult task for it. Consider for example

one who volunteers to go to Mars. She does it for her glory. Even if she fails to land on Mars, her endeavor is worthy of glory. However, as G is omnipotent, presumably it was not difficult for G to create the universe, and as it is omniscient, it knows that it will do it. Consequently, glory cannot be the motivation of an omnipotent being for creating the world. Thus, the notion that G or EG create out of glory should be abandoned.

Peter Forrest aptly observes that it is implausible that a being whose nature is destructive would be motivated to create the world in the first place (Forrest 2012, p. 37). The existence of G is quite plausible. G creates the world out of its infinite goodness for the benefit of humans. G loves its creation and humans love G. If one wishes to put it in terms of something that pleases G, it may be conceded that creation pleases G. By symmetry, presumably, EG challengers must claim that creation pleases EG. However, EG hates humans. Therefore, it is not creation that pleases EG; rather, what pleases EG is human suffering. EG creates things that it hates because doing so will lead to something that pleases it. EG hates its creation, and its creation hates EG. This may or may not be regarded as an asymmetry but, at the very least, it shows that EG's actions would be inconsistent with its omniscient and omnipotent nature: creation pleases G because it is beneficial to humans. G loves humans, and humans love G. Creation pleases EG because it is beneficial to EG. Moreover, EG hates humans, and humans hate EG. In addition, it seems absurd to argue that a being endowed with infinite power and infinite knowledge and wisdom would create things that it hates.

The maltheist must explain why EG would create the world, considering that it hates humans. Here, the maltheist cannot avail herself of the symmetrical hypothesis that EG decided to create humans so that humans would benefit from knowing EG because humans would clearly not benefit from it. As EG is not interested in our existence, but our detriment, the counter-challenge is for EG challengers to explain in what sense EG can be a divinity like G and yet create creatures whom it hates and whom it wants to torment and destroy. Indeed, if creation does not benefit or improve its nature, there would be no reason for EG to create the world in the first place.

Therefore, if my arguments are cogent, they show that the existence of EG is significantly less reasonable than G; they also show that EG's nature and its actions are incoherent, which make EG's existence self-contradictory. The implausibility of EG follows from an inconsistency between the claim that EG is a divinity, morally perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, a being that lacks nothing, that can be improved or benefited by nothing and the claim that such an entity would choose to create creatures whom it hates and who hate EG. EG challengers must meet the counter-challenge and explain why a divinity that cannot be perfected or improved by anything and who hates humans decides to create humans. Absent a defeater, it must be concluded that EG cannot be the malevolent version of G. If EG really existed, it would not be a divinity in the classical sense. Perhaps, it would be a creation of G or a subordinate to G, such as Satan, for example.

Consider some objections. As G creates humans to benefit them, and EG to harm them, both hypotheses are symmetrical. As I noted above, the problem with this objection is that it fails to consider EG's motivation for creating the world. G brings the universe and humans into existence for a reason: because G sees a great value in a world that contains free-willed creatures, that these free-willed creatures will benefit from existence and, moreover, they will benefit from knowing G and building a loving relationship with G. However, asymmetrically, EG cannot possibly see a great value in such a world. For EG hates humans, and thus, it does not intend to benefit them. Moreover, as EG is omniscient, it must see that free-willed human creatures will benefit from existence in a world created by a loving god. However, EG desires the detriment of humans and knows that humans will not benefit from knowing EG and building a loving relationship with EG. EG's motivation, therefore, is selfish, which seems inconsistent with its allegedly divine nature.²

EG challengers might point out that EG, perhaps, simply creates out of an overflow of evil as G creates out of an overflow of goodness. However, on the one hand, G loves and enjoys its creation. On the other hand, EG hates its creation. However, in examining which

hypothesis is significantly more reasonable than the other, intuitively, it seems that G is significantly more reasonable than EG. The reason: EG is supposed to be an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being whose overflow of evil brings into existence creatures that EG hates that hate EG, upon whom EG will inflict evil—because this pleases EG. If EG challengers bite the bullet, then the burden of proof is on them to explain why such a god is as reasonable as G.

The bottom line is that EG challengers may not just argue, ‘G creates to benefit humans and EG to harm them—there is the symmetry.’ The question would then be, why does G desire to benefit humans? The answer is that, because of G’s loving nature, G desires to give humans the possibility to freely enter into an eternally loving relationship with their creator (without expecting to gain something in return for it). However, why does EG desire to harm or torment humans when it knows that humans would not want to be harmed or tormented and certainly would not want to enter into a relationship of eternal hate or love with their creator? The answer must be that creating humans in order to harm or torment them must benefit only EG. If EG challengers reply that this is not the case, then they are challenged to produce a plausible explanation of EG’s motivation and actions.

Consider next the objection that perhaps both G and EG are not whole without creation. They both *need* to create humans in order to be complete or for some other reason. The symmetry would reappear. For example, assume that G could have just loved itself without creation but is able to love itself more and differently if there are created beings. My response to such an objection brings up another problem with the existence of EG. As G is wholly good, it loves itself and cannot hate itself. By symmetry, it would follow that EG could have just *hated* itself without creation and hated itself more if there were created beings. This clearly leads to an absurdity regarding EG’s nature, which I call the paradox of evilness: as EG is wholly evil, it must hate itself. Moreover, as its hate is without bounds, it must hate itself so much that it desires to go out of existence. However, this hardly seems to be consistent with divine nature. Moreover, as EG is omnipotent, can it destroy itself? If it can, first it lacks omnipotence, and second, it would already have destroyed itself, and thus, there would be no EG, and the challenge would be met. Worse, if EG cannot destroy itself, it is condemned to exist against its desire to destroy itself. If such were the case, EG challengers would have to give more robust arguments to support the EG hypothesis. The reason is that, intuitively, G’s existence is significantly more plausible than EG’s. EG would be an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being who hates itself so much that it wants to destroy itself, but it cannot and thus is ‘condemned’ to exist and continue to hate itself for eternity. Such a hypothesis is absurd because it postulates the existence of an incoherent being.

G is by nature wholly good. By symmetry, EG is wholly evil, which means that EG has not one iota of goodness in it. While G simply cannot hate either itself or its creation, by symmetry EG cannot love either itself or its creation. Consequently, we are left with the absurdity of a supposedly omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely wise being that hates itself, who desires its demise, but it cannot bring it about and allegedly creates creatures that it hates that hate it. This line of reasoning explicitly shows that the EG hypothesis is absurd, that EG is not a plausible being, and thus, no such entity exists. At the very least, it is doubtful (and significantly less plausible than the G hypothesis) that there could be a being who is morally perfect and endowed with maximal knowledge and power who hates itself—and might hate itself more by creating the world. Again, EG challengers here will have to decide how to fill in the blanks in EG’s nature.

In the event that they argue that EG loves itself, the response will be the following. Intuitively, there seems to be something inconsistent about a wholly evil god loving itself. The comparison with evil humans who love themselves will not do because, first, humans are not omniscient or omnipotent; second, evil humans are not wholly evil; and third, very evil humans typically are psychopathic, and at this point, it is not clear whether EG challengers would endorse the notion of an omnipotent and omniscient psychopath.

Another problem with EG is that the hypothesis that EG loves itself in conjunction with omnipotence and omniscience seems inconsistent with omnimalevolence. That is to say, if EG loves itself, it must see the importance of its own well-being. Furthermore, as it is omniscient, it has an infinite awareness of the fact that humans do not desire to be tormented; it therefore would see that there are good reasons for not desiring the detriment of humans. However, as it is wholly evil, it cannot but hate. It would then seem that EG would exist in a state of eternal, divine perplexity stemming from its knowing that there are good reasons for not tormenting humans and yet tormenting them. Once again, such a god is not only significantly less plausible than G, but also an absurdity.

The foregoing discussion highlights problems that cannot be easily avoided. EG challengers at this point can bite the bullet and concede that EG is a determined evil being. The correct reply to such a concession is that it has never been proposed by any EG challenger and, indeed, it cannot be proposed that EG is determined. It cannot be proposed, first, because the challenge questions classical monotheism, according to which G is endowed with freedom of the will. Second, determinism would render the question of EG's moral nature moot because it would imply that one has no moral responsibility one way or the other. If this is what EG challengers are willing to argue, the challenge is for EG challengers to show that the existence of a determined EG is as plausible as the existence of G. Intuitively, the existence of such a being is considerably less plausible than the existence of G. In the alternative, EG freely chooses to create the world. However, in that case, the question EG challengers must wrap their heads around is why EG chooses to create human creatures whom it hates that hate it. If the answer is 'In order to maximize evil,' this implies that EG does it for its own benefit, in which case EG is incapable of maximizing evil without creation. EG challengers cannot maintain both that EG freely chooses to create the world in order to maximize evil and that there is no reason why it chooses to do so.

They cannot plausibly maintain that EG simply creates the world without explaining why, especially in the light of EG's ambiguous nature, i.e., does EG love or hate itself? EG challengers may reply that theists, too, argue that G created the world to maximize the good. However, this is not entirely correct. G creates humans and endows them with freedom of the will in order for them to benefit from existence and be able to freely choose whether to live in an eternally loving relationship with their creator. On the other hand, it is evident from the hypothesis that EG does not desire a relationship with humans—let alone an eternal relationship. Note that by relationship, I mean a mutual respect between parties. However, in this case, humans would not voluntarily accept any sort of relationship with EG.

An analysis of EG's and G's natures, thus, shows that the existence of EG is implausible. To reiterate the problems, EG is an infinitely powerful, infinitely intelligent, morally perfect being, (arguably) endowed with free will, who needs creation, possibly to accomplish its personal goal of maximizing evil, that knows that harming innocent beings is wrong but is nevertheless bound by its nature to create and torment; a being who takes the trouble to fine-tune the universe and wait millions of years before humans arise and become intelligent enough to be deceived. All this predicament, why? Because that is the way it is. To such a hypothesis, it must be replied that EG's existence is dubious at best or, at worst, that the EG hypothesis is incoherent. On the other hand, the existence of G is consistent and plausible if we consider its motivation and its nature.

3. Theodicies and Reverse Theodicies

In its defense and in extension of the EG challenge, John M. Collins argues that theodicies do not help the theist tip the scale in G's favor because the maltheist can present reverse theodicies. Collins writes,

Consider, to give just several examples of familiar theodicies: (1) God gave us free will in order to make possible morally virtuous actions, even though this inevitably also makes possible morally vicious actions; (2) suffering is required for our moral and spiritual growth; and (3) the suffering we undergo in our lifetimes

is more than compensated for by the eternal bliss of the afterlife. (Collins 2019, p. 86)

He then notes that these three theodicies are isomorphic to the reverse theodicies. Again, the idea is to show that EG and G are equally plausible as what theists can say about G, maltheists can say about EG. In this case, according to Collins, even the problem of evil is symmetrical to the problem of good. Namely, maltheists justify the existence of good by offering three reverse theodicies, which mirror the three theodicies mentioned above: (1a) EG gave us free will in order to make possible morally vicious actions, even though this inevitably also makes possible morally virtuous actions; (2a) happiness is necessary for moral decay; and (3a) the happiness we undergo in our lifetimes is more than compensated for by the eternal bliss of the afterlife. Collins agrees with Law who asks, ‘How persuasive are our three reverse theodicies?’ and answers his own question.

Intuitively, they are not persuasive at all. Rather than being taken seriously, they usually provoke amusement among theists and non-theists alike. However, this raises the question: if the reverse theodicies are feeble and ineffective, why should we consider the standard theodicies any more effective? (Law 2010, p. 359)

What follows attempts to show that while the aforementioned reverse theodicies are, in fact, ‘feeble and ineffective,’ the three theodicies considered are quite effective and, moreover, are asymmetrical to the reverse theodicies.

3.1. First Theodicy

(1) The first theodicy says that G gave us free will to enable morally virtuous actions, even though this inevitably also makes morally vicious actions possible. According to the EG challengers, theodicy (1) can be reversed showing a symmetry between EG and G as follows: (1a) free will is necessary for the possibility of free evil actions, even though this inevitably also makes morally good actions possible. However, is human free action per se really EG’s concern? Considering its omnimalevolent nature, the goal of EG is not exactly to create free-willed human creatures so that these creatures will freely perform evil actions. Rather, EG’s purpose seems to be to torment humans. Therefore, EG could not care less whether humans are free for their own good. Granted, EG might be interested in humans’ freely committing evil acts because freely committed evil is wickeder than determined evil. However, my point is that as EG hates humans, it does not care about their freedom because their freedom is something important to them. Rather, EG is interested in the vilest state of affairs, whichever way it might be achieved. However, the reverse is not true about G, for G creates free-willed human creatures—but *not* in order for them to freely perform virtuous action. Rather, G creates the world for us without limiting our possibilities of free expression and action in order to enable us to perform a variety of free acts, learn scientific truths, build houses, love each other, and so on. So, G gives us free will for our own good, but EG does not. EG gives us freedom for its own good. G gives us freedom because a world inhabited by free-willed creatures is significantly more valuable than a world inhabited by automata or no world at all. However, EG does not create us and give us freedom because a world that contains free-willed creatures is significantly more valuable than a world inhabited by automata or no world at all. In EG’s case, freedom serves the purpose of making humans suffer.

By saying that G does not limit our possibilities of free expression and action, it is implied that human actions are free with respect to human nature. Our freedom does not allow us to jump out of the window and fly or something of that nature. Nevertheless, G gave us all the freedom that our nature permits so that we can decide how to live. The reason G gave us this capacity is because G knows that our relationship with it will benefit us incalculably. Without freedom, we would not be able to freely choose to enter into a relationship with G. Conversely, EG does not create us free so that we might enter into a relationship with it. Moreover, EG does not care about our freely choosing how to live. EG’s purpose is our detriment.

Within the boundaries of physical reality and human nature, humans can perform virtuous or vicious acts. However, G's purpose is not to make us happy during our lifetimes. G's purpose is to allow humans to do whatever they want and live however they want in order to eventually choose to enter into a relationship with it. Asymmetrically, EG creates the world in such a way as to specifically allow humans to do virtuous acts because acting virtuously is necessary to its scheme to torment us or maximize evil. Theodicy (1) and theodicy (1a), therefore, are not symmetrical. G creates the world for us; virtuous and vicious acts are possibilities that result from our freedom of the will. Conversely, EG does not create the world for us. Rather, it is evident that EG creates the world for itself and specifically makes sure that humans experience just the right amount of happiness and suffering with the precise intent to torment us.

Put another way: G creates the world for us, and it is completely up to us to experience happiness or suffering; G does not expect us to choose a specific way to live our lives.

Conversely, EG creates the world for itself and specifically gives us happiness with the purpose of taking it away in order to accentuate our suffering in order to maximize evil. In fact, suppose that humans exercised their freedom in such a way that they always performed good actions so that the amount of happiness significantly outweighed the amount of suffering. Arguably, EG would intervene by making sure that the right balance of happiness and suffering that is most conducive to our suffering exists. Conversely, whether all human beings are happy or all of them suffer, G would not intervene—that is because the point of G is not to create a certain balance between good and evil; rather, it is to enable humans to freely choose how to live and freely choose to worship G and eventually join G in an eternally loving relationship. Consequently, free-will theodicy is not symmetrical to its reverse.

Note that I do not just assume G's motivations for giving humans free will without justifying it. I rely on the prevalent view among theists (e.g., Augustine, Plantinga, Craig, Lewis, and others) that a world with free-willed creatures is significantly more valuable than a world that contains unfree beings. Why is it so hard to accept this claim? Moreover, one may object, why cannot EG have different motivations for providing free will to humans? I never said that EG cannot have different motivations. I am open to such possibilities. Again, it is the EG challengers' job to identify what motivates EG. Thus, I have shown that (1) and (1a) are not symmetrical because the motivations of G and EG are completely different. G loves and cares about humans and makes humans free. However, EG does not care about humans because it is wholly evil. If it did care, it would not make us suffer. So, (I) EG gives us free will because it ultimately benefits it, which brings us back to the issue that such behavior is inconsistent with divine nature for reasons already discussed above. Furthermore, (II) EG does not give us freedom because a world that contains free-willed creatures is significantly more valuable than a world inhabited by automata. In sum, although EG challengers need to work on clarifying this issue, EG seems to be concerned about the way to inflict as much evil as it can. Why an omnipotent and omniscient being would do this, as I have argued, is not clear. However, EG is not interested in our well-being, nor is it interested in our freedom, except insofar as our freedom leads to evil and suffering.

3.2. Second Theodicy

(2) The second theodicy is that G allows suffering because it is required for our moral and spiritual growth, the so-called soul-making theodicy (Hick 1977). The allegedly symmetrical reverse theodicy (2a) is that happiness is necessary for moral decay and soul destruction. Again, on closer inspection, theodicies (2) and (2a) are not symmetrical. Moreover, while theodicy (2) is effective, theodicy (2a) raises more questions than answers. First, assume that G allows suffering as a sort of divine soul-making tool that aims at the moral development of human souls. It does not mean that G sprinkles the world with evil. After all, it is not G, but humans, who perform evil acts. At any rate, according to theodicy (2), G allows humans to do evil things *not* because G enjoys this but because G

gave humans a free will and G wishes them to freely choose how to live and to freely unite with their creator. Moreover, according to theodicy (2), G does not prevent evil because the idea is that, by undergoing various adversities, humans can develop various virtues and can strengthen their moral character. The goal of all this is that in the afterlife and even in this life, humans will be prepared for an eternal relationship with G; as they would have experienced evil during their lifetime, in the afterlife they will be morally mature and able to always choose freely to be good. However, in the event that most or all humans used their freedom to choose to be evil all the time, as G gave them freedom G would not intervene and make sure that the level of evil in the world is not too high.

However, reverse theodicy (2a) is not symmetrical to theodicy (2), for EG does not allow happiness as a sort of divine educational or formative tool that aims at the moral damnation of human souls. What is more, EG must control the amount of happiness and suffering that humans experience. EG would not want humans to have too much happiness or too much misery during their lives on earth. EG wants humans to suffer, but EG is not interested in our souls' moral or immoral development. EG simply wants us to suffer as much as possible, whichever way works best. EG does not care about us. Even if EG is interested in the development of vice, EG is not interested in our developing vice for our own sake, but for EG's own sake. In other words, it is the maximization of evil that EG is after. Moreover, EG would allow humans to do good deeds and be happy *not* because EG wishes humans to freely choose how to live—he wants them to suffer as much as possible. As mentioned in the previous discussion about theodicy (1), if in the exercise of their freedom humans always chose the good over the evil, and experienced more happiness than suffering, no doubt EG would make sure that the amount of happiness be reduced down to the perfect amount necessary in order to maximize suffering. Again, this is because EG does not care about allowing humans to develop a certain moral character. Rather, EG cares about maximizing evil (and yet again, this shows the un-divine and imperfect nature of EG). Additionally, EG's goal cannot be that in the afterlife humans will be prepared for an eternal relationship with EG. Furthermore, it is certainly not the concern of EG's that humans would have experienced happiness during their lifetime so that in the afterlife they would be morally mature and able to always choose freely to be evil.

Consider now the most important eschatological asymmetry. G loves humans and desires their well-being for their own sake. Thus, G creates an afterlife where humans benefit from G's presence and loving relationship. However, EG hates humans and desires their ill-being; consequently, it would seem implausible that EG would create an afterlife inhabited by the very creatures that EG hates that hate it. Granted, in this hypothetical afterlife humans would be in some sort of eternal suffering. Yet, EG will have them around for eternity. One could argue that a world with an afterlife inhabited by evil beings would be wickeder than a world without it. This could be reason enough for EG. The first reply is that humans do not desire to be evil. The second reply is that it is not clear in exactly what respect a world with an afterlife inhabited by evil beings is wickeder than a world without it. After all, just like heaven has no apparent, direct, beneficial, or deleterious influence upon the physical world, an evil afterlife would not have any negative, evil, or beneficial influence upon the physical world. Therefore, an evil afterlife could only serve the purpose of benefitting EG, and this, yet again, leads us back to the problem that such a decision is inconsistent with the nature of a divinity. It lacks a plausible reason why an omnipotent god would create an evil afterlife filled with evil beings that EG hates that hate it and that will together exist for eternity.

Another way to show that theodicy (2) and (2a) are not symmetrical is to point out that theists are not required to hold that suffering is required for moral growth. Theists can say that G creates free-willed beings for their benefit. If humans freely choose to be virtuous, it is beneficial to them. If they choose to be evil, it is bad for them. The case is not analogous in EG's case. For EG creates free-willed beings not for their benefit but for EG's. EG does not allow them to do whatever they want. Presumably, if there were a way for EG to maximize evil without creating free-willed beings, EG would not create us. Conversely,

as G loves humans and wants them to freely choose to have a relationship with it, G's goal is not simply to maximize the good. What matters for G is not simply the amount of good, but rather that humans freely choose to have a loving relationship with G. In EG's case, however, if we ultimately build a good character, it is good for us but contrary to EG's plans. If our character is ultimately destroyed, this is bad for us but good for EG. Therefore, the theist does not have to argue that G allows suffering for our moral growth, suffering results from human freedom. Conversely, EG *does* expressly allow happiness in order to achieve the perfect balance between suffering and happiness that will be conducive to our moral decay. Therefore, the moral-growth and moral-decay theodicies are not symmetrical.

Note that my point is the following: G does not cause evil on purpose. G does not go around killing, murdering, embezzling, etc., nor is G causing earthquakes, tsunamis, and human suffering. Humans cause moral evil; nature causes natural events that some regard as evil. Now one may raise the following objection: G gave humans selfish and cruel impulses, impaired their freedom by allowing people to be shaped by poor role models at a young age, and so forth. I must say that, to my knowledge, no theist would accept such contentions, that G impaired us or gave us selfish impulses. G creates free creatures who must freely decide how to live. Consequently, it is plausible to think that G does not make sure that there is a certain balance of good and evil in the world. Conversely, as EG wants to maximize evil, it would seem plausible to think that EG would be concerned about how much evil and how much goodness existed in the world.

Next, consider that Stephen Law makes an interesting observation that unwittingly works against the so-called symmetry thesis. He writes,

But surely *nothing* could be worse than hell as traditionally conceived? Why doesn't an evil god just send us straight to hell?' However, as already noted, a mirror puzzle faces those who believe in a good god. Given that a heavenly environment would be profoundly more joyful than this, why doesn't a good god send us straight to heaven? Why are so many of us allowed to go through such appalling suffering here? (Law 2010, p. 363)

First, to dot all the i's and cross all the t's, the idea is not why G does not *send* us straight to heaven. Rather, the question would have to be why G does not *create* us directly in heaven. This, however, is not a 'mirror puzzle' as law declares. Although G could have created us directly in heaven, G chose not to do it because doing so would not have guaranteed that humans would freely choose to always do what is right or would freely enter into a loving relationship with their creator. Thus, G created humans on earth, first, so that they could experience happiness and suffering and freely choose how to live and whether to have a relationship with their creator. If G had created free-willed beings directly in heaven, then some or all of these beings could have rejected G—and could have even resented G for creating them in a heaven taking away their freedom to choose whether to be there. At any rate, the important point is that, as great as the suffering during our lifetimes on earth may be, such a temporary suffering will be dwarfed by a state of eternal bliss in the company of G. However, the situation regarding EG is in no way symmetrical.

Consider the following. While G could have created us directly in heaven, G chose not to do it because G wants humans to freely choose whether to enter into a loving relationship with their creator. Thus, the idea is that heaven is inhabited only by those creatures that freely chose to have a relationship with G and are capable of freely choosing always what is good. In other words, once in heaven humans will still be free, but they will have learned to freely choose to be good. It might be said that our temporary earthly existence is a necessary preparation for heaven. However, EG does not face the same problem. If EG creates free-willed beings directly in hell, it is not important to EG whether some humans could freely accept or reject EG or could even resent EG for creating them in a place where they do not want to exist. It is not as if humans could go on a heavenly strike and protest against EG. Whether or not humans want to be there, EG will make sure that they will be there whether they like it or not.

Now, here is the most important point: the eternal bliss that we will experience in the afterlife will dwarf the temporary suffering that we undergo during our brief earthly existence. By symmetry, then, it would follow that the dreadful existence that awaits humans in hell will dwarf the temporary happiness (if any) that we might experience during our earthly existence. Furthermore, considering that EG does not face the problem of some free-willed humans' rejecting or resenting EG for creating them directly in hell, the question of why EG does not create us directly in hell remains. Thus, according to maltheism, there is no reason EG does not create us directly in hell, which is a state of maximal evil. Therefore, maltheism faces the problem of good. Consequently, theodicy (2) is effective, but theodicy (2a) is not. In short, EG challengers have failed to provide a successful reverse theodicy for the existence of good in concomitance with the existence of EG. As heaven may be considered as a situation of maximal good, by symmetry hell would be a situation of maximal evil. G faces a problem if G creates humans directly in heaven—some or all humans may reject and even resent G for not allowing them to freely choose how to live and whether to be in heaven. Thus, G must create humans on earth, first, in order to allow them to freely choose whether to be in heaven. However, EG does not face such a problem. EG could not care less about whether humans freely chose to be created directly in hell—they have no say in the matter because EG wants to torture them for eternity whether they like it or not. Consequently, EG challengers face the puzzle of explaining why EG does not just create humans directly in hell instead of creating them on earth, first, and allowing them to experience happiness. Thus, the fact that we have not been created directly in hell counts against the existence of EG.

3.3. Third Theodicy

(3) According to the third theodicy, the suffering we undergo in our lifetimes is more than compensated for by the eternal bliss that awaits us in the afterlife. According to the allegedly symmetrical reverse theodicy (3a), the happiness we undergo in our lifetimes is more than compensated for by the eternal damnation that awaits us in the afterlife. The problem for EG challengers is that theists can avail themselves of an eschatological account not available to maltheism. Theists are not required to hold that eternal bliss is some form of compensation for the evil we undergo in our lifetimes. Humans are not entitled to demanding compensation from G because it is not G, but rather humans, who choose how to live. Suffering results from our free actions. So, theists are not required to argue that eternal bliss is G's compensation to us for our earthly suffering because G has not wronged us. In theism, it is up to us to choose how to live. If we are good during our lifetimes, in the afterlife only those humans who freely chose to always be good and to enter into a loving relationship with G will forever exist in a state of bliss. Those who chose to be evil and to reject G will face punishment or separation accordingly. Moreover, as G is merciful, G gives evil humans an opportunity to redeem themselves. Suppose that all humans chose to be good and to accept G. In the afterlife they will all exist in a state of eternal bliss. If all of them are evil on earth, in the afterlife all of them will face punishment or separation from G appropriately (with the possibility of redemption).

However, EG's case is not symmetrical. Whether all humans or some humans are good or bad makes no difference to EG because in the afterlife EG will forever torture them all. According to maltheism, there is no reward or redemption—everybody suffers. It would be absurd to argue that EG rewards some humans or that EG enters into a relationship with them because EG hates them all. Furthermore, EG cannot be merciful. In theism, eternal bliss is not G's form of compensation for the suffering we have experienced on earth. Rather, it is a state that humans can freely choose or reject. Conversely, eternal damnation is EG's only form of retribution for our living happily—an eternal state of suffering that we cannot freely choose or deny. Therefore, the eternal-bliss and the eternal-misery theodicies are not symmetrical. Moreover, when the same eschatology is applied to both gods, theodicy (3) is effective, but theodicy (3a) is not.

Furthermore, G is merciful and allows redemption; the idea is that even those humans who were evil on earth will be able to freely enter into a loving relationship with G and exist in a state of eternal bliss. However, this is not symmetrical in the case of EG. By symmetry, EG would have to allow reverse redemption, which is not possible in the case of EG. In the case of G, in the afterlife good people forever exist in a state of eternal bliss. Evil people will face punishment with the possibility of being forgiven and allowed to enter heaven. However, in EG's case, in the afterlife good people as well as bad people forever exist in a state of eternal damnation. In other words, G allows redemption because its desire is that all humans, including the naughty ones, will go to heaven. Asymmetrically, EG's desire is that all humans go to hell and suffer for eternity.

Therefore, EG challengers may not maintain that maltheism faces the problem of good just like theism faces the problem of evil. The good in the world does constitute evidence against EG's existence as some EG challengers maintain (Law 2010, p. 357; Lancaster-Thomas 2018a, 2018b). However, in the G hypothesis presented in this paper, evil results from humans' wrong use of human freedom. As Law notes, EG gives us good for a moment so that, when it takes it away, we suffer even more than we would have if we had never had it in the first place (Law 2010, p. 358). Therefore, EG deliberately allows good in the world—indeed, EG makes sure that there exists good in the world. Conversely, in the case of G, moral evil results from free human action. So, the existence of good and the existence of evil are not symmetrical. More specifically, the existence of good is, as EG challengers note, a problem for maltheism. That is, EG challengers must explain why EG (who is omnipotent) needs the existence of good in the world in order to achieve the maximization of evil. As noted earlier, as eternal damnation is a state of maximal evil, and EG does not need a pre-hell time for soul-destruction, it is logical to expect that EG would create humans directly in hell. As G does not require or allow evil in the world, theism can successfully explain evil.

Consider the following objection: heaven would be an unjust reward for the evil. So, why assume that EG does not send people to heaven? This objection suggests that, by rewarding evil people, EG can create more injustice and evil. For example, Hitler goes to heaven because he was an evil man and that is an unjust reward. However, is this what an omnipotent and omniscient being does? The joke is on EG, one may respond. EG is supposed to be wholly evil, and yet, EG sends humans to a state of *eternal bliss*? But heaven is supposed to be good because of the presence of a loving god. But if EG exists, what renders heaven a state of eternal bliss? After all, presumably, souls there would be aware of the fact that they exist in an eternal state in the presence of EG—but souls hate EG and EG hates them! Such a scenario does not sound very evil, but rather absurd. However, how does this parallel G? How could heaven be a state of eternal bliss with an evil god? Would humans in heaven not know that EG is omnimalevolent? Therefore, EG challengers face the problem of good because they claim that EG requires good in order to maximize evil.

Another objection: EG could arbitrarily assign punishment and reward. If G can torture people forever, EG can give people eternal bliss. My response: first, theists are not required to argue that G tortures anyone. Evildoers, after all, are justly "punished" (with the possibility of redemption), while good people are rewarded. This is because a good God cares about justice and loves humans. However, how is this paralleled by EG? According to the objection, EG would send evil people on an eternal vacation (again, the joke is on EG). This is inconsistent with EG's nature and inconsistent with the acts of a divinity.

4. Concluding Remarks

The question at this point is whether my arguments undercut the challenge. The challenge is to explain why G's existence should be regarded as significantly more reasonable than EG's. As already noted, the challenge is marred by the lack of a precise description of EG's nature, which led the present discussion to a counter-challenge. The main problem is that it is not at all clear why EG would create the world in the first place. It is plausible that there exists G and that G creates humans according to its loving nature.

Conversely, it is implausible that there exists a being that hates itself and humans and yet elects to create things that it despises that despise it. The existence of G is plausible because G's omnibenevolence leads to the creation of beings with whom to share G's love and knowledge. G, moreover, creates humans because G knows that humans would desire to enter into a relationship with their creator.

However, the existence of EG is significantly less plausible than G's because EG is allegedly *omnimalevolent*. Taking into account the symmetry thesis, it has been observed that EG hates itself. In the first place, such an absurd notion (absurd for a god) clearly makes EG's existence less plausible than G's. Consider again the symmetry thesis. G is a necessary being. G is all-loving, and thus, G loves itself and desires to exist. However, by symmetry EG hates itself and, arguably, does not desire to exist. As EG would also be a necessary being, then even though EG is omnipotent and omniscient, EG cannot cease to exist. EG then would be a frustrated omnipotent and omniscient being who hates itself but is 'stuck' with itself, condemned to exist in a world he hates with beings it hates that hate it. Its existence must be unbearable to it, but EG cannot do anything about it because it is condemned to exist. The existence of such a being is not only significantly less plausible than the existence of G, but rather absurd. Furthermore, EG's all-evil nature is inconsistent with its decision to create beings that it hates. It is not as if EG desires to share its hate and knowledge with humans. As it hates them, EG does not want to have anything to do with them. Furthermore, as humans do not desire to suffer or to have a hating relationship with EG, then it is incorrect to say that EG creates humans *for* their detriment. The only reason that might explain EG's act of creation is that EG is incomplete without creation, which implies that EG needs something or that its nature can be benefitted by creation—but such need shows that EG is not a god.

Another point is the question of why EG does not create humans directly in a state of eternal suffering. EG challengers have replied that it is wickeder to create humans on earth first and use happiness to exacerbate their suffering than to create them directly in hell. Max Baker-Hytch and Ben Page, for example, suggest that 'a torture world is a much worse place for conscious creatures than mixed world is . . . ' (Page and Baker-Hytch 2020). The problem here is the following. If G could create humans directly in heaven, G would. However, it does not because G wants humans to freely choose to go to heaven and love G. If G created humans directly in heaven, G would thereby limit their freedom to choose whether to be there. Moreover, it can be argued that the suffering we undergo on earth is morally edifying. It teaches us to live in heaven eliminating the possibility of freely making bad choices. In other words, if G created free-willed beings directly in heaven, they could use their freedom to do evil deeds in heaven or resent G for depriving them from choosing how to live. Thus, evil would be present in heaven. By creating free-willed beings on earth, first, G makes sure that those humans who go to heaven are only those who will never use their freedom to do evil deeds.

The point is that according to the teaching of theistic religions, heaven is the state of fully experiencing love in the presence of God. In heaven, suffering is not present at all, it is completely annihilated. Therefore, when we think about human existence and suffering, we must consider the fact that once in heaven one would experience eternal joy and love. Such a picture, however, is asymmetrical to the hypothesis advanced by maltheism. EG *could* create humans directly in hell, but why does it not? EG cannot be worried about the same problems that G faces. EG does not want humans to freely choose whether to go to hell—EG is going to send them all there no matter what. If EG created humans directly in hell, EG would thereby limit their freedom to choose to be there—which is arguably the greatest evil of all—but what does EG care about limiting human freedom? Moreover, G wants to make sure that those who go to heaven have learned to exercise their freedom of the will without ever doing evil deeds. However, if EG created humans directly in hell, EG could not care less about whether humans exercised their freedom without ever doing good deeds. EG wants to torture them without regard to such issues. The point is that if heaven is a state of maximal good, then by symmetry hell is a state of

maximal evil. Furthermore, if existence in heaven dwarfs the suffering that we undergo in our lifetimes thereby rendering suffering insignificant, by symmetry, existence in hell dwarfs the happiness that we undergo in our lifetimes rendering happiness insignificant as if it never existed. The idea is the following: heaven is so good that humans will not even remember the suffering they underwent in their lifetimes on earth. By symmetry, hell is so bad that humans will not even remember the happiness they underwent in their lifetimes on earth. Consequently, EG challengers must explain, first, why EG does not create humans directly in hell, and second, they must explain in what respect EG's predicaments should be considered as plausible as those of G, as the reverse appears to be true.

Therefore, if the arguments offered in this paper are successful, they demonstrate that EG's existence is not symmetrical to G's. Moreover, supporting discussions show that G's nature is consistent, and thus, G's existence is plausible; conversely, the arguments offered here show that the EG hypothesis is riddled with absurdities, paradoxes, and inconsistencies, which render it an implausible hypothesis, and thus the challenge is met.

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Notes

- ¹ In endnote 3 of his paper, [Hendricks \(2018\)](#) also notes a confusion in the framing of the challenge. He notes that Law has two different formulations of the challenge in its article. One is that if belief in EG is unreasonable, then belief in GG is unreasonable. Belief in EG is unreasonable. Therefore, belief in GG is unreasonable. The other is, "the challenge is to explain why the hypothesis that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and all-good god should be considered significantly more reasonable than the hypothesis that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and all-evil god" ([Law 2010](#), p. 353). From Law's public presentation of the challenge, it appears that another formulation can be the following: Give me a good reason why, if there is one, God is wholly good instead of wholly evil.
- ² Several theorists (see Keith [Ward 2015](#)) have argued that a wholly evil god would hate everything including itself, therefore it would desire to self-extinguish. [Page and Baker-Hytech \(2020\)](#) have also claimed that EG is unlikely to have created the universe because EG has no motivation to do so.

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