

CHRISTIAN THEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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The problem of evil has always been one of the most serious philosophical challenges to the Christian faith. Frequently, atheologians have used it to pronounce the defeat of Christian theism. Too often theologians have significantly modified orthodox theism in order to evade this agonizing problem. Other theologians have generated a plethora of theodicies in hopes that a multiplicity of defenses would retain the intellectual integrity of Christian doctrine. Although all discussions operate on the assumption that there is a profound relation between God and evil, one that may determine whether Christianity is acceptable or unacceptable, many proceed without a clear understanding of the theoretical structure of the problem. It is not always clear in the writings of theologians and atheologians precisely how evil constitutes a problem for theistic belief. When one consults the traditional and current scholarship on God and evil, he finds the issue formulated in many different ways—a confusing array of problems, answers, evasions and denials. Since the exact formulation of the problem one countenances indicates the direction of his analysis, thinking Christians obviously need not just another clever answer but an understanding of the logic of the problem, of where the burden of proof lies and of what reasons and evidences are appropriate.

In this article, I survey the contemporary literature on the topic and note ways in which the problem has been conceived, looking for instructive patterns in these various formulations. I then identify two very important formulations, what I call the problem of logical consistency and the problem of *prima facie* gratuity, which are the primary atheistic arguments from evil. As devices to elucidate the structure of these two arguments, I cite two familiar theistic arguments, the ontological and teleological arguments respectively. Last, I recommend responses that Christian philosophers and theologians should make to the two different problems of evil. It is only after such an investigation that we can begin to construct a responsible answer to the theme that has so long bewitched studies of history, literature, philosophy and religion.

I.

It sometimes appears that the problem of evil is not just one particular argument but a cluster of arguments, each relating to a certain area of concern and having an identifiable structure. To sort out the various renditions is to move closer to an adequate response. A brief survey of the ways in which philosophers have distinguished formulations of the problem would be helpful.

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H. D. Aiken divides the problem of evil into the logical and the existential problems. The former pertains to the relation of key ideas contained in two essential theistic claims: "(a) There is an almighty and omniscient being who is a perfectly good person and who alone is God; and (b) there is something in the finite universe created by that being which is evil."¹ Yet he says that the problem of holding these two propositions together is only a sterile exercise in formal logic compared to "the problem of faith and conscience" that may occur in the personal life of the believer who has a disposition to affirm both of them. Calling them the theological and ethical theses, respectively, he explains that faith holds to (a) and conscience affirms (b). Since they are apparently contradictory, the self that strives to maintain loyalty to both is faced with a serious existential problem.

M. B. Ahern designates three divisions of the problem of evil: (1) the general abstract problem; (2) the specific abstract problems; and (3) the concrete problems of evil.² These three aspects of the problem may be stated thus: (1) Is the existence of God compatible with any evil? (2) Is the existence of God compatible with specific kinds, degrees, and multiplicity of evil? (3) Are the conditions under which the existence of God is compatible with actual evil in fact met?³ Essentially, Ahern's point is that the atheist cannot prove the negative answer to any of the three questions and that theism is thereby safe. He says that (1) is the traditional problem and suggests that (2) and (3) are comparatively less important or at least less pressing. (1), of course, is a purely logical question about the compatibility of "God" and "evil," whereas (3) approximates the question about the apparent gratuity of much evil.

A. R. King, commenting on the Book of Job, divides the problem into its rationalistic and pragmatic aspects. Unlike Aiken, he does not restrict the rationalistic aspect to a problem of sheer logical consistency but argues that critical examination of theistic belief ultimately misses the point. Moreover, he stresses the need for a pragmatic solution that culminates in a numinous experience of God in light of which all rational considerations melt away. King writes, "A religious pragmatism and mysticism boldly affirms the paradox and pursues the matter in terms of practical adjustments to evil."⁴

The above distinctions are just a few of the ways of organizing the complex cluster of problems that come under the same rubric. However, they do not clearly express the two most philosophically interesting and important conceptions of the problem that may be discerned in the vast

¹H. D. Aiken, "God and Evil: A Study of Some Relations Between Faith and Morals," *Ethics* 68 (January, 1958) 79; the following quote is on p. 77.

²M. B. Ahern, *The Problem of Evil* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) 2.

³*Ibid.*; this statement of the questions is drawn from the scope of the whole book.

⁴A. R. King, *The Problem of Evil: Christian Concepts and the Book of Job* (New York: Ronald, 1952) 213; also see pp. 104, 107, 120-121.

scholarship on the subject. The most significant formulations are (1) as a problem of logical consistency between "God exists" and "evil exists" and (2) as a problem of *prima facie* gratuitous evil in a theistic universe. The first approach considers whether traditional theism is rationally coherent and the second considers whether theism is morally and rationally acceptable in view of the apparently meaningless evils in the world. Let us now consider these two formulations in greater detail.

II.

Some contemporary authors conceive of the problem of evil as a completely logical one. Essentially, they claim that evil shows orthodox theism to be self-contradictory and thus irrational. Alvin Plantinga maintains that in order to establish the charge that theism is self-contradictory it would be necessary for the atheologian to identify a set of propositions that both entails a contradiction and is such that each proposition in the set is either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a consequence of such propositions.⁵ Obviously, the theist would have no problem if he were not committed, on some grounds or other, to each proposition in the set or if the set did not really entail a contradiction. The following set is often cited: (1) God exists; (2) God is omnipotent; (3) God is omniscient; (4) God is omnibenevolent; (5) evil exists. Both theists and atheists have believed that this set or some variation on it constitutes a logical problem. Concerning this alleged problem J. L. Mackie writes:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three. (The problem does not arise only for theists, but I shall discuss it in the form in which it presents itself for ordinary theism.)⁶

H. J. McCloskey pronounced the enigma to be insoluble:

The problem of evil is a very simple problem to state. There is evil in the world; yet the world is said to be the creation of a good omnipotent God. How is this possible? Surely a good omnipotent God would have made a world free of evil of any kind.⁷

This formulation of the problem of evil is not at all new. The classic statement of Hume (after Epicurus) puts the matter in stark clarity:

Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is

⁵Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967) 117.

⁶J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955) 200.

⁷H. J. McCloskey, "The Problem of Evil," *JBR* 30 (1962) 187.

he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? ⁸

Although there are minor variations in this conception of the problem, they all express the same basic logical point and present the theist with the task of clarifying and reconciling the propositions under investigation.

C. S. Lewis, for example, recognized the problem as one of a possible inconsistency in theistic claims. He explains that

the possibility of answering [the problem] depends on showing that the terms "good" and "almighty," and perhaps also the term "happy" are equivocal: for it must be admitted from the outset that if the popular meanings attached to these words are the best, or the only possible meanings, then the argument is unanswerable.⁹

Lewis then proceeded to argue for more adequate meanings for the terms. John Hick, another theist, made a monumental attempt to make sense of the concept of a benevolent God who allows evil.¹⁰ More recently, M. B. Ahern addressed himself to the problem of consistency.¹¹

Two important characteristics of this problem must be considered before theists or atheists reach a final assessment. First, the problem of evil, when posed as one of logical consistency, does not suppose any matter of fact and can be discussed independently of whether there really is evil in the world. In other words, it is a purely *a priori* matter of finding out whether God as conceived by traditional theism is compatible with the concept of evil. If the concepts of God and evil are logically incompatible, then, if evil does in fact exist, God does not. From this formulation of the problem it is clear that peculiar kinds, degrees and distributions of actual evil are irrelevant to the logical consideration before us.

Second, the issue of logical compatibility does not arise immediately on the basis of the original premises but only after some additional premises are introduced or hidden assumptions made explicit. These premises or quasi-logical rules would have to specify the meaning of key terms and relate them in appropriate ways. Examples of this might be: (1') God has being or independent ontological status; (2') there are no non-logical limits to what an omnipotent being can do; (3') an omniscient being would know all the ways to eliminate evil; (4') omnibenevolence is opposed to evil and always seeks to eliminate it completely; (5') evil is not logically necessary. From all these, many philosophers hold, it ultimately follows that the claims that a perfectly good and all-powerful being exists and that evil exists are strictly incompatible. For example, some time ago J. L. Mackie offered additional

⁸D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1948) 66.

⁹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 26.

¹⁰J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Norfolk: Fontana Library, 1968).

¹¹Problem.

premises much like (2') and (4') in order to convict the theist of inconsistency.¹² More recently, R. R. LaCroix claimed that even more premises are needed to deduce a contradiction in theism. He included statements about a wholly free creation, God being the greatest possible good, and the conditions for justifying evil, and then derived several alleged contradictions.¹³

Rebuttals to the logical problem, which defend instead of alter orthodox theism, might be directed not only at one or more of the original premises but also at one or more of the additional premises. For example, Ahern and Lewis have argued that (4') does not hold because there are morally sufficient reasons why a perfectly good being might not completely eliminate evil.¹⁴ Augustine and Leibnitz argued that (5') is false because any created finite world necessarily involves some evil and thus God is not culpable for not eliminating it.¹⁵ So the responsibility is with the atheist to show, without begging the question, why the theist must accept the additional premises needed to deduce a contradiction.

This is precisely the point at which Christian theists must begin their response to the problem of evil conceived as a logical problem. Historically, the bulk of Christian theology has assumed the possibility of holding all of its essential claims together without inconsistency. There may be a contradiction derivable within traditional theology, but the continued failure of atheologians to produce the fatal inconsistency seems to count heavily against the likelihood of their eventual success. In terms of the structure of this problem, then, the burden is heavy on the atheologian either to point out the hitherto unnoticed propositions or to reinterpret the meaning of some obvious propositions to which theists are indeed committed. However, the scholarship contains nothing more than a series of interesting atheistic failures that generally commit either of two fallacies: begging the question by selecting propositions to which the theist is not committed, or lifting out of context propositions to which the theist is committed but imputing new and convenient meanings to them. So the self-contradiction strategy of this version of the problem of evil does not seem to be a promising alternative for atheology.

Actually, this criticism of the atheologian's logical problem of evil is strikingly similar to the standard criticism of the theologian's ontological argument. Upon examination, the logical problem of evil as a proof for the non-existence of God can be seen to be the exact negative analogue of the ontological proof for the existence of God. Following Anselm,

¹²J. L. Mackie, "Evil," pp. 200-201. Other authors who have recognized this requirement for properly setting up the problem of evil as a logical question are H. D. Aiken, "God," pp. 13-21; N. Pike, "God and Evil: A Reconsideration," *Ethics* 68 (January, 1958) 120.

¹³R. R. LaCroix, "Unjustified Evil and God's Choice," *Sophia* 13 (April, 1974) 20-28.

¹⁴M. B. Ahern, *Problem*; C. S. Lewis, *Pain*.

¹⁵Augustine's mature views on this may be found in *The City of God* and *Enchiridion*; Leibnitz's position is contained in his *Theodicy*.

theologians have stipulated *a priori* the meaning of "God" as "a being than which none greater can be conceived" and have added premises such as "existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone" in order to complete the proof. Constructing the proof in this way allows the theologian to move with a kind of magic to the conclusion that "God exists both in the understanding and in reality."¹⁶ But the magic of the inference is matched only by the question-begging of its definitions. The problem of logical consistency of "God" and "evil" commits the same fallacy when seeking deductive certainty for its conclusion. It loads key terms to the point of succumbing to some kind of *petitio*.

III.

Some philosophers avoid constructing the problem of evil as one that concerns the logical compatibility of "God" and "evil," and they phrase it as one that arises from the apparent meaninglessness of what is commonly recognized as evil. Thus the question about evil is shifted from that of consistency to that of gratuity. No longer is evil *per se* taken as evidence against the existence of the theistic God. Instead the kinds, amount and distribution of evil make it apparently gratuitous, and that would count against the existence of God. Two current representatives of this view, E. H. Madden and P. H. Hare, state their approach:

It must be clear at the outset that the problem we raise is not why there is any evil at all in the world. Although the latter problem is a legitimate one and leads to interesting discussions about God's alleged ability or inability to create a perfect world, this problem is a sterile one in every other way, since some evil obviously serves good ends. But much evil resists simple explanation; it is *prima facie* gratuitous. The really interesting problem of evil is whether the apparent gratuity can be explained away by more ingenious measures or whether the gratuity is real and hence detrimental to religious belief.¹⁷

Their precise formulation of the problem of gratuity is:

If God is unlimited in power and goodness, why is there so much *prima facie* gratuitous evil in the world? If he is unlimited in power he should be able to remove unnecessary evil, and if he is unlimited in goodness he should want to remove it; but he does not. Apparently he is limited either in power or goodness, or does not exist at all.¹⁸

After posing the problem in this way, the procedure for the theist would be to make sense out of the facts of evil or for the atheist to show that all efforts to make sense of evil somehow fail.

A. Plantinga is another author who recognizes an atheistic argument

¹⁶See discussion of the structure of the argument in A. Plantinga, ed., *The Ontological Argument* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).

¹⁷E. H. Madden and P. H. Hare, *Evil and the Concept of God* (Springfield: Thomas, 1968) 3.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

similar to what I have called the problem of gratuity. In *God and Other Minds*, he rebuts at length the "*a priori* atheological argument from evil" that purports the theist's position to be self-contradictory. Then he is careful to point out another challenge that the fact of evil may pose:

But an *a posteriori* argument from evil may also be given. The atheologian might hold, for example, that we actually find certain kinds of evil that no good state of affairs, no matter how impressive, could possibly outweigh—severe, protracted, and involuntary human pain, for example.¹⁹

He takes this factual claim together with the theist's claim that God never allows unrequited or unjustified evil to lead to the conclusion that there is no omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Several important features of the problem of gratuity deserve attention. First, the formulation of this problem as one of *prima facie* gratuity is, unlike the problem of consistency, an *a posteriori* approach. From those facts that are apparently instances of meaningless evil, a case against the providential God of theism is generated. In regard to their formulation of the problem of gratuity, Madden and Hare state:

Our examples of *prima facie* gratuitous evils are taken always from that whole set of undesirable experiences and deeds which all of us, minus our philosophical views, would prefer to avoid. This set includes, at a minimum, unbearable pain and suffering caused by either natural events or the acts of other men, character defects, immoral acts, physical and mental deformity, the prosperity of rogues, and the failure of honest men.²⁰

Note that now the question need not be begged by loading the intentions of key terms or adding quasi-logical rules. By employing the extensions of key terms (e. g., "evil") this approach remains more faithful to common sense and to the theistic claims in question than does the problem of consistency.

Unlike the problem of consistency that strives for strict demonstration, the problem of gratuity is inductive and depends on an assessment of probabilities. Such a quasi-scientific assessment is very complex, being influenced by whatever items of evidence are present and central in one's thoughts and by the metaphysical presuppositions, analogical models, moral values and existential "feels" one brings to the evidence. It is obviously the case that responsible and informed persons disagree in their assessment of the evidence. The evidence and the presuppositions of those interpreting it complicate matters beyond the hope of some indisputable conclusion. Unfortunately, logicians have not provided a universal standard telling us precisely how we are to be directed when making this decision. So the conclusion one reaches in this debate is more a matter of rational judgment than of demonstrative logic.

Many theists have responded to the atheistic argument from the apparent gratuity of evil, calling it "hopelessly inconclusive" or "purely

¹⁹A. Plantinga, *God*, p. 128.

²⁰E. H. Madden and P. H. Hare, *Evil*, p. 5.

emotional" since it lacks deductive certainty. For example, Ahern says that once theists and atheists engage what I have called the problem of gratuity its very structure makes it impossible to reach a final determination. Concerning the problem of gratuity Ahern writes:

What is certain is that a negative answer cannot be given to any concrete problem of evil, if it is taken as an independent problem. Such an answer would require knowledge of a negative fact, namely that no good which justifies the evil will ever exist. No one can know this since all of the good facts about the world cannot be known.²¹

In other words Ahern thinks, as do many others, that a God's-eye-view of the world is needed in order to settle the question either way. He explains:

The nature of the problem makes it impossible for any theist to show that all actual evil is justified. But it is also true that the nature of these problems makes it impossible for non-theists to show that actual evil is not justified.²²

This suggests that any theoretical problem to which there cannot be a conclusive answer is a pseudo-problem, one that need not be taken seriously after the impossibility of a final resolution is recognized.

Plantinga makes a similar point, stating that the atheist is unable to prove "the tricky premise that (1) no case of severe, protracted, involuntary human pain is ever outweighed by any good state of affairs."²³ He concludes his investigation with the following remarks:

The most that can be said for the atheologian who accepts (1) is, I think, that the existence of protracted and severe human pain provides *him* with a decisive reason for believing that God does not exist; but he could hardly claim that the *theist* is involved in any difficulty here. For he cannot claim (without stooping to name calling) that (1) is a proposition which no reasonable person who understood it would deny; one of the hallmarks of such moral judgments as (1) is just that reasonable persons can and sometimes do disagree about them.²⁴

Ahern and Plantinga are not alone in thinking that theism is properly defended by pointing out the inherent inconclusiveness and psychological nature of the opponent's case, even though the theist may be unable to explain all the apparently gratuitous evil in the world. Consider Hick's evaluation of the problem:

If the extent or intensity of the world's pain and evil were greatly to increase, would this be taken as disproving theism? No; there is no assignable limit to the capacity of religious faith to trust in God despite daunting and apparently contradicting circumstance. Would *any* conceivable happening compel the faithful to renounce their religious belief? There

²¹M. B. Ahern, *Problem*, p. 57.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 72.

²³A. Plantinga, *God*, p. 129.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 130.

may well of course be psychological limits to the persistence of challenged and discouraged faith, limits which will differ in each individual. But is there any *logical* terminus, any definite quantum of unfavorable evidence in face of which it would be demonstrably irrational to maintain theistic belief? It does not appear that there is or could be any such agreed limit.²⁵

A very natural defense of Christian theism follows from all this. Hick states the strategy of his defense:

These chapters do not seek to demonstrate that Christianity is true, but that the fact of evil does not show it to be false: those who have some degree of the Christian faith should not abandon it in face even of this agonizing problem, nor should those who lack Christian faith rule it out on this account as a possibility for themselves.²⁶

It is not clear, however, that such a defense against the atheistic challenge is adequate.

In a recent article, Madden and Hare defended their atheistic response to the apparent gratuity of evil from the charge of being purely psychological or emotional and explained why it is a rational conclusion:

We agree that there is no logical point *n* in the accumulation of such failures at which theism becomes an unreasonable metaphysical theory, while at *n*-1 theism was reasonable. This is not an all-or-nothing affair. But it does not follow from the fact that the force of such failures is not an all-or-nothing affair that they actually have only psychological, not logical, force. What we believe we have shown in our detailed critique of theodicies is not that some magical point has been passed in the accumulation of explanatory failures, but instead that the likelihood of eventual success is so dim that evil is a much more severe challenge to theism than even Hick supposes.²⁷

For Madden and Hare the kinds, amount, and distribution of evil coupled with what they take to be the repeated failures of the Christian theist to find an adequate theodicy count heavily against a theistic interpretation of the world. Therefore they insist that their atheistic case is a sound assessment of probabilities even without possessing logical finality:

If such a demand for exhaustive knowledge is made, no deliberation would ever arrive at a reasonable conclusion, that is, a conclusion justified beyond a reasonable doubt in terms of the evidence available. To demand finality is to abdicate one's responsibility to make decisions based on a clear preponderance of evidence.²⁸

Madden and Hare make no claim to have shown adequate theodicy to be logically impossible or to have structured the challenge so that the theist could not win. They simply call for an intellectually responsible look at the evidence. They conclude that the gratuity is not just apparent but real and thus that God does not exist.

²⁵J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1957) 148.

²⁶J. Hick, *Evil*, pp. x-xi.

²⁷E. H. Madden and P. H. Hare, "Evil and Inconclusiveness," *Sophia* 11 (April, 1972) 12.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

Theists cannot begin to formulate an adequate response to the problem of gratuity, one that is more perceptive than Ahern's, Plantinga's or Hick's, until they fully understand the logic of the problem. At this point, it is helpful to note analogies between the atheistic argument from gratuity and the teleological argument of traditional theism. As students of natural theology know, the teleological argument cites instances of apparent order and purpose as evidence for the existence of a Great Designer. Without fallaciously loading the key terms of the argument, it proceeds by focusing on those items and events that we commonly recognize as orderly. These evidences are then interpreted within the context of a certain moral theory, ontological commitment, and existential orientation in order to yield the theistic result. The structure of the argument is inductive and the strength of the conclusion probabilistic. The result is a reasonable judgment, not a strict deduction. Now the atheistic argument from the apparent gratuity of evil is similar to the teleological argument in all relevant respects. But this means that the problem of gratuity escapes the common theistic rebuttals to the effect that it is inconclusive. All inductive arguments are to some degree inconclusive, but they are the stuff of which the important issues of life are made. When considering such one may give a counter-interpretation of the facts or wage an attack at the presuppositional level in order to refute an opponent. But to point out that a responsible inductive judgment is non-deductive and therefore inconclusive is hardly enough. Yet few contemporary Christian theists, particularly within the evangelical ranks, have taken up the larger debate. We are now in a position to detect some current mistakes by those who have at least entered the debate.

While analyses like those of Ahern, Plantinga and Hick are helpful, they miss several crucial points. First, they seem to take the atheist's conclusion to the problem of gratuity as being a universal negative proposition: "God does not exist," "no omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being exists," or whatever. Then, from the fact that it is in principle impossible to prove conclusively a universal negative they attenuate the atheist's case by labeling it "inconclusive." But now we can see that no such proposition is being argued. What is being argued is a probabilistic conclusion based on an assessment of evidence in light of one's moral values, ontological commitments, and so on. And this legitimate kind of inductive inconclusiveness is present for both the theist and the atheist who consider the facts of evil. The data are religiously ambiguous, with some seeming to count for and some against the existence of God. Moreover, there are shifting perspectives from which to view the data and no commonly accepted standard for selecting the right perspective.

A second point theists often miss is that no positive position is ever established by insisting that it has not been conclusively disproved. Few important beliefs in the rational life admit of final proof or disproof. It should be no embarrassment, then, to the theist or atheist, to follow good reasons and evidence in the absence of logical finality. Although

neither side possesses conclusive proof, it is hasty to assume that they are roughly equal and have reached an impasse. The apparently dysteleological aspects of the world are, generally speaking, no problem for atheistic naturalism. The problem of the *prima facie* gratuity of evil is one which distinctively arises for the orthodox Christian theist, since it is he who advances various claims about the power and love of God and must square those claims with the facts. The atheologian has every right to demand that we make sense of instances that seem to falsify our own theistic claims. But to reply that our claims cannot be conclusively falsified is to state a simple truism about the rational life in general and to deceive ourselves into thinking our responsibility is over. Serious atheistic philosophers can simply reply that the amount and character of the negative evidence is so compelling that a non-theistic conclusion is entirely justified. This is the kind of falsification challenge that must elicit careful theodicies from Christian theists. We must find ways of showing why apparently meaningless evil is not really meaningless and thus that we are intellectually responsible in holding to the existence of a providential God. Of course, this may be based on a review of the data or of the criteria by which the data are judged.

IV.

Clearly, the problem of *prima facie* gratuitous evil opposes theism in a way very different from the way in which the logical problem does. The standard rendition of the logical problem is that the concepts of God and evil are inconsistent and that Christian theism is thus *irrational*. The statement of the problem of gratuity is not that God and evil are logically incompatible, but that the compatibility of God and the apparent pointlessness of much actual evil is questionable. In other words, this version of the problem assesses theism to be *improbable*, not irrational. The challenge has force because the theist himself holds that an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God would not allow real gratuity—and yet there appears to be gratuitous evil. So, as uncomfortable as it may be, the burden of generating a positive theodicy is on the theist. This task is largely neglected in theological circles today even though the secular world seems preoccupied with the meaninglessness and absurdity of life, particularly in view of suffering and evil. Hopefully, I have made clear that to continue to demand exhaustive knowledge or logical finality is to misunderstand our common epistemic condition. And to call the atheistic assessment of evil a purely emotional reaction on that account is unwittingly to rob theistic assessments of any claim to rationality.

There is little doubt that the problem of evil in whatever form is not the only consideration in reaching a proper evaluation of Christian theism. The eventual acceptance or rejection of theism is further complicated by a host of independent considerations: rational, historical, existential. What we are left with is the grueling task of turning over and over all of the rational arguments of theology and atheology and examining the historical and existential evidence relevant to theism.

My present analysis is not meant to make such a comprehensive judgment or even to provide a theodicy for evil. But by mapping the logic of the issue over evil I also hope to suggest the outlines of our larger intellectual responsibility: We must not rely on the essentially negative tactic of pointing out the inconclusiveness of atheistic attacks, especially when the inconclusiveness is perfectly legitimate, and must resume the old-fashioned business of making positive sense of our own truth-claims.